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Is the Unconscious Really all that Unconscious?: The Role of Being and Experience in the Psychoanalytic Encounter*

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There is Little Question in the minds of every psychoanalytic practitioner that Freud's conception of the unconscious is the pivot around which psychoanalysis orbits, even if the particulars as to what the unconscious comprises have been debated by every psychoanalytic school that has followed in his wake. Yet despite the controversial nature of this concept, there is a pervasive agreement among analysts that whatever the unconscious is, it is certainly not a form of *consciousness*. That being said, this is precisely the dilemma that philosophers have found most troubling about the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious and the reason why so many have questioned its efficacy. In a recent book, Grotstein (1999) addressed a fundamental and as yet unresolved difficulty in prevailing conceptions of the unconscious, which follows when we attempt to assign the very core of our being to a hypothesized unconscious agent that we can never know directly, and whose existence we must infer and, hence, *believe* to be so, as an article of faith. Grotstein concluded that we are still, after one hundred years of trying, unable to account for this persistent yet obstinate contradiction: that the unconscious knows all, but is “known” by no one.

Like many, I have been haunted by this anomaly over the course of my analytic career. For the purposes of this essay, however, my concern is not a theoretical one, but one of approaching the problem phenomenologically, which is to say from the perspective of the psychoanalyst's *lived experience* — what has been depicted by the interpersonal school as an experience-near paradigm. Therefore, I do not intend to offer a new theory about the nature of the unconscious, but rather to explore

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the relationship between the alleged existence of the unconscious and one's experience of it. In the course of my exploration of this problem I address a number of critical questions: Does it make sense, for example, to speak in terms of one's capacity to "experience" the unconscious if the very concept of the unconscious refers to that which is beyond experience? Moreover, does it make sense to talk in terms of suffering "unconscious experiences" if one is not *aware* of the experiences one is presumed to be suffering? And *finally*, allowing that experience is, at its margins, tentative and ambiguous, how does one account for those phenomena on the periphery of experience, whether such phenomena are characterized as unconscious (Freud), ambiguous (Merleau-Ponty), mysterious (Heidegger), unformulated (Sullivan), or simply hidden?

I do not claim to have found the answers to these questions nor even to have taken a preliminary step in that direction. Instead, I merely seek to explore some of the problematics that the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious has obliged us to live with ever since Freud formulated it one century ago. To this end, I focus the bulk of my attention on Freud's conception of the unconscious, since this is the one that all psychoanalysts, no matter to what school or perspective they adhere, have inherited, with all the attendant doubts and misgivings it has fostered. First, I review Freud's depiction of the unconscious in relation to his conception of psychic reality, and then turn to some of the philosophical problems that derive from his characterization of the "two types" of mental functioning, primary and secondary thought processes. Finally, I review some of the implications that derive from the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious by employing a phenomenological critique of its presuppositions, emphasizing the role of Being and experience in the psychoanalytic encounter.

Though my aim is not a theoretical one, it is nonetheless relevant to theoretical concerns because the questions raised are of a philosophical nature. Although I am aware that numerous psychoanalysts since Freud have endeavored to situate his conception of the unconscious in light of subsequent theoretical developments, my purpose is not to assess these developments with a view to contrasting them with Freud's. Instead, I review the problematics of Freud's thesis in the light of those philosophers whose perspective is at odds with the very notion of an "unconscious" portion of the mind and who endeavor to situate the phenomena that Freud deemed unconscious in the context of consciousness itself, or in the case of Heidegger, one that dispenses with the conscious-unconscious

controversy altogether. To this end I propose that the unconscious is a form of sentient, nascent “consciousness”—implied in Freud's own depiction of it—but a form of consciousness that is unavailable to *experience*. Hence I characterize the purpose of the psychoanalytic endeavor as one of bringing those aspects of consciousness that lie on the periphery of experience to experience, to the degree that is feasible in each case.

Freud's Conception of Psychic Reality

Freud's first topography for demarcating the distinction between conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind concerned the nature of fantasy and the role it plays in the life of the neurotic. As a consequence of his experiments with hypnotism, Freud surmised that every individual is driven by two kinds of fantasies: one of which one is aware and the other of which one is unaware. Freud opted to term those of which one is unaware “unconscious” because we have no conscious experience of them, but are nonetheless capable of discerning their existence when hypnotized. Such so-called unconscious fantasies have been repressed, but because they reside “in” the unconscious they engender psychic conflict, the manifestation of which accounts for psychopathology, dream formation, and parapraxes.

Thus Freud's first, topographical model of the unconscious was relatively simple: one portion of the mind is conscious and the thoughts it contains are in the forefront of awareness (*or conscious experience*), whereas another portion of the mind is unconscious and is composed of fantasies that have suffered repression (or more primitive defense mechanisms). Freud also included a third element in this topography, the “preconscious,” which contains thoughts and memories that, though not immediately conscious, are nonetheless available to consciousness in principle. Freud's earlier topography is essentially an outline of the vicissitudes of the individual's psychic life, what Freud termed “psychic reality.” Freud's depiction of psychic reality is not, however, predicated on the kind of factual reality that is investigated by the empirical sciences, because it is a kind of “reality” that one *experiences* in the form of fantasy, delusion, or hallucination. Quoting Freud (1913), “What lie behind the sense of guilt of neurotics [for example] are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones. What characterizes neurotics is that they prefer psychical to factual reality and react just as seriously to thoughts as normal

people do to realities” (p. 159). Yet, in what sense can one treat such fantasies as “realities” when they are not *real*? Freud recognized that fantasies can be *experienced* as real in the same way that objective reality—which is to say, that which is not our invention—is typically experienced. In other words, fantasies, though not literal depictions of the past, nevertheless convey meaning, and such meanings are capable of telling us more about our patients than the so-called facts of their history. By *interpreting* both fantasies and symptoms as meaningful, Freud was able to obtain truths about his patients that were otherwise hidden. His opposition between “psychic” and “external” realities served to juxtapose an inherently *personal* reality with a more *literal* one. This isn't to say that literal, or objective, reality is necessarily false, but it was Freud's genius to see that the truth about one's history can be derived from the communication of otherwise innocuous musings, by interpreting a patient's fantasies as disguised messages. The recognition that fantasies could be conceived as messages suggested there was something “hidden” in them that the patient neither recognized nor appreciated.

Hence, fantasies serve a purpose: they disclose the intentional structure of the individual's deepest longings and aspirations. But Freud lacked a conception of intentionality that could explain how his patients were able to convey truths they didn't “know” in a disguised and indirect manner. In other words, his patients *unconsciously intended* their symptoms and the attendant fantasies that explained them—they weren't “caused” by their unconscious. Freud nevertheless suspected the existence of an unconscious form of subjectivity that was capable of intending symptoms when he coined the term “counter-will” in one of his earliest papers. Leavy (1988) brought attention to Freud's difficulty in grappling with the notion of an “unconscious subject” in a study of the development of Freud's psychoanalytic theories.

One of Freud's earliest ways of presenting the idea of unconscious motivation was as “counter-will” (Gegenwille), a word that is worth keeping in mind whenever we say “the unconscious.” Will, so rich in philosophical overtones, has been played down by psychoanalysis. Being a verb as well as a noun, the word will always implies a subject. When I do something that I claim I didn't want to do ... it does no good to plead that blind, impersonal, unconscious forces “did” the act: they are me. [p. 8, emphases added]

Leavy's use of the term “will” is not, of course, limited to the conventional usage of *conscious* will, any more than Freud's expression “counter-will” is. The term “will” refers to an intentional act that often alludes to *prereflective* (or “unconscious”) sources of motivation. Freud (1892) first used the term counter-will in a paper on hypnotism where he referred to an idea of which the patient is unaware, but which was brought to conscious awareness under hypnosis. Freud continued to use the term in a variety of contexts for some twenty years. The last time he apparently used it was in a paper on love and sexual impotence that was published in 1912. Leavy notes that the term seems to have disappeared thereafter. According to Leavy, “probably the generalization fell apart into concepts like resistance, repression, unconscious conflict, and ultimately, drive. But the gain in specificity was accompanied by the loss of the implication of a personal ‘will’” (p. 12n). As Freud pursued his project of establishing the empirical “causes” of symptoms, his earlier notion of the unconscious as a subtle agent, or anonymous ego, or counter-will receded into the background. Yet the tendency to depersonalize the unconscious into impersonal drives, forces, and instincts has not met with universal acceptance, even in psychoanalytic circles. The terms “instinct” and “drive” were scarcely used before 1905, though the concepts were there under other guises. Yet, expressions like “affective ideas” and “wishful impulses” clearly convey more subjective nuances than the terms “instinct,” “drive” or “excitations,” for example. With all the current debate over Strachey's translation of Freud into English—especially the translation of *trieb* into either “drive” or “instinct”—neither the use of *trieb* or drive alters Freud's understanding of the concept.

Whichever term one prefers, whether drive or instinct, psychoanalysts, with few exceptions, find it agreeable to use a term in which the *impersonal* aspect of the unconscious predominates. One of those exceptions, in addition to Leavy, was Hans Loewald, who took considerable care to explain how his use of the term “instinct” was intended to convey a human quality. According to Loewald (1980), “When I speak of instinctual forces and of instincts or instinctual drives, I define them as motivational, i.e., both motivated and motivating.... [For me] instincts remain relational phenomena, rather than being considered energies within a closed system” (pp. 152-153). Terms such as “motive” and “relational” lend a clearly personal nuance to the term “instinct,” and even the word “phenomena” sounds more personal than “forces.” If Freud's shift from

counter-will to instinct lent credence to his claim that psychoanalysis, at least in appearance, deserved the status of a science, it is nevertheless a science more similar to that of academic psychologists who “study” rats or physicists who “measure” energies. However much some analysts may strive to measure the psychoanalytic experience in specifically scientific terms, the legitimacy of one's fantasy life can only be grasped metaphorically and experientially, in terms that remain personal in nature.¹

Freud's Formulation of Two Types of Mental Functioning

After Freud formulated his theory of the structural model in 1923, his earlier allusions to the unconscious as a “second subject” that behaved as a “counter-will” gradually disappeared. The precedent for this revision was predetermined even earlier by Freud's distinction between primary and secondary thought processes. Indeed, the publication of Freud's (1911) “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” roughly coincided with his final reference to the unconscious as “counter-will” in 1912.

