

JAMES'S CRITIQUES OF THE FREUDIAN UNCONSCIOUS – 25 YEARS EARLIER

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ABSTRACT:

In The Principles of Psychology, William James addressed ten justifications for the concept of the unconscious mind, each of which he refuted. Twenty-five years later in The Unconscious, Freud presented many of the same, original arguments to justify the unconscious, without any acknowledgement of James's refutations. Some scholars in the last few decades have claimed that James was in fact a supporter of a Freudian unconscious, contrary to expectations. In this essay, I first summarize Freud's justification for the unconscious to highlight the arguments he used in 1915, before then demonstrating how clearly James had undercut these same argument in the Principles, published in 1890. Interpreters of James's thought should resist the claim that he would or did support Freud's idea of the unconscious, even if he at times spoke generously about other scholars. We also have reason to wonder about Freud's inattention to James's remarkable early work in psychology, especially given James's critiques of the concept of the unconscious.

INTRODUCTION

Giants of early psychology, William James and Sigmund Freud disagreed about a central idea, the concept of the unconscious. It is generally understood that James rejected the idea, yet some scholars, such as Joel Weinberger and Gerald Myers, have read him in an effort to find sympathy for the Freudian unconscious. Weinberger argues that James's references to unconscious mental processes and the "subconscious" are evidence that he believed in the unconscious.¹ This is a

mistake since “unconscious,” for James, is at most an adjective referring to that to which we are not conscious, whereas *the* unconscious, for Freud, refers to a portion of, or an entity within, the mind, one which desires objects while remaining invisible to the conscious mind. These two things are quite different. James explains that practices or processes can become strengthened in the pathways of behavior through habituation such that a person no longer needs to think about them. These become subconscious, or in a simple sense unconscious, inasmuch as we no longer need to think about them in the focus of our conscious attention. This does not make the habits and processes at work desired. In fact, bad habits can form purposefully or accidentally, which people must fight to stop given the powerful force of habit.

In a 1990 essay, Gerald Myers addressed the relationship between James and Freud on the centennial of the publication of the *Principles of Psychology*.² Like Weinberger, Myers claims that although “James disliked the dogmatism that he found in Freud’s dream symbolism and antireligiosity... he commended his insistence on the reality of unconscious mental processes.”³ Myers tries to show that there was more agreement between James and Freud than people often acknowledge. Again I would caution against reading too much into this, given that what James and Freud each meant by “unconscious” was quite different.

There has been surprisingly little study of the comparison of James’s and Freud’s ideas about unconscious processes and *the* unconscious, respectively. The reason to study this topic is simple: some clinicians treat patients’ on the basis of the concept of the unconscious. Therefore, it is vital that concepts like these and our justifications for them are considered carefully. To this end, I aim to make a narrow contribution in this paper. In studying James and Freud, I found it truly remarkable that Freud would not have studied James more closely than he appears to have done. Had Freud studied James’s *Principles of Psychology*, he would have encountered James’s devastating criticisms of an unconscious portion of the mind. James challenged key justifications for the concept of the unconscious in *The Principles of Psychology*, twenty-five years before Freud made use of those same justifications in his “Justifications for the Concept of the Unconscious.”⁴ Freud did not acknowledge or address James’s criticisms. This leads me to think that he was unaware of them, though they were featured in the most influential publication on psychology published in the United States at the time.

In this essay I will examine two texts: James's "Mind-Stuff Theories" chapter of the *Principles* and Freud's "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious" in *The Unconscious*. It seems in comparing these texts that the kinship that Weinberger and Myers want to read into Freud and James ignores just how opposed James and Freud were about arguments justifying the concept of the unconscious. I believe that the common view is more justified, namely that James rejected the concept of a hypostatized unconscious, and that his arguments against justifications for the concept are strong and worth revisiting today.

In what follows, I will start with an examination of Freud's "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious" before then showing how profoundly James had challenged these same arguments a full twenty-five years earlier. I hope that it will be clear, in the end, that James's interest in "unconscious processes" is quite distinct from an appreciation of a Freudian conception of an unconscious mind.

I. FREUD'S "JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS"

In 1915, Freud published his famous essay, *The Unconscious*, in which he devoted a key early section to "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious." In that short but densely packed passage, he presented key arguments for the unconscious. In this section I will outline those arguments.