In this formulation Freud conceived the primary thought processes as essentially unconscious. Hence, they were deemed to account for such psychic phenomena as displacement, condensation, the ability to symbolize and to apprehend time and syntax, as well as dreaming. Because the primary thought processes are supposed to be governed by the pleasure principle, they are responsible for that portion of the mind that “strives toward gaining pleasure” and withdraws from “any event that might arouse [pain]” (1911, p. 219). More to the point, Freud held that unconscious processes were “the older, primary processes [and] the residues of a phase of development in which they were the only kind of mental process” that was available to the infant (p. 219). Thus, whatever the infant wished for, says Freud, “was simply presented in a hallucinatory manner, just as still happens today with our dream-thoughts each night” (p. 219).

However primitive the primary thought processes may seem, they are nonetheless perfectly capable of sensing that when the infant's hallucinatory anticipation of pleasure fails to materialize, another means of obtaining gratification must be substituted in its place. Moreover, the primary thought processes are also presumed to be capable of “experiencing”

¹ For a more thorough treatment of Freud's conception of psychic reality see Thompson, 1994, pp. 1-50.

disappointment, leading to the necessity for another means of engaging the world.
Quoting Freud:

It was ... the non-occurrence of the expected satisfaction, the disappointment experienced, that led to the abandonment of this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination. Instead of it, the psychical apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavor to make a real alteration in them. A new principle of mental functioning was thus introduced; what was presented in the mind was no longer what was agreeable but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable, [thus paving the way for] setting up the reality principle. [p. 219, emphases added]

Freud's conception of the unconscious is based more or less entirely on the distinction between these two principles of thinking. Now the secondary thought processes, governed by the reality principle, assume responsibility for the individual's relationship with the social world, including the capacity for rationality, logic, grammar, and verbalization. It doesn't take much reflection to see that there is something unwieldy, even contradictory, about the way Freud unceremoniously divides facets of the mind between these two principles of mental functioning. For example, if the primary thought processes are only capable of striving toward pleasure and avoiding unpleasure, and the secondary thought processes are in turn responsible for delaying gratification while formulating plans in pursuit of one's goals, to *what* or *whom* is Freud referring when he suggests that it is the "psychical apparatus" that "decide[s] to form a conception of the real circumstances" encountered, and then "endeavor[s] to make a real alteration in them" (p. 219)? Is the so-called psychical apparatus the primary, or the secondary, thought process?

We can presumably eliminate the secondary thought processes from this logical conundrum because Freud just explained that the *psychical apparatus* (whatever that is) was obliged to bring these very processes *into being* in the first place. On the other hand, we can also eliminate the primary thought processes from contention because Freud proposes the need for *a more realistic mode of thinking* than already existed, precisely because the primary processes are, by definition, incapable of executing them.

Many of the questions that Grotstein raises in response to Freud's formulation of the two types of mental functioning are devoted to the need

to find a resolution to this problem, and there has been no shortage of subsequent analysts who have raised this point. For example, Charles Rycroft (1962) questioned Freud's conception of the two types of thinking in "Beyond the Reality Principle" (pp. 102-113). There he questions whether it makes sense to insist that the primary thought processes necessarily precede the secondary ones. Rycroft notes that even Freud doubted it; according to a footnote in his paper on the "Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911), Freud himself admitted that

It will rightly be objected that an organization which was a slave to the pleasure-principle and neglected the reality of the external world could not maintain itself alive for the shortest time, so that it could not come into existence at all. The employment of a fiction like this is, however, justified when one considers that the infant—provided that one includes with it the care it receives from its mother—does almost realize a psychical system of this kind. [Quoted in Rycroft, pp. 102-103]

Freud might have added to this "fiction" the notion that the infant is as helpless as Freud suggests before it elicits the protection of its developing ego. Rycroft observes, "Freud's notion that the primary processes precede the secondary in individual development was dependent on ... the helplessness of the infant and his having therefore assumed that the mother-infant relationship ... was one in which the mother was in touch with reality while the infant only had wishes" (p. 103). Again, we cannot help being struck by the notion that the infant needs somebody else (in this case, the mother or, later, an ego) to grapple with the social world *on its behalf*. Rycroft concurs with the view of many child analysts that infants aren't as helpless as Freud supposed. According to Rycroft,

If one starts from the assumption that the mother is the infant's external reality and that the mother-infant relationship is from the very beginning a process of mental adaptation, to which the infant contributes by actions such as crying, clinging, and sucking, which evoke maternal responses in the mother, one is forced to conclude that the infant engages in realistic and adaptive behavior [from the very start]. [p. 103]

Rycroft concludes that the secondary thought processes probably operate earlier than Freud suspected and that they even coincide with primary process thinking. Even if Freud was right in proposing that infants are

indeed ruled by primary thought processes, what if those processes happen to include those very qualities he attributed to the secondary, such as rationality, judgement, and decision-making—even an acute grasp of reality? Wouldn't such a scenario, in turn, negate the utility of the ego's so-called synthetic powers? If Freud's *original* formulation of the ego is retained—that it is essentially defensive in nature—then the so-called unconscious id, which is governed by the primary thought processes, could be conceived as a *form of consciousness*. Freud's wish to distinguish between two types of thinking could be retained, but only after remodeling their capacities and functions. Paradoxically, what I am proposing would in many ways reverse Freud's schema. The primary thought processes—which I propose are “conscious” but *prereflective* and, hence, not “experienced”—enjoy a spontaneous relationship with the social world, while the secondary thought processes—those employing the tasks of *reflective consciousness*—determine the individual's relationship with himself or herself.

The nature of subjectivity has always puzzled philosophers and psychologists alike. Freud's depiction of an unconscious agency whose designs need to be interpreted in order to be understood was his singular contribution to our age. But his theories could never explain what his intuition was capable of perceiving. Freud hypothesized some sort of self, or agency, prior to the formation of the ego. This was supported by his theory of primary thought processes and, in another context, by his conception of primary narcissism. We know that the id is capable of thought because, after all, it decided to form an extension of itself—the ego—in order to insulate itself against the anxiety of being in the world.

In practical terms, the division between the id and the ego is a false one. As Freud himself acknowledged, the ego is merely an “outer layer” of the id; it was never conceived as a separate entity. If we expect to be consistent with the ego's origins, then that ego—following even Freud's reasoning—is nothing more than a “reservoir” of anxiety, in fact, our *experience of anxiety itself*.

Sartre's Critique of the Unconscious

Given all the attendant problems that Freud's conception of the unconscious has elicited, it is surprising that there is little, if any, attention paid to the prevailing conception of consciousness it presupposes. Whereas Freud depicted psychoanalysis as essentially a science of the *unconscious*,

it is impossible to escape the observation that it is also a science—if we can call it that—preoccupied with *consciousness* itself, if only implicitly. Terms like *truth*, *epistemology*, *knowledge*, *understanding*, and *comprehension* pervade virtually every psychoanalytic paper that is devoted to the unconscious as a concept. But isn't our fascination about the unconscious and our failure to resolve questions about its nature a consequence of our obsession with consciousness and the epistemological bias it engenders?

These are among the questions to which phenomenologists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur devoted the bulk of their philosophical writings: What is the importance of knowledge and what role does it serve in our everyday lives? Of all the phenomenologists, it was perhaps Sartre who took psychoanalysis the most seriously, even conceiving his own brand of “existential psychoanalysis” (1981). Fascinated with Freud the man as well as his project, Sartre was also a Frenchman and, like all French philosophers, was preoccupied with the nature of rationality, a legacy of Descartes. Yet Sartre's fascination with Freud alerted him at a very early stage of his intellectual development to the problems I have summarized.

Sartre (1962, pp. 48-55; 1981, pp. 153-171) rejected Freud's topographical model for reasons similar to Freud's. In Freud's earlier topographical model the only thing separating the system-conscious from the system-unconscious is the so-called censor that serves to regulate what is permitted into consciousness and, contrariwise, what is repressed into the unconscious. Hence the censor is aware of everything, that which is conscious and unconscious alike. Yet because the ego is *unaware* of the censor, this model posits a “second consciousness” (the censor) that is both unknown and unknowable to the ego in principle. Sartre's problem with this model is obvious: the so-called censor is the defacto “person” who is being analyzed and who disclaims knowledge of all the shenanigans he employs to disguise what he is up to—“bad faith” in its essence. As we saw earlier, Freud also had problems with the implications of a “second thinking subject,” and decided to discard this model for one that contained only one subject that *knows*, the conscious portion of the ego, and not one but *three* subjects that do not know: the id, the superego, and that portion of the ego that is responsible for defense mechanisms.

Freud's subsequent revision of his earlier model, however, fares little better in Sartre's opinion. The topographical model is replaced with one that is less concerned with demarcating conscious and unconscious portions

of the psyche than with determining the complex nature of psychic “agency,” or subjectivity. Although the two models are not completely complementary, it is easy to recognize those elements of the second model that were intended to remedy the problems engendered by the first. Now the id more or less assumes the role of the system-unconscious, whereas the ego more or less assumes the tasks of the system-conscious. Ironically, the system-preconscious does not enjoy a direct parallel with the third agency in Freud's new apparatus, the superego; instead, the superego adopts some of the functions of the now-abandoned *ensor*, due to its ability to prohibit those wishes and desires it deems unacceptable. Sartre's principal complaint with the new model is that it still fails to resolve the problem of bad faith, the problem of a “lie without a liar.” If anything, the new model gets even further away from Sartre's efforts to *personalize* the unconscious, by instituting three psychic agencies that protect the conscious ego from any responsibility for its actions. How would Sartre propose to remedy this situation, to account for those actions that Freud claimed the “conscious” patient is “unconscious” of devising, while holding the conscious patient responsible for performing them?

Sartre accomplishes this by introducing two sets of critical distinctions into the prevailing psychoanalytic vocabulary. The first is a distinction between *prereflective* consciousness and *reflective* consciousness, and the second is between consciousness and *knowledge*. Sartre summarizes the basic dilemma in Freud's conception of the unconscious—contained in both the topographical and structural models—with the following questions: How can the subject (a divided “subject” notwithstanding) not know that he is possessed of a feeling or sentiment that he is in possession of? And if, indeed, the unconscious is just another word for *consciousness* (Sartre's position), how can the subject, even by Sartre's reckoning, not know what he is “conscious” of? Sartre's thesis of “prereflective” consciousness is his effort to solve this riddle. Following Husserl's thesis, Sartre saw consciousness as *intentional*, which means it is always conscious *of something*. Hence there is no such thing as “empty” consciousness; nor is there such a thing as a “container” or “receptacle” that houses consciousness—a formulation that rejects not only Freud's thesis but Melanie Klein's “part-objects” hypothesis as well. Rather, consciousness is always “outside” itself and “in” the things that constitute it *as* consciousness-of something. In Sartre's (1957) words, “Intentionality is not the way in which a subject tries to make ‘contact’ with

an object that exists beside it. *Intentionality is what makes up the very subjectivity of subjects*” (pp. 48-49). In other words, the concept of intentionality renders subjectivity as already and in its essence a *theory of intersubjectivity*, because to be a subject is, by necessity, to be engaged with some thing “other” than one's self—even if this other something is just an idea. Sartre elaborates how this thesis would be applied to the social world specifically:

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I (or “ego”). There is [only] consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken, etc.... In fact, I am then plunged into the world of objects; it is they which constitute the unity of my consciousness; it is they which present themselves with values, with attractive and repellent qualities—but me—I have disappeared; I have annihilated myself [in the moment of conscious apprehension]. [pp. 48-49]

Thus, when I experience a rock, a tree, a feeling of sadness, or the object of my desire in the bedroom, I experience them just where they are: beside a hill, in the meadow, in my heart, in relation to myself and my beloved. Consciousness and the object-of-consciousness are given at one stroke. These things constitute my consciousness of them just as I constitute their existence *as* things through the act in which I perceive them and give them a name. And because naming things is a purely human activity, these things do not exist as rocks, trees, or emotions in the absence of a human consciousness that is capable of apprehending them through the constitutive power of language.

Such acts of apprehension, however, do not necessarily imply “knowledge” of what I am conscious of. Sartre makes a distinction between the *prereflective* apprehension of an object and our *reflective* “witnessing” of the act. Ordinarily when I am prereflectively conscious of a feeling, for example, I intuit the feeling of sadness and, in turn, reflectively acknowledge this feeling as sadness: I feel sad and experience myself as a sad individual more or less simultaneously. But I am also capable of feeling sadness, or anger, or envy without *knowing* I am sad, or angry, or envious, as such. When such a state is pointed out to me by my analyst I am surprised to be alerted to this observation. Of course, I may resist the analyst's intervention and reject it, but I may also admit it because, on being alerted to this possibility, I am also capable of recognizing this feeling as *mine*. Sartre argues that I would be incapable of recognizing

thoughts or ideas that I claim no awareness of unless I had been conscious of these feelings in the first place on a prereflective level.

In other words, what Freud labels “consciousness” Sartre designates “reflective consciousness” (i.e., knowing *that* I am conscious of it), and what Freud labels the “unconscious” (or preconscious) Sartre designates as that moment of prereflective consciousness that, due to resistance, *has not yielded to reflective awareness* and, hence, to “knowledge” of it, after the fact. This is why I can be conscious of something that I have no immediate knowledge of, and why I can become knowledgeable about something that I am, so to speak, “unconscious” of, but am subsequently able to recognize as mine when a timely interpretation alerts me to it. Thus, I can only *experience* something I have knowledge of, but not what I am merely “conscious” of. The power of analysis, according to Sartre, lies in its capacity to “arrest” time for the patient, by allowing the neurotic (or psychotic) the opportunity to slow the pace of his anxietyridden experience in order to ponder what his experience is, in its immediacy.

Of course, the decisive difference between Sartre's and Freud's respective formulations isn't that it merely substitutes Freud's terminology with Sartre's; on a more radical level it eliminates a need for the notion of a “second thinking subject” *behind* or *beneath* consciousness, and ultimately offers a means for personalizing the unconscious in a manner that Freud was unable to. There are still problems, however, even with Sartre's formulation. Because Sartre shared with Freud an obsession with the nature of consciousness, he went even further than Freud and eliminated the need for an “unconscious” altogether, replacing Freud's formulation with a model that was rooted solely in a theory of consciousness, a solution that was even more rationalistic than Freud's. Sartre even acknowledged late in life that his earlier project had been too indebted to Descartes and suffered from being infused with rationalism, as though “comprehension” is the final arbiter to psychic liberation.

Ironically, despite Freud's preoccupation with epistemology, he moved away from his earlier bent toward intellectualism and subsequently adopted the more sceptical position that knowledge per se plays a limited role in the psychoanalytic experience. The move away from interpretative schemes toward transference (and more recently, relational) conceptualizations of psychoanalysis reflect the growing influence of phenomenology, scepticism, and hermeneutics on psychoanalytic practice. If we want to find a philosophical model that can integrate all these

influences, however, we will not find it in Sartre, but in someone who was a mentor to him in the earliest days of his intellectual development: Martin Heidegger. I here review those elements of Heidegger's philosophy that appear to solve the problem of the unconscious that neither Freud or Sartre were able to.

Heidegger's Conception of Being and Experience

Although he was never all that interested in psychoanalysis, and what little he knew of it dismayed him, there are many aspects of Heidegger's philosophy that are sympathetic with it. Unlike Sartre and Freud, Heidegger was not interested in the nature of consciousness *per se*, because he thought it tended to psychologize our conception of human experience instead of getting to its roots. Heidegger's reasons for taking this position were complex, but at the heart of them was a conviction that epistemology is not a viable means for getting to the bottom of what our suffering is about. Of all the phenomenologists of his generation, Heidegger was alone in conceiving philosophy as a therapy whose purpose is to heal the human soul. This made Heidegger unpopular with academic philosophers but a valuable resource to a group of European psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who saw in his work a humanistic alternative to Freud's penchant for theory. Ironically, many of them, including Medard Boss, Ludwig Binswanger, Eugene Minkowski, and Viktor Frankl, threw out the baby with the bathwater in their haste to separate themselves from the psychoanalytic zeitgeist by replacing it with Heidegger as the basis for their clinical theories. This culminated in the impoverishment of both traditions, and only a handful of psychoanalysts (e.g., Hans Loewald, Stanley Leavy, Paul Federn, and R. D. Laing) sought to integrate elements of Heidegger's philosophy into Freud's conception of psychoanalysis.

Heidegger is probably most famous for his decision to root his philosophy in ontology, the study of Being, instead of epistemology, the study of knowledge. This is irritating to philosophers and psychologists alike, because it discards epistemological questions in favor of a fundamental critique of what human existence is about. This is a topic that most people would prefer to leave alone, for why question the “why” of our existence when it is patently obvious that we, in fact, exist? But Heidegger was not simply interested in why we exist but how, and to what end. For example, when I pause to take stock of myself by asking, “who am I?” I am asking the question about the *meaning of Being*. In fact, we

submit to Being all the time, but without knowing it. Whenever we are engaged in writing a paper, painting a picture, driving a car, or riding a bicycle, we “let go” of our rational and conscious control of the world and in that letting-go we submit to Being, an experience that, by its nature, we cannot think our way through. Arguably the most radical critic of Descartes's rationalistic constitution of subjectivity, Heidegger countered that we live our lives in an everyday sort of way *without* thinking about what we are doing and, more importantly, without having to think our way through our activities as a matter of course. The place he assigned to reason is, in effect, an after-the-fact operation that is not primary to our engagement with the world, but secondary; it is only when our involvement with the world breaks down that we take the time to divorce ourselves from it for the purpose of pondering what has happened and why.

Contrary to both Husserl and Sartre, who believed it is possible to employ the conscious portion of the mind in order to fathom the bedrock of who I am in tandem with the choices that determine my subjectivity, Heidegger countered that it is impossible ever to get “behind” our constitutive acts in such a way that we can determine the acts we intend to embark on *before* committing them. Whereas Sartre argued that I “choose” the person that I am and can always change who I am by choosing to be someone else, Heidegger observed that my ability to comprehend the choices I make necessarily occurs *after* the fact, so that I am always endeavoring to “discover” (or disclose) the acts I have *already* made in a world that is not my construction, but is in significant measure “other” than my intent or volition. This is because I am always embedded in a situation that is imbued with moods and feelings that conspire to “determine” my choices before I am ever conscious of having made them. Thus my experience of myself is one of having been “thrown” into the situation I find myself in, and then collecting myself in order to fathom how I got here and what my motives have been, in hindsight.

Hence, more primary for Heidegger than the comprehension of the world (Descartes), the search for pleasure (Freud), or the management of anxiety (Klein) is the *need to orient* ourselves at every moment in time by asking ourselves, where are we, what are we doing here, to what do we belong? It is my sense of who I am to ask this question that constitutes me in my existence. Although the question of who-ness is the foundation of Heidegger's philosophy, it is important to understand that this is not

a psychological question of identity, as per Erikson, but an ontological question of Being, because it is bigger than the psyche or the self. At bottom, this question is presupposed when we query the role of the unconscious, but it replaces Freud's psychologization of this question with an existential one. If one removes these questions from a strictly philosophical context and inserts them into one that is specifically clinical, one readily recognizes that Heidegger is raising the same questions that our analytic patients are struggling with, only they lack the means with which to consider them.