Freud breaks up his justification for the concept of the unconscious into two sections. The first concerns his reasons why the concept is *necessary*. The second explains the *legitimacy* of the inference to an unconscious. For the sake of clarity, I will divide Freud's arguments following two further categories, namely his empirical reasons for the unconscious and then his conceptual reasons.

Freud gives three principal empirical reasons for the *necessity* of the concept of the unconscious. These take the form of sorts of behavioral or experienced phenomena we encounter, but for which we have no immediate explanation. The first argument Freud gives is what he calls "gaps in consciousness."⁵ These "not only include parapraxes and dreams in healthy people, and everything described as a psychical symptom or an obsession in the sick."⁶

Parapraxes, or slips, might well be the most famous of Freud's concepts: "You dropped your penis ... I mean PENCIL!" These phenomena commonly invoke allusions to Freud and his theories of our repressed, unconscious sexual desires emerging in odd ways in consciousness. How can we explain slips of the tongue? The lack of an immediate explanation is precisely what Freud deems to be a "gap" in consciousness.

Freud also claims that our dreams can present us with this same sort of gap. How can we explain the remarkably odd experiences we seem to have in dreams, such as the dream of our brother's head on a scorpion's body, or of a melting ice cube crying for help? When we discover patterns, especially, in our dreams – such as the recurring presentation of a certain individual or a repeated reference to water – what can possibly explain them? One might explain these, as does Freud, through an account of desires and fears of which the conscious mind is unaware. And, the appeal of this story is obvious. We have desires. Others have desires. We often infer, interpret, and analyze the patterns of their behavior, so why not analyze our own dreams similarly? In this way, Freud inverts the common way we explain the patterns of other people's behavior. When one finds patterns, it is not uncommon to see in them some sort of meaning.

In our waking lives we experience thoughts in odd ways. Asking a loved one "what are you thinking about?" can often reveal the strangest of answers. The oddity of consciousness to which Freud is pointing here involves the progression from one idea to another that seems entirely disconnected. For instance, a parent progresses from thoughts about their reports to be turned in at work, to sudden memories of sandy beaches or sexual fantasies. Where do these oddly progressing ideas *come from*? How can we understand this remarkably strange jump in thought that suddenly *came to mind*? Freud believes our inability to understand the link between thoughts is yet another of these "gaps" in consciousness which necessitate a theory of the unconscious. Of course, his argument assumes that thinking is only understandable as a series of thoughts which are connected directly and with logically implicative reasons. There may have been an evolutionary advantage to a certain amount of randomness in thinking, rendering human beings less predictable and more varied, biologically and behaviorally speaking. As a final example of these gaps, Freud also raises the fact that often we arrive at "intellectual conclusions [but] we know not how."⁷ An instance of this might be the solving of puzzles or paradoxes. We

sometimes stare at puzzles for hours. Some paradoxes have been contemplated for millennia. Sometimes these problems are resolved all of a sudden, and we have no idea what brought the solution, nor why this new understanding was not previously obvious. How can we understand such odd phenomena in consciousness? Freud answers that we need the concept of the unconscious to do so. He claims that "All these conscious acts remain disconnected and unintelligible if we insist upon claiming that every mental act that occurs in us must also necessarily be experienced by us through consciousness."⁸

The second sort of empirical reason Freud gives for the *necessity* of the concept of the unconscious is that we have "ideas in a state of latency."⁹ Without justification, he claims that for the most part, at any one moment, consciousness only has present to itself a "small content."¹⁰ So, there must be something psychical that connects these disparate conscious thoughts, allowing some thoughts to be present to consciousness while others are put on hold. Where else can these thoughts go? Yet again, Freud's answer is the unconscious mind.

Freud's third empirical reason for the concept of the unconscious is what he calls "the effectiveness of hypnotism."¹¹ Many, including Freud and William James, have recognized hypnotism.¹² If hypnotism is effective, Freud believes there needs to be some sort of explanation for how it is these patients can exhibit the behavior they do *without* being aware of their hypnotism.

Freud also gives conceptual justifications for the *necessity* and *legitimacy* of the concept of the unconscious. The reasons he gives here are numerous. We can classify these arguments under four main headings.