Because Heidegger rejected epistemology, his philosophy is inherently sceptical,² not in the sense of doubting that I can know anything, but because knowledge doesn't get to the heart of what my life is about. Moreover, this attitude is easily adapted for the purposes of psychoanalytic inquiry, as any number of contemporary psychoanalysts have recognized. The novelty of this perspective has also insinuated its way into the thinking of many disparate (including classical as well as contemporary) psychoanalytic practitioners, some by virtue of their acquaintance with Heidegger's philosophy (Leavy, **1980, 1988**; Laing, **1960, 1969**), some by virtue of Sullivan's interpersonal theory (Levenson, **1972, 1983, 1991**; **Stern, 1997**; **Bromberg, 1998**; **Langan, 1993**), and others through the influence of classical psychoanalysts such as Hans Loewald (**1980**), a self-identified Freudian analyst who studied with Heidegger in his youth. What holds such disparate theoretical outlooks together is their respective conceptions of experience. Heidegger's movement from epistemology toward ontology led to his abandoning concepts like consciousness and even intentionality (as it was conceived by Husserl) in favor of a critique of our relationship with Being and the manner in which it is disclosed to us in the immediacy of everyday experience.

How, then, does Heidegger conceive of experience and why is this an ontological question instead of an epistemological or psychological one? From a strictly Heideggerian perspective, psychoanalysis is already concerned with our manner of Being and has been from the start. People go into analysis because they are not satisfied with the manner of Being they are in and want to change it. But in order to determine what our manner of Being is about we have to give ourselves to it, through our experience of it. In its essence, psychoanalysis gives us the opportunity to give thought to our experience by taking the time that is needed to ponder it. Heidegger

² See **Thompson, 2000b**, for a discussion on the sceptical dimension to Heidegger's and Freud's respective conceptions of the human condition.

would have agreed with Freud that there are indeed “two types” of thinking that we typically employ, though he wouldn't formulate them in the way that either Freud or Sartre proposed. Heidegger not only rejected Freud's conception of the unconscious, but also avoided employing the term “consciousness” in the convoluted manner that Sartre did, opting instead to focus his attention on two types of “thinking”: calculative and meditative. Basically, Heidegger believed that the nature of consciousness is so inherently mysterious that it is misleading to equate it with synonyms like “awareness” or “knowledge.” We have seen, from the thicket of contradictions that both Freud and Sartre entertained about the distinction between a conscious and unconscious portion of the mind, that such a distinction ultimately dissolves into a well of confusion.

Whereas all analysts are familiar with situations when their patients resist thinking about certain topics because they are distressing and because they prefer thinking about topics that are more pleasing or interesting, Heidegger observed that one manner of thinking (whatever the topic happens to be) is inherently comforting while the other is more liable to elicit anxiety or dread (*angst*). We tend to avoid thinking the thoughts that make us anxious and abandon ourselves to thoughts, speculations, and fantasies that are soporific. The prospect of enduring the kind of anxiety that genuine thought entails is distressing and the tactics we employ to avoid it are universal. The task of analysis is to nudge our thinking into those areas we typically avoid so that we can access a region of our existence that we are loathe to explore, but which lies at the heart of our humanity. This is effected by *experiencing what our suffering is about*, and allowing such experiences to change us, not by virtue of knowing more than we already do about ourselves, but by helping us accommodate a dimension of our experience that we avoid at every turn. When we succumb to such experiences we are thrown into a different manner of experiencing ourselves and what we, as “selves,” are about.

If the foregoing is to make any sense, we must first understand why Heidegger insists on depicting the manner of Being he is concerned about with a capital “B,” a distinction that Heidegger calls “the ontological difference.” The word “being” (with a little “b”) is an “entity,” as such, and is the object of scientific investigation as well as our everyday ordinary perceptions: trees, houses, tables, feelings, and so on. In other words, it refers to things as they seem at first blush. Heidegger, however, transforms these “things” (beings, or entities) into Being by recognizing their *temporal* dimension. Hence, “beings” necessarily exist *in time*, in a

temporal flux of past-present-future (what we ordinarily call “now”). This temporalization of beings into Being, however, can only be achieved by a *human* being who is privy to a relationship with objects of reflection by virtue of the capacity to think about them and interpret what they mean. Hence, our relationship with time reveals what the Being of “beings” share in common: the world as it is disclosed or “illuminated” to *a person* by virtue of his or her capacity to experience the object in question. In other words, beings (things, objects, perceptions) are transformed into Being when they are experienced by virtue of my capacity to interpret their significance for *me*. This observation sheds light on what psychoanalysts are already doing whenever they employ interpretations for the purpose of helping their patients appreciate that everything they experience is unique to them alone. This is because everything they are capable of experiencing contains an historical component, and only they have lived the history that is theirs. Where Heidegger parts company with most analysts, however, is that such realizations are not intended merely to help patients “understand” themselves better, but to *experience* who and what they are, fundamentally. Like Heidegger, the analyst “temporalizes” the patient's experience by interpreting its historical antecedents, and in the act of temporalization helps the patient's world come alive. This is what Heidegger calls doing “fundamental ontology.”

Thought—and the Experience of Thinking

As noted earlier, in Heidegger's later thought he emphasized a form of thinking he characterized as meditative, a kind of thought that is usually dismissed as irrelevant by scientists and academics who employ a manner of thinking Heidegger calls *calculative*. What kind of thought does meditative thinking entail? Gray (1968) suggests it is helpful to first understand what Heidegger does not mean by meditative thinking.

Thinking is, in the first place, not what we call having an opinion or a notion. Second, it is not representing or having an idea (uorstellen) about something or a state of affairs.... Third, thinking is not ratiocination, developing a chain of premises which lead to a valid conclusion.... [Meditative] thinking is not so much an act as a way of living or dwelling—as we in America would put it, a way of life. [pp. x-xi]

Offering a different perspective on this enigmatic proposition, Macquarrie 1994 proposes that “‘Meditation’ suggests a kind of thought in

which the mind is docile and receptive to whatever it is thinking about. Such thought may be contrasted [for example] with the active investigative thought of the natural sciences” (pp. 77-78). In comparison, Heidegger characterizes calculative thinking as the conventional norm and a byproduct of the technological age in which we live. Though its roots go all the way back to Plato, its impact on culture was not fully formed until the scientific revolution that was inspired by Descartes in the sixteenth century. The tendency to perceive the world in the abstract and conceptual manner that calculative thinking entails took an even sharper turn in the twentieth century with the birth of the computer era and the amazing gains that technology has enjoyed over the past century, evidenced in the development of housing, transportation, medicine, and so on. But have these gains made us any happier? The question of technology is a complicated one and remained the focus of Heidegger's attention throughout his lifetime. Though it would be extreme to suggest Heidegger was opposed to science, he believed that science has overtaken our lives to such a degree that we have now forgotten how to think in a nonscientific manner. One of Heidegger's most infamous statements about the status of science is that “science does not *think*” and that the thinking science employs is an impoverished variation of it, epitomized by the credence given to scientific “research” and the like, which Heidegger dismisses as thought-less and thought-poor.

Indeed, one of the consequences of the technological age is what has recently been depicted as the “postmodern condition,” the ultimate expression of our contemporary obsession with technology and the technology culture it has spawned. This is a culture that, from Heidegger's perspective, is fundamentally ill, in the sense of being “ill at ease” with itself, a product of the pervasive emptiness that characterizes the twentieth-century neurosis. Heidegger saw psychoanalysis as the inevitable response to the malaise in which Postmodern Man is imprisoned, because once we created this dire situation it was necessary that we fashion a cure for it. What, in Heidegger's opinion, is the cure for such malaise? To simply remember *how* to think in the manner that we have forgotten. In fact, this is the kind of thinking that Freud, despite his penchant for science, stumbled upon on his own, not by engaging in scientific research, but by examining his own condition. His efforts culminated in the radical treatment scheme that lies at the heart of the psychoanalytic endeavor, epitomized by the free-association method and its complement, the analyst's “free-floating attentiveness”—neutrality, or what

Keats (Leavy, 1970) termed “negative capability—that he counseled analytic practitioners to adopt.³

Whereas in Heidegger's earlier period he was concerned with the region of our everyday activities that we perform as a matter of course without having to think our way through them, the later period of his development in which he focused on calculative and meditative thinking entailed a “turn” in his thinking that emphasized the kind of experience we are capable of obtaining when we have been cured of our obsession for knowledge. Though Heidegger abandoned terms such as “intentionality” and “consciousness” in this later period, he then emphasized to an even greater degree the importance of *attending to experience* and even argued that the only means we have of “touching Being” is by pondering what our experience may elicit from this novel perspective. Thus, for Heidegger, experience, properly speaking, is ontological, that is, one does not genuinely experience with one's feelings or one's mind, but with one's *Being*. Hence one cannot “feel” or “think” one's way to experience—one must *submit* to it.

To summarize, whereas Sartre distinguishes between prereflective and reflective modes of consciousness, Heidegger distinguishes between a region of our existence that is unavailable to experience and the capacity we have to access it by submitting to it. Whereas Freud's conception of the unconscious conceives it as an “underworld” of hidden aims, intentions, and conspiracies that shadow the world of consciousness (i.e., the world in which we live), Heidegger inverts his thesis into one that dispenses with the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious altogether. Instead, Heidegger sees a cleavage between the acts we commit without thinking (of which we have no knowledge at the moment we commit them) and the acts that become available to experience by giving thought to them. Conversely, it is the world I inhabit *without* thinking where I reside, not the one (as per Freud) I am momentarily conscious of. Moreover, this is the world I attend to when free associating in analysis, but a world I will never, no matter how much I try, be fully conscious of.