First, Freud claims that if the assumptions of the unconscious allow us to "construct a successful procedure by which we can exert an effective influence upon the course of conscious processes, this success will have given us an incontrovertible proof of the existence of what we have assumed."¹³ I place this argument in the conceptual category, even though it refers to empirical evidence and verifications. In effect, this argument looks like one half of a *modus ponens* argument, presuming the antecedent is true. His point is conceptual: If a procedure can be constructed based on an imagined object, and this procedure proves effective, we would have

proof of the object. Unfortunately, Freud does not address the problem of the “placebo effect,” a significant counterexample to his claim.

Next, Freud points out to critics of the unconscious that they must not simply assume there is no such thing. Such an assumption would beg the question against Freud. *Why* not believe there to be an unconscious? Freud further claims that to fail to adopt the theory of the unconscious is to “prematurely abandon the field of psychological research without being able to offer us any compensation from other fields.”¹⁴ Rightly so, Freud demands that we curb unnecessary psychological assumptions, particularly against his theory. This claim does not truly justify the concept of the unconscious, however.

Freud’s third conceptual argument for the unconscious claims that the question begging equation of consciousness with the mental and vice versa “disrupts psychical continuities ... [plunging] us into the insoluble difficulties of psycho-physical parallelism.” He claims that it “overestimates the part played by consciousness.”¹⁵ One way to interpret Freud’s claim here is to say that a simple denial of the unconscious ignores the “gaps” in consciousness. It is unclear what else he might mean by “disrupt[ing] psychical continuities.” It is also unclear, however, why one ought to believe that consciousness is overestimated. One interpretation might be that Freud was answering a claim that all these psychical “discontinuities” were explainable in terms of consciousness. What makes this claim an overestimation? Freud does not say.

All the above conceptual arguments primarily support Freud’s view that the unconscious is *necessary*. The fourth conceptual argument given is a reason to believe the inference to the unconscious is *legitimate*. As such, this argument does not serve as a reason to believe a theory of the unconscious is correct, but rather that it is worthy of consideration in the first place. Freud’s argument unfolds as follows. We rely on inferences about mental states all the time. When we believe there to be other minds “inside” or related somehow to the bodies of friends and others, we are inferring that because they look like us and seem to exhibit the same sorts of behavior we do, by analogy, we can infer that they too have minds. Freud claims that “psychoanalysis demands nothing more than that we should apply this process of inference to ourselves also.”¹⁶ In so doing, we might infer there to be some other mentality, this time not externally, but *within* ourselves. In fact, Freud believes this inference to be *less* assuming than is

the inference to *other minds*. At the same time, the similar move of inferring intelligence is evident in the world or universe, a religious claim, is to Freud wrongheaded and childish.¹⁷

An element worth noting in this conceptual argument is that Freud recognizes a complication. When we infer there to be another mind somehow related to another body, we are concluding there to be another *consciousness*. I am aware of another body, and infer that that body, like mine, is related to a consciousness in quite the same way as is mine. This inference, when applied to oneself should – if it is considered a proper analogy – have the result of concluding there to be another *consciousness* within oneself. While Freud recognizes this issue, he says that it does seem odd to think of another consciousness in oneself of which the conscious mind is not aware. There would be two consciousnesses, unaware of each other, within one and the same mind. But how can this be? What would we say one has “in mind?” I have in mind the subject of my writing. Some other consciousness somehow within my mind would really have its own mind. In the ordinary language sense “it would have a mind of its own.” This language confirms Freud’s suspicion that an inference of another conscious mentality within our own, of which we are unaware, is not very appealing.

Freud correctly concludes that “those who have resisted the assumption of an unconscious *psychical* are not likely to be ready to exchange it for an unconscious *consciousness*.”¹⁸ Furthermore, if we are to assume there to be other conscious mentality of which our consciousness is unaware, we must “be prepared ... to assume the existence in us not only of a second consciousness, but of a third, fourth, perhaps of an unlimited number of states of consciousness, all unknown to us and to one another.”¹⁹ It is interesting that these difficulties with the inference Freud proposes do not lead him to abandon it. Instead, he explains that given these problems, “we have grounds for modifying our inference about ourselves and saying that what is proved is not the existence of a second consciousness in us, but the existence of psychical acts which lack consciousness.”²⁰ He concludes that