R. D. Laing's Critique of “Unconscious Experience”

Much of this, I imagine, is no doubt familiar, not because Heidegger has been a focus of study, but because analysts have adopted a phenomenological perspective without “knowing” it. This is one of the virtues of

³ See Thompson, 1998, 2000b, for a more detailed exploration of how Freud developed the principles of free association and neutrality.

phenomenology: because we are only capable of grasping it intuitively, many people stumble upon it on their own, as Freud did, without formal instruction. In a manner of speaking, despite his protestations to the contrary, Freud was a closet-phenomenologist and many of his ideas about psychoanalysis, including the bulk of his technical recommendations, were faithful to the phenomenological perspective. As noted earlier, Heidegger recognized that Freud's conception of free association and the analyst's endeavor to effect a state of free-floating attentiveness was compatible with the kind of meditative thinking Heidegger advocated.⁴

Given the parallels between Heidegger's and Freud's respective conceptions of meditative thinking and the analytic attitude (i.e., free association, neutrality)⁵ it is all the more surprising that Heidegger's influence has not been more evident in psychoanalytic circles. Despite his influence on a generation of Continental psychiatrists following the Second World War, there has been little effort among psychoanalysts to critique Freud's conception of the unconscious from a Heideggerian perspective. A singular exception is the work of R. D. Laing who studied Heidegger before he trained as a psychoanalyst in the 1950s. Laing's first two books, *The Divided Self* (1960) and *Self and Others* (1969), were inspired attempts to apply some of Heidegger's insights to the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious in terms of what is given to experience.⁶

In Laing's *Self and Others* (1969), he confronts some of the problems with Freud's conception of the unconscious (noted earlier) in a critique of a paper by Susan Isaacs, a follower of Melanie Klein. Though Isaacs's paper is mostly related to Klein's technical vocabulary, one of the themes in Isaacs's study originated with Freud and has been adopted by virtually every psychoanalyst since: the notion of "unconscious experience," a contradiction in terms for the reasons we reviewed earlier. Indeed, Laing avers, "It is a contradiction in terms to speak of 'unconscious experience,' [because] a person's experience comprises anything that 'he' or 'any part of him' is aware of, whether 'he' or every part of him is aware of every level of his awareness or not" (p. 8). Laing's thesis is that the psychoanalytic notion of unconscious experience alludes to a more fundamental contradiction that began with Freud's conception of the unconscious:

4 See Mcdard Boss's account of Heidegger's take on Freud in Boss, 1988, pp. 9-10.

5 See Thompson (1996a, 2000b) for a more detailed exploration of Freud's conception of free association and neutrality in light of the sceptic and phenomenological traditions.

6 The theme of experience preoccupied Laing throughout his lifetime. Two of his other books, *The Politics of Experience* (1967) and *The Voice of Experience* (1982), even contain the word "experience" in their titles. See more on the history of experience in Western Culture in Thompson, 2000a.

that there is such a thing as an unconscious portion of the mind that one is capable of experiencing “unconsciously.” Indeed, Freud's decision to conceive a separate portion of the mind that the (conscious) mind has no awareness of sets up a series of false theoretical dualities between inner experience and outer reality that land one, in the words of Juliet Mitchell (1974), “in a welter of contradictions such as the notion that ‘mind’ is a reality outside experience—yet is the ‘place’ from which experience comes” (p. 254). Mitchell observes that “This problem is peculiar to psychoanalysis ... because the ‘object’ of the science ... *experiences* the investigation of the scientists” (p. 254).

The heart of Laing's argument revolves around the difficulty that every psychoanalyst faces if he or she believes that the psychoanalyst is in a position to know more about the patient's experience (conscious or unconscious) than the patient does:

My impression is that most adult Europeans and North Americans would subscribe to the following: the other person's experience is not directly experienced by self. For the present, it does not matter whether this is necessarily so, is so elsewhere on the planet, or has always been the case. But if we agree that you do not experience my experience, [then] we agree that we rely on our communications to give us our clues as to how or what we are thinking, feeling, imagining, dreaming, and so forth. Things are going to be difficult if you tell me that I am experiencing something which I am not experiencing. If that is what I think you mean by unconscious experience. [pp. 12-13]

Even if one allows that the psychoanalyst's principal function is that of investigating the experience of the analysand, the analyst must remember that he has no direct access to the patient's experience other than what the patient tells him, whether the patient's account of his experience is reliable and to what degree. Yet it seems that the analyst is not content with the limitations of the situation that is imposed on him and prefers to engage in fanciful speculations and inferences as to what he “supposes” is going on in the patient's mind, of which the patient is presumed to be unaware:

Beyond the mere attribution of agency, motive, intention, experiences that the patient disclaims, there is an extraordinary exfoliation of forces, energies, dynamics, economics, processes, structures to explain the “unconscious.” Psychoanalytic concepts of this doubly chimerical order include concepts of mental structures, economics, dynamism, death and life instincts,

internal objects, etc. They are postulated as principles of regularity, governing or underlying forces, governing or underlying experience that Jack thinks Jill has, but does not know she was, as inferred by Jack from Jack's experience of Jill's behavior. In the meantime, what is Jack's experience of Jill, Jill's experience of herself, or Jill's experience of Jack? [pp. 14-15]

Indeed, this subtle interplay of how one's experience of other affects one and, in turn, how one's reaction to this effect elicits behavior that affects other's experience as well was a major theme in Laing's writings throughout his career. The book in which Laing's critique of Isaacs's paper appeared was a full-scale examination of the effect that human beings have on each other in the etiology of severe psychological disturbance, fueled by acts of deception and self-deception that characterize our most seemingly innocent exchanges with one another. Heidegger's influence on Laing's clinical outlook was explicitly acknowledged by Laing when citing Heidegger's essay, "On the Essence of Truth" (1977) in that work. Noting Heidegger's adoption of the pre-Socratic term for truth, *aletheia* (which conceives truth as that which emerges from concealment), Laing put his own twist on Heidegger's thesis by emphasizing the interdependency between candor and secrecy in the way that one's personal truth emerges and recedes in every conversation with others, an innovation that owes just as much to Sartre and Freud as to Heidegger's ontological preoccupations.

Many of the terms Laing introduced in that book for the *first time*— *collusion, mystification, attribution, injunction, untenable positions*— were coined for the purpose of providing a conceptual vocabulary that could help explain how human beings, in their everyday interactions with others, are able to distort the truth so effectively that they can affect each other's reality, and hence their sanity, as well. It was just this vocabulary that Laing suggested was missing in Freud's psychoanalytic nomenclature. In the language of psychic conflict, Laing agreed with Freud that people who suffer conflict are essentially of *two minds*: they struggle against the intrusion of a reality that is too painful to accept, on the one hand, and harbor a fantasy that is incapable of being acknowledged on the other. Consequently, their lives are held in abeyance until they are able to speak of their experience to someone who is willing to hear it with benign acceptance, without a vested interest in what their experience ought to be.

Like Heidegger, Laing avoided employing terms such as consciousness

and unconscious and situated his thinking instead in the language of experience and how experience determines our perception of the world and ourselves. Instead of characterizing what we do not know as that which has been repressed into one's unconscious, Laing was more apt to depict such phenomena descriptively, as that which I am unconscious *of*; or better, as that which is not available, or given, to experience, even if in the depths of my Being I intuitively sense that I am harboring a truth too painful or elusive to grasp. Laing also adhered to Heidegger's thesis that my experience of the world is dependent on what I interpret the world to be, so if I want to change my experience of the world, I have to reconsider my interpretation of it (Laing, Phillipson & Lee, **1966**, pp. 10-11).

An apt example of how Laing incorporated the basic tenets of phenomenology into his psychoanalytic perspective was his treatment of the psychoanalytic conception of defense mechanisms. According to Laing (**1967**),

Under the heading of "defense mechanism," psychoanalysis describes a number of ways in which a person becomes alienated from himself. For example, repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection. These "mechanisms" are often described in psychoanalytic terms as themselves "unconscious," that is, the person himself appears to be unaware that he is doing this to himself. Even when a person develops sufficient insight to see that "splitting," for example, is going on, he usually experiences this splitting as indeed a mechanism, an impersonal process, so to speak, which has taken over and which he can observe but cannot control or stop. [Hence] there is some phenomenological validity in referring to such "defenses" by the term "mechanism." [p. 17, emphases added]

Note that Laing uses phenomenology for the purpose of emphasizing what the patient *actually experiences* in relation to the analyst, not what the analyst believes, supposes, or imagines is going on in the patient's (unconscious) mind. Analytic patients, Laing allows, may indeed have a sense of themselves as living "in a fog," "out of it," "going through the numbers," "on automatic pilot," and so on. Hence, when the analyst suggests that such experience (or nonexperience) may be construed as a mechanism, the patient is perfectly capable of appreciating the metaphoric quality of this terminology. Laing's point, however, is that psychoanalysts tend to take this notion, not metaphorically, but literally, as

though there are indeed mechanisms and the like controlling our behavior, the nature of which we are unaware and may never become aware, no matter how much analysis we have had.

Laing emphasizes the importance of extending this notion further by examining the ways in which so-called unconscious aspects of a person's behavior (and experience) must be accounted for *in terms* of what one experiences and how, instead of speculating about what a patient may be said to be experiencing when his experience is inaccessible to both himself and his analyst alike. Laing suggests, for example, that the patient's defenses “have this mechanical quality because the person, as he experiences himself, is dissociated from them,” and because he is alienated from his own experience and, hence, himself (p. 17). Laing asks, what are defenses if they are not *protective maneuvers employed to keep one's experience at bay*? Phenomenologically speaking, repression characterizes the patient's capacity to forget painful experience, just as denial provides a means of simply ignoring one's experience. Similarly, projection provides a means of attributing self's experience to other, just as splitting characterizes the person's ability to “divide” experience into two isolated worlds, wherein the existence of the one is kept in abeyance from the existence of the other, and so on.

Consequently, experiences don't just “happen” in random, haphazard fashion; I am also capable of resisting experiences, avoiding them, and even forgetting painful experiences I have suffered in the past. In turn, the degree to which I am able to fundamentally experience something—whether eating a meal, falling in love, even undergoing a psychoanalysis—is determined by how willing I am to submit (i.e., give myself over) to the experience in question. Hence, there are degrees to experience—it isn't all or nothing. These considerations about the nature of experience offer enormous implications for the role of the psychoanalyst and the means by which interpretations may be used to transform what the patient experiences and how. Laing noted that Heidegger's conception of experience *already presupposes* an act of interpretation that, in turn, elicits the possibility of experience in the first place. According to Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1966),

Our experience of another entails a particular interpretation of his behavior. To feel loved is to perceive and interpret, that is, to experience, the actions of the other as loving. ... [Hence] in order for the other's behavior to become part of self's experience, self must perceive it. The very act of

perception land hence experience] entails interpretation. [pp. 10-11, emphasis added]

According to Laing, everything a patient in analysis experiences is the end result of “interpretations” the patient has *already*, surreptitiously given to all that he is capable of experiencing throughout the course of the therapy relationship. Hence, what the analyst says is never actually “heard” in the way the analyst necessarily intends it, because it is *unceremoniously and unconsciously interpreted* by the patient according to his or her interpretative schema, a culmination of everything the patient has previously experienced (and understood by those experiences) in the course of a lifetime. In other words, every analytic patient experiences the world according to a personal bias that is inherently resistant to anything that contradicts it. The dogmatic nature of the patient's views, held together by a lifetime of neurotic impasse maneuvers, accounts for the resistance that analysts invariably encounter when employing their interpretations. Because both the analyst and patient are always, already (“unconsciously”) interpreting everything the other says, what is actually *heard* by each and in turn experienced is impossible to communicate directly, because every account of one's experience entails the use of words which, when uttered, are de facto “interpretations” of that experience. This constantly changing interplay of speech, recognition, and misunderstanding accounts for the extraordinary difficulty that analysts encounter in their endeavor to effect change, because the change they aspire to effect is at the mercy of the patient's originary experience, the nature of which is impossible to predict, or even finally determine.

Hence, the analyst should resist the temptation to blindly offer interpretations with the hope that some will simply “stick,” but should endeavor instead to learn the means by which his interpretations actually *affect* the patient (transference) and, in turn, why the patient's responses affect him (countertransference) the way they do. In every communication with the patient, the analyst aims to (1) *learn* what the patient's interpretative framework is; (2) determine the means by which that interpretative framework constructs a “world” (the transference neurosis) that is attributed to the analyst; and (3) offer the patient a wider range of interpretations to consider, with a view to helping the patient overcome his innate resistance to experiencing something new, or foreign, but also *forgotten*. In his resistance to this process the patient employs alternative “interpretations” of his own that serve to distance him from painful experiences

while eliciting other, more manageable experiences in their place. Should an unanticipated experience slip through the patient's carefully wrought net of defenses, he will nevertheless instinctively limit the degree to which he is ready to permit the experience to affect him and, hence, transform his view of the world.

Heidegger concluded that experience never simply “transpires,” in the abstract, but is necessarily *suffered*, in the existential sense. Because we always have a hand in what we experience and the degree to which we permit our experience to affect us, no one can ever actually impose an experience on another person. It is nevertheless possible, through coercion, intimidation, or seduction, to engender an experience that the other person, in hindsight, may not have wished to experience. Such “experiences” can, in turn, be forgotten and *appear* to have been repressed and, hence, harbored in the unconscious. In fact, “experiences” are never actually repressed, as such, only those thoughts or discoveries that elicit such unsupportable anxiety that the individual is unable to take in, and hence, experience (i.e., integrate) the thought in question. This is because experience is an ontological phenomenon, not a psychological one. I am perfectly capable of entertaining thoughts or ideas without permitting them to affect me. Indeed, we typically attribute such instances to “intellectualization,” a neurotic defense commonly employed by obsessionals. Similarly, a person is just as capable of feeling anger, sadness, even pleasure, but without truly experiencing such affects wholeheartedly, a common occurrence in hysteria. Many people are simply dissociated from their experience characterologically (e.g., obsessive-compulsive or histrionic character type), but we are also capable of employing such forms of dissociation selectively, engendering blind spots in what we are capable of experiencing and how.

But what happens to “forgotten” experiences, ones we have experienced in the past, but now have no recollection of having done so? Do they become stored “in” the unconscious as Freud implies? In fact, experiences are not “entities” (and hence, psychological phenomena) like thoughts or ideas (like the idea, for example, that my father could possibly love me) that can be entertained and, given the right conditions, experienced, heart and soul. When I experience such and such my experience is *alive* because it exists in a passage-of-time. A linguistic analogy may make this clearer. If one thinks of experience as a verb and the thought experienced by the verb a noun, then once the noun is repressed the verb simply ceases to exist. The noun may subsequently be

resurrected and, hence, its movement in time can begin anew. But a passage-of-time cannot, in toto, be repressed or forgotten. It simply dies by ceasing to exist at the moment the unwelcome idea or affect associated with it is rejected. The catalyst for erasing such experiences by repressing one's knowledge of them is the unsupportable pain or anxiety that suffering such experiences occasions. Later in analysis, the experience of my relationship with my analyst may remind me of a similar occurrence with my father, and the memory of this incident may, in turn, be recalled, but without the attendant experience it originally elicited. Subsequently, I may have to work over such revelations once they are manifested before I can acknowledge the significance of the forgotten memory, not by understanding it better, but by finally *suffering*, and hence, succumbing to an experience of it. The irony in this thesis is that so-called traumatic experiences are never actually *experienced* as such, but are deferred until a later date when, with the help of analysis, the repressed memory may be elicited and finally experienced, often for the first time.

These considerations may help to explain why the act of interpreting the patient's disclosures with the aim of aligning them with "past" experience is a slippery slope on which every analyst has slid. The likelihood of transgressing the boundaries that designate the respective roles assigned to analyst and patient alike is built into the fabric of the analytic relationship, because its outcome depends on the manner in which such interpretations are offered. Interpretation is an undeniably invaluable and no doubt indispensable resource, but only when employed for the purpose of helping patients gain access to a dimension of their experience that has become dormant, by seizing on the opportunity of coming to terms with a lost, unincorporated dimension of their existence, however painful such experiences may be.

It should be remembered that Laing's treatment of experience was offered some forty years ago, long before the subsequent development of hermeneutic, relational, constructivist, and intersubjective schools of psychoanalysis, which have in turn noted some of the same problems that Laing presaged but rarely gets credit for. One possible explanation for this oversight is that Laing's commentary is *still*, forty years hence, radical in comparison with contemporary treatments of this theme; indeed, virtually all the schools listed above continue to flirt with the notion of "unconscious experience"!

The Interpersonal Tradition

Of all the psychoanalytic schools in America, the interpersonal school of Sullivan is the closest in temperament and spirit to Laing's phenomenological perspective.⁷ Sullivan was not himself a phenomenologist and apparently had no knowledge of its literature, but he was profoundly influenced by social theory and took considerable pains to reframe Freud's psychoanalytic vocabulary into one that was informed by a social, or "interpersonal," perspective, much of it indebted to Kurt Lewin and the American pragmatist, John Dewey. Sullivan's conception of the unconscious is a case in point. Perhaps because of Dewey, experience played an important role in Sullivan's thinking and led him to question the basis of Freud's drive theory and the idea that the unconscious is nothing more than a reservoir of repressed experiences. Sullivan situated Freud's conception of the unconscious in a social lens that relied less on the act of repressing fully formed (and hence, "experienced") knowledge than on the thesis that the experiences in question are not unconscious but "unformulated." In other words, in keeping with what I have been saying, much of what is unconscious has never been *experienced*, as such, but is preexperiential and, hence, not yet formulated (or in postmodern parlance, "constructed"), so it couldn't have been repressed in the first place. According to Sullivan (1940), "One has information about one's experience only to the extent that one has tended to communicate it to another or thought about it in the manner of communicative speech. Much of that which is ordinarily said to be repressed is merely unformulated" (p. 185).

Stern (1997), however, observes that Sullivan was not entirely successful in making a decisive distinction between his conception of unconscious experience and Freud's: "Because the approach was a new one at the time, and not clearly differentiated from the classical theory of the defenses, it is not always obvious when Sullivan means repression (expulsion or exclusion from consciousness of a fully formulated psychic element) and when he means lack of formulation" (p. 55). Stern's clarification of Sullivan's murky treatment of this distinction is a considerable advancement over Sullivan's, while remaining faithful to it in spirit. Perhaps Sullivan's clearest statement on what he meant by experience is

⁷ Indeed, after Laing visited the White Institute (founded by Sullivan and others) in the 1960s, he was made an Honorary Member of its society, and remained so throughout his life.

contained in a footnote in his seminal work, *Schizophrenia as a Human Process* (1962):

Experience as here used refers to anything lived, undergone, or the like: to that which occurs in the organism, rather than directly to events in which the organism is involved. Experience is mental; i.e., it is reflected to a greater or lesser extent in behavior and thinking. At the same time, experience often occurs without conscious awareness. [p. 106, emphasis added]

This ambiguous statement as to whether experience is, strictly speaking, unconscious (i.e., a fully formulated thought that has suffered repression) or may occur “without conscious awareness” would appear to support the thesis that Sullivan rejected the notion that experiences reside “in” the unconscious, as such. Compared to Laing, however, Sullivan does seem to entertain experiences that are not strictly “conscious,” a notion that Laing rejected in principle. In an effort to correct some of Sullivan's oversights, contemporary interpersonalists such as Edgar Levenson, Donnel Stern, Philip Bromberg, and Robert Langan have been instrumental in situating many of Sullivan's insights into the contemporary relational, hermeneutic, constructivist, and intersubjective perspectives. Stern in particular has brilliantly rendered Sullivan's oftentimes incomprehensible conception of experience more accessible to contemporary psychoanalytic practitioners. Indeed, Stern's recent work (1997) has emphasized the crucial role of interpretation in the psychoanalytic experience and is in many ways more consistent with Laing's position (noted above) than was Sullivan's.