... in psycho-analysis there is no choice for us but to assert that mental processes are in themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the

sense-organs ... so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object ... [and in effect,] internal objects are less unknowable than the external world.²¹

Depending on how one categorizes Freud's justifications here, we might say either that he offered seven or ten arguments, some of which are more properly explanations for the possibility of an unconscious mind, rather than justifications. In the next section, I will present James's challenges for ten alleged proofs for the unconscious, which he published in the *Principles* twenty-five years before Freud's *The Unconscious*. Of course, Freud was not only aware of James before 1915. As Jacques Barzun has pointed out, Freud and James met in 1909, shortly before James's death.²²

II. WILLIAM JAMES'S EARLIER REPLIES TO THEORIES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

James's critiques of justifications for the concept of the unconscious are found in his "The Mind-Stuff Theory" chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*.²³ He hoped to show that the various theories attempting to divide the content of the mental make a serious mistake. After clarifying his general doubts about "mind-stuff theories," James analyzes the unconscious in terms of two questions: "Can states of mind be unconscious?" and "Do unconscious mental states exist?"²⁴ James writes that some

...try to break down distinctness among mental states by *making a distinction*. This sounds paradoxical, but it is only ingenious. The distinction is that *between the unconscious and the conscious being of the mental state*. It is the sovereign means for believing what one likes in psychology, and of turning what might become a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies. It has numerous champions, and elaborate reasons to give for itself. We must therefore accord it due consideration.²⁵

James believes that defenders of the unconscious “will hardly try to refute our reasonings by direct attack.”²⁶ Sadly, James’s prescient suspicion here turned out to be true also of Freud. Since the concept was so popular, and since so many alleged proofs had been given for it already, he accords it considerable attention.

James evaluates ten alleged proofs for the unconscious. Since he lays out each proof and reply side by side, I will do the same. It bears repeating that James was not replying directly to Freud in these critiques of the unconscious, since Freud’s “Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious” in *The Unconscious* was not published until twenty-five years later. James speaks instead to the slew of authors who seem to have taken the theory for granted.²⁷ James answers what he believes to be the most common and strongest of the proofs.

1. The first proof James calls “the *minimum visible*, the *minimum audible*.”²⁸ This proof asks how it is we can claim that we are affected by an aggregate, such as in the case of the sound of ocean waves crashing, without claiming each part individually affects our mentality unconsciously. Since we are not conscious of every wave distinctly, it must be that we are unconsciously affected by each and every sound wave, and our unconscious then sums up the individual causes and presents the aggregate to consciousness. We are not aware of each individual crashing wave. We only hear the whole. This proof resembles Freud’s later claim that there are gaps in conscious functioning. According to some, such as Leibniz,²⁹ the aggregate of the waves cannot be the cause of our awareness of the whole, since the aggregate is caused by the individual waves crashing.

James answers this proof by reminding us of the fallacy of division. Simply because the whole affects our mentality, we cannot conclude that all the parts do individually. Such an inference would bear the same structure as the claim that because the Mona Lisa is beautiful, it must be the case that each brush stroke is beautiful. James also reminds us of a point raised by John Stuart Mill. Mill tells us that a certain quantity of the cause may be necessary in order to bring about its effect. James provides the analogy of a rusty scale that is completely unmoved by the unbalance of a single pound to one side. It may indeed require a certain number of pounds to be added before any movement or impact is caused. The same could be said of each individual wave. We need not believe that we hear each individual wave when we hear the aggregate. It

may take a certain *quantity* of waves in order for any of the sound to bring about mental effects. So, we need not believe that certain mental content is summed first in the unconscious. We may simply believe that nothing enters mentality until it does so in consciousness, which can require a certain *amount* of the cause in order to be perceived.

Another point can be made about this first proof. Sound provides a useful example for studying the effects of parts and wholes. When we take the example of the ocean as above, an analysis of the summation of sound waves will serve to refute this proof. When we examine visually the recording of multiple sounds, a very common practice today with popular sound editing software, what we find *is an aggregate*. A wave is simply a linear fluctuation in amplitude of a certain kind – it is the whole, singular combination of a wide spectrum of frequencies and oscillations in amplitude. If we examine a concurrent set of recorded sounds, we will always be left with a single line whose amplitude consists of the summation of all the sounds' frequencies and amplitudes. What should be noted, however, is that the signal recorded and heard *already is the aggregate* (see figures 1, 2 and 3 below).