In an imaginative application of Gadamer's hermeneutic method to psychoanalytic interpretation, Stern has also drawn attention to the manner in which human beings are essentially interpretative creatures, and how the interpretive act is one in which we are *already* engaged at the moment we experience something. In fact, according to Stern, what we experience is our interpretation of reality, not reality as such (pp. 181-184). This is very close to Laing's thesis (drawing from Heidegger) that in order to change one's experience of reality one must first change one's interpretation of it. This should not be surprising because the principal inspiration for Stern's adoption of the hermeneutic method is Gadamer, a former student of Heidegger. Although Gadamer adopts Heidegger's thesis that interpretation is a precondition to experience, he departs from Heidegger's ontological schema and replaces it with a hermeneutic one,

emphasizing the manner in which individuals “construct” their reality by virtue of the interpretation they give it, in the act of conversing with others. This appears to suggest, however, that the act of interpretation (or “construction”) is a conscious one, whereas Heidegger argues that the spontaneous act of interpretation that gives rise to experience is not conscious, as such, but one that is “given” to consciousness, from the recesses of one's being. Hence, for Gadamer (and Stern) experience is constructed, whereas for Heidegger (and Laing) it is given to consciousness after the fact. Thus it is only when we *bring into question* the interpretations we have already given that we engage in the interpretive act consciously or, as Gadamer would say, “constructively.” Moreover, this is the role analysts assume when questioning the interpretations their patients give to experience, by inviting them to consider alternate interpretations as well.

I believe that Sullivan's and especially Stern's respective conceptions of unformulated experience are advances over the problematic notion of unconscious experience and a step in the right direction, but they still do not quite reach the radical level of Heidegger's ontological critique of experience, for two reasons: (1) Heidegger's model is not constructivist, but revelatory, not a revelation of “knowledge” per se, but of being; (2) experiences that are not yet formulated (or conscious) are not actually *experienced*, as such, whether one depicts them as formulated or unformulated.

The points of convergence between Laing's and Stern's perspectives, however, far outweigh their divergence. For example, whereas Freud would say that anxiety prompts the individual to repress painful experiences that are already fully formed, Stern characterizes the act of repression-dissociation that rejects unwanted experiences (that have or have not yet achieved formulation) as one where the individual does not want to *have to think* about it, a point I have made elsewhere (Thompson, **2001**, pp. 418-424, p. 587 of this article). Hence, according to Stern (**1983**),

The self-system rejects all experiences and modes of relating which are associated with anxiety.... New experiences come to be mistrusted simply because they are new.... When this happens, the new disappears without ever having been noticed—or without being formulated.... That is, one keeps certain material unformulated in order not to “know” it. [pp. 74-75]

I concur with Stern (and Sullivan) that simply not thinking about something is the principal means available to the neurotic for not knowing what his or her experience is. My only argument with Stern—and this may be a semantic one—is that I would not characterize unformulated experiences as “experiences” per se, but rather thoughts or perceptions that have not yet *been* experienced. Hence, one is perfectly capable of “apprehending” a thought or discovery without giving such apprehensions sufficient thought to experience them.

Moreover, Stern suggest that this intricate dance the individual employs in order not to know (or experience) what is staring him in the face is more aptly characterized by dissociation than repression, because the conventional (or at any rate, classical) view of repression is that the repressed is a “fully formed experience,” whereas Stern's point is that dissociation takes hold before such experiences have had the opportunity to be formulated and, hence, experienced, properly speaking. Stern (1997, pp. 113-147, 2001) has examined the relationship between dissociation and unformulated experience in painstaking detail and depicts two types of dissociation. The first type is a more structured form of dissociation that more or less corresponds to repression, but defers from it in that the experience being defended against does not exist “in” some psychic underground grotto “from” which it can later emerge; rather it serves to impede efforts to construct a specific kind of experience that the individual is predisposed against experiencing. The second, less structured kind of dissociation is not typical of repression, because the only reason the individual is dissociated from a given experience is because he is preoccupied with another, more acceptable experience. It is easy to see how either hysterics or obsessional patients typically suffer from both types, the one against which they mount powerful defenses and the other that is readily available to them once they have been given an opportunity to entertain it.

The turn from utilizing repression as the fundamental defense mechanism (among classical analysts) to a more sophisticated conceptualization of dissociation (among contemporary analysts) has been spearheaded by interpersonal psychoanalysts such as Stern and more recently Bromberg (1998), who has discussed the role of dissociative states in severe forms of psychopathology. Bromberg rejects the “receptacle” metaphor for the unconscious and agrees that the study of experience is fundamental for a proper understanding of so-called unconscious processes; moreover, he has also given a great deal of thought to the role dissociation plays in

defenses against experience.⁸ Similarly, Langan (1993) has invoked the perspectives of Laing, Binswanger, Heidegger, and Sartre in his relational take on the unconscious. Many of these authors owe a considerable debt, not only to Sullivan, but to (1972, 1983, 1991), who has played a decisive role in translating Sullivan's now-outmoded terminology into the language of the consensus, while brilliantly demonstrating Sullivan's lasting relevance to and continuing influence on the most cutting-edge ideas in contemporary psychoanalysis. My only problem with these exciting and accessible thinkers is the tendency to position Freud as the straw man for everything that is corrupt and wrong-headed about classical analysis. Indeed, were Freud alive today he would feel right at home among the interpersonalists and the existentialists, not among the so-called classical analysts!

Freud's and Heidegger's Respective Conceptions of Experience

Returning to Freud, I now review those aspects of Freud's conception of the unconscious that are compatible with Heidegger's philosophy and the respective importance that each assigns to the role of experience in our lives. Over the past two centuries the German language has offered perhaps the richest and most subtle variations on the kinds of experience that English subsumes under the one term. It should not be surprising, therefore, that German philosophers have dominated nineteenth- and twentieth-century investigations into the nature of experience that subsequently spilled over to other European countries, including France, Great Britain, and Spain. I am thinking of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger specifically, all of whom elaborated on the notion of experience in their respective philosophies, granting the concept a central role in both phenomenology and existential philosophy. Before exploring their impact on phenomenology, however, I must say a few words about the German conception of experience and the etymology from which the terms they employ are derived.

The first is the German *Erfahrung*, which contains the word *Fahrt*, meaning “journey.” Hence, *Erfahrung* suggests the notion of temporal duration, such as, for example, when one accumulates experience over time, including the accruing of wisdom that comes with old age. The other German term for experience is *Erlebnis*, which derives from the

⁸ I am particularly indebted to both Bromberg and Stern for alerting me to some of the similarities between Sullivan's views on experience and my own.

word *Leben*, meaning “life.” Hence, the use of the word *Erlebnis* connotes a vital immediacy in contrast to the more historical perspective of *Erfahrung*. When invoking *Erlebnis*, the speaker is emphasizing a primitive unity that *precedes* intellectual reflection.⁹ In the scientific community, the notion of experience suggests the accumulation of empirical knowledge through the use of experimentation, a supposedly objective endeavor. On the other hand, experience may also suggest something that happens to us when in a passive state and vulnerable to stimuli, such as what occurs in a movie theater. It may also suggest the process whereby we submit to education, entailing the accumulation and memorization of knowledge over a period of time. Finally, the term may be used to connote a journey I have taken while traveling to a foreign country, perhaps in wartime when I am faced with obstacles and danger, the experience of which has expedited my journey into manhood.

You can see from these distinctions between the two types of experiences we are capable of having that even while offering tantalizing hints as to what the term means, there remains something ineffable about the concept itself. This presents us with a paradox, because the word is often employed, according to Martin Jay (1998), “to gesture towards precisely that which exceeds concepts and even language itself.” In fact, the word *experience* has frequently been used as a marker for what is ineffable and so private or personal that it cannot be rendered in words. One's experience of love, for example, is an experience that many insist is impossible to express or grasp in words alone, precisely because it is experienced long before it is understood, if then. As Laing observed earlier, even when I try to communicate what I experience to others, only I can know what my experience is. Hence, our efforts to convey experience are imperfect because it cannot be reduced to words. This observation has enormous consequences for the experience of psychoanalysis, wherein both patient and analyst rely almost entirely on the passage of words between them.

So what does the essential nature of experience entail? Is experience

⁹ As noted earlier, whereas Sartre holds that prereflective consciousness is a form of experience (*Erlebnis*), Heidegger argues that in order for knowledge to become available to experience it must be *thought*. Hence, for Heidegger, prereflective consciousness may be intuited, but not *experienced* per se. For this reason, Heidegger rejected Dilthey's (and Sartre's) notion of *Erlebnis* as a feature of experience, properly speaking, though he probably would have found the term more acceptable if it were to connote an act that is reflectively conscious at the moment it is experienced. It is this later understanding of *Erlebnis* that I employ in this article. For more on Heidegger's perspective on experience, see **Heidegger, 1970**.

antithetical to our capacity to reason, as some have claimed, or is our ability to reason dependent on our capacity to experience the very thoughts that our words endeavor to convey? As we know, many of the last century's philosophers and academics sought to reduce human activity to language, suggesting that one's capacity to experience is mediated through words and, hence, is secondary to the power that words possess. This view implies that preverbal experience is inconceivable, so that even the experience of pain relies on one's "knowledge" of what pain entails. Many of the features of structuralism, deconstructionism, poststructuralism, and the postmodernist perspective argue that the very notion of a conscious, sentient, self that is capable of determining its own truth is an antiquated idea that should be replaced with a schema that views the subject, not in terms of an experiencing agent, but as an effect, or "construct," of hidden forces.

In order to appreciate the contribution of phenomenology to our conception of experience it is important to note that, historically, empiricist philosophers such as Hume separated experience from rationality by consigning to experience sensual data alone. Hence, modern scientific methodology, which endeavors to combine the experience we derive from our senses with our capacity to think about and reflect on the nature of such experiences, is unable to account for the experience of ideas, thoughts, and imagination. In other words, philosophers have traditionally "split" human Being in half, assigning one portion of the human project to rationality, the mind, and the other portion to sense experience, the body.

The singular contribution of Husserl at the turn of the century was to reconcile the split between sense experience and rationality by suggesting that experience is already inherently thoughtful, because the nature of consciousness, according to Husserl, is intentional, so that the act of consciousness and its object are given at one stroke. One isn't "related" (as per object-relations theory) to the other because each is irrevocably dependent on the other, so that neither is capable of standing alone. As some Buddhists have argued, the presumed split to which Western thought has been devoted is illusory, because the two are actually One. Heidegger concluded that there are levels of experience—just as there are levels of awareness or consciousness—depending on my capacity to interpret *to the depths* what my experience discloses to me.

This thesis is especially relevant to the psychoanalyst who endeavors to direct the patient's attention to his or her experience by interpreting

its ostensible meaning. Viewed from this angle, a good interpretation is not intended to explain one's experience, but to *deepen* it, in the phenomenological sense.

Alternately, *what the patient experiences and how reveals to the analyst the person the patient happens to be*. Thus, as Laing noted earlier, patient and analyst alike are interested not only in their own experience of the situation they share together, but in what each takes the other's experience to be, however imperfect one's ability to understand other's experience may be.

This helps to explain why Heidegger conceives experience as the “revealing” of Being. Because experience discloses both who I am and the world I inhabit simultaneously, the two are inextricably connected. I am neither strictly constituted by the world, nor is the world I inhabit my invention: the two are interdependent because each serves to constitute the other. Thus the distinctive feature of experience from a Heideggerian perspective is its capacity to shock the slumber of my world at the roots, because experience not only reveals things that are hidden, it is also capable of changing *who* I am. In Heidegger's (1971) own words, “When we talk of ‘undergoing’ an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making, [so that *in order* to undergo an experience] we [must] endure it, suffer it, [and] receive it as it strikes us, and [*finally*] submit to it” (p. 57). By anticipating my experiences with a specific purpose in view I can use them in order to gain insight into the person I am. Moreover, there are degrees to experience; it isn't all or nothing. This is why I am also capable of resisting experience, avoiding it, and even forgetting experiences that are too painful to bear. In turn, the degree to which I am able to experience anything—a piece of music, the article you are now reading, even a psychoanalysis—is determined by how willing I am to submit to the experience in question.

So what does the ontological structure of experience have to do with the unconscious? Some would argue, nothing. After all, psychoanalysis is concerned with exploring the unconscious, whereas Heidegger's conception of phenomenology is devoted to the revelation of Being by critiquing one's experience. Despite what Freud says about the ego “no longer being the master of its own house,” experience nevertheless plays a vital role in Freud's conception of analysis and the conflicts that patients typically suffer. Basically, Freud believed that our capacity to bear painful experience (*Erlebnis*) as children more or less determines whether we will develop neurotic symptoms, or worse, when we grow up. This is actually a Heideggerian conception of experience, though

Freud never knew this. According to Freud, if a child is faced with an experience that is too painful to bear, the child simply represses it from consciousness, making the child's experience of frustration disappear. As Freud himself noted, it isn't the actual experience of frustration that is repressed, but the *knowledge* or idea (or from a hermeneutic perspective, the "interpretation" of what one takes the case to be) of the incident that elicited the experience in the first place. Hence, after this piece of knowledge (or idea) is repressed, the individual continues to experience moments of sadness or anxiety, for example, but doesn't know why. The only problem with this solution is that the repressed memory finds an alternate means of expression that transforms it into a symptom the adult subsequently suffers and complains about, though he hasn't a clue what caused the symptom or what purpose it serves.

For Freud, the purpose of pathogenic symptoms is to shield the individual from experiencing a disappointment of traumatic proportions that the person who suffers the symptom wants desperately to avoid. Since the disappointment in question was repressed (disavowed, projected, dissociated) but not entirely eradicated, the individual instinctively avoids experiencing similar disappointments and anything that may serve to remind him of it in the future. Analytic patients are loathe to risk disappointment because to really *be* disappointed is not only transformative, but necessarily painful. But such disappointments are transformative only and to the degree to which they are finally experienced at the heart of one's being, in the give-and-take of the analytic encounter.

Just because one has a fleeting thought, idea, or intuition, for example, doesn't necessarily guarantee that one will have a full-throttle *experience* of it. The phenomenologist accounts for this phenomenon by suggesting that Freud's unconscious is nothing more than a *mode of thinking* (consciousness) that the patient is unaware of thinking. In other words, the patient has no experience of thinking the thoughts attributed to him because he failed to *hear* himself thinking the thoughts in question. At the moment such thoughts occurred to him, his mind was "somewhere else." The psychoanalyst says he was unconscious of what he was thinking, but the phenomenologist would say he simply failed to listen to, and hence experience, the thoughts in question, when they occurred to him.

Based on this hypothesis, psychoanalytic treatment is nothing more than an investigation into the patient's experience, suffered over the entirety of one's life. Hence, analysts seek to learn about the experiences (*Erfahrung*) that patients remember over the course of their history, just

as they seek to understand the patient's experience of the analytic situation (*Erlebnis*), that is, the patient's *experience of his relationship with the analyst*: the so-called transference phenomena. But analysts are also interested in eliciting what may be characterized as “lost” experience (what Heidegger would call “potential experience”) through the patient's free associations. Change comes about through the patient's ability to speak of his experience instead of concealing it, as he has in the past. In other words, giving voice to experience deepens it, but only if the experience elicited plunges the patient to the depths of his suffering.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

What does Heidegger's emphasis on the ontological dimension of experience tell us about the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious? Does it do away with it entirely or does it offer another way of conceiving it? How, in turn, does it relate to Sartre's distinction between reflective and prereflective consciousness? Are Heidegger's and Sartre's respective views compatible or are they hopelessly irreconcilable? And finally, is it possible to be “conscious” of something that one has no experience of, or is it necessary to experience something in order to know it, even “prereflectively”? Or contrariwise, is there a dimension to experience that one is not *aware* of experiencing, or is it essential to be conscious of experience in order to construe it as experience, as such, whether one is invoking *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*?

Recall that Sartre makes a distinction between prereflective consciousness and *reflective* consciousness (i.e., that which we ordinarily term “conscious awareness”). Even while Sartre is indecisive on this point, for Heidegger, Sartre's notion of prereflective consciousness only makes sense if it is conceived as a form of nascent awareness that is not immediately available to experience, properly speaking. Only when I *reflect on* my prereflective acts of consciousness am I capable of experiencing them and, hence, be with them. Thus, from a Heideggerian perspective, there is no such thing as “unconscious experience,” despite the views of most classical and conventional psychoanalysts. If Sartre's conception of prereflective consciousness is simply another term for what Freud calls primary process thinking, then the unconscious may be conceived as a form of consciousness that is not yet available to experience.

As noted earlier, Heidegger lost interest in exploring the distinctions between consciousness, awareness, and intentionality because he felt

they were inadequate concepts for describing the nature of thought and why it is available to experience in some situations but not others. Thus the capacity to experience is the final arbiter for what it means to inhabit the world and to be-in-the-world authentically, as the person I genuinely am, because experience, whatever form it assumes, is irrevocably my *own*. Heidegger finally rejected the primacy of consciousness because he was concerned with how one comes to be who one is and the weight of anxiety that being one's self inevitably entails.

If Freud's conception of the unconscious is, for all intents and purposes, a scientific one, it is nevertheless imbued with ontological overtones that are evident, for example, when he characterizes the way we stumble upon it in our dreams, parapraxes, and symptoms. From this perspective, the unconscious is nothing more than an algebraic "x" that serves to explain that which is not immediately given to experience. Moreover, one can discern parallels between Freud's and Sartre's (as well as Heidegger's) respective depictions of "two types of thinking," which, when treated phenomenologically, betray ontological connotations to Freud's intuitions, if not his theoretical conceptualizations. Thus what Freud depicts as primary thought processes may be conceived as a version of Sartre's notion of prereflective consciousness, and what Freud depicts as secondary thought processes are editions of what Sartre terms reflective consciousness. Seen from this angle the primary thought processes are a form of consciousness, but lack the reflective capacities that the ego is only capable of obtaining after the acquisition of language. Another way of understanding the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* is to conceive the former as a form of preverbal experience (i.e., the experience of the infant) whereas the latter pertains to the child's (and later, the adult's) capacity to reflect on his or her experience after having acquired the capacity for language. The child's ability to learn from experience will evolve and develop, just as the *capacity to experience* will also evolve, from the most primitive aspects of *Erlebnis* to the more sophisticated editions of *Erfahrung*. Thus, Freud's topographical and structural models are indeed scientific, but only to the degree that psychoanalysis is a theoretical science that presumes to explain that which is inaccessible to experience. As a theoretical construct it may be accurate or not. We do not know, nor can we, whether and to what degree it is accurate, which no doubt explains why the history of psychoanalysis is littered with a seemingly endless array of alternative formulations to Freud's, each of which is just as credible (or not) as the next.

Whomever's theory one opts for—whether Klein's, Sullivan's, or Lacan's, for example—however compelling or attractive or elegant it may be, it is still just as theoretical, abstract, and impossible to prove (or disprove) as Freud's.

From Heidegger's ontological perspective, the unconscious is not a theoretical construct, nor is it “in” my head, but “out” *there*, in the world, an inescapable dimension of Being. It is my abode, my past, and my destiny converged, so that “I,” the one for whom the unconscious comes into Being, am simply the experience of this tripartite intersection. We apprehend it as an enigma, a dimension of our existence that lies hidden one moment, then slips into view the next, only to disappear again, in perpetuity. If our only access to it is through the vehicle of interpretation, it is not the interpretation (i.e., “translation”) of this or that psychoanalytic theory into a language of the consensus, but the kind of interpretation we render each moment of our lives, by the act of giving things a name and a significance. This is because everything we are capable of experiencing conveys meaning, and the only way to understand what something means is to determine what it means for *me*, at the moment it becomes available to experience and how. Consequently, the unconscious is never unconscious for me, but a living presence in my world. This is why the purpose of analysis is not finally to “know” the unconscious, but to return the analytic patient to the ground of an experience from which he has lost his way, in order to claim it as his own.

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