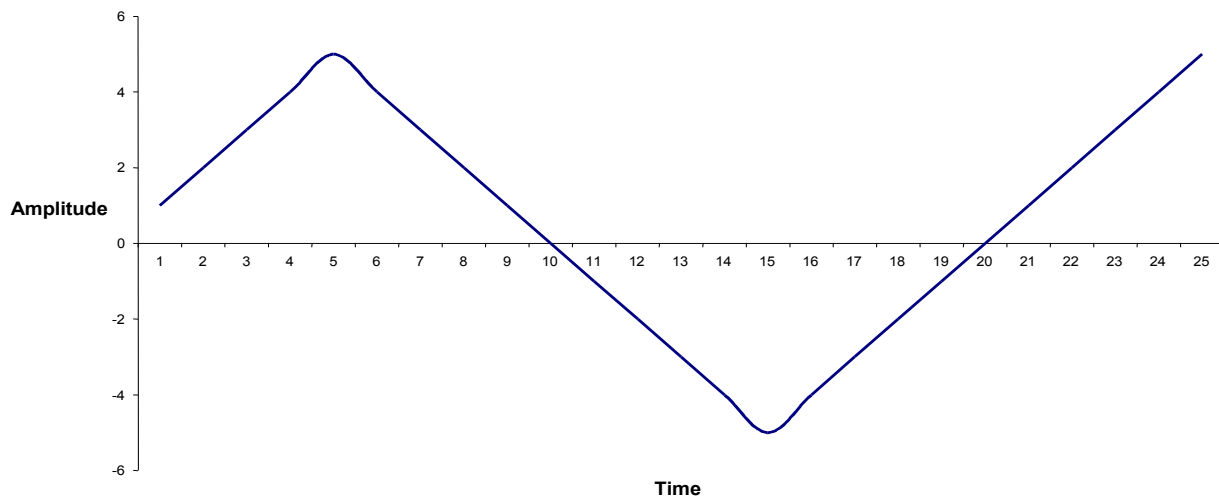


Figure 1: Sound Wave 1.

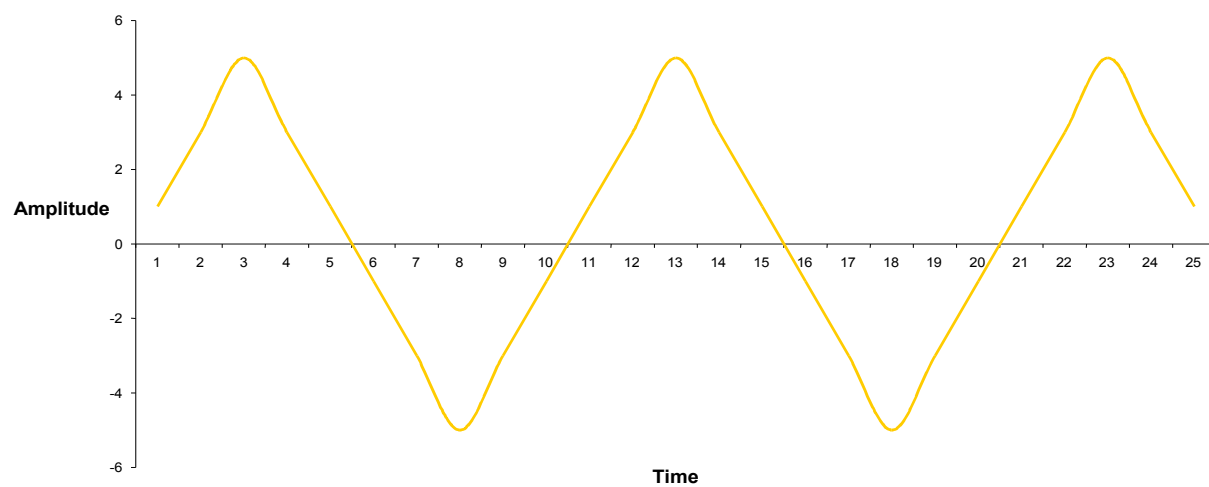


Figure 2. Sound Wave 2.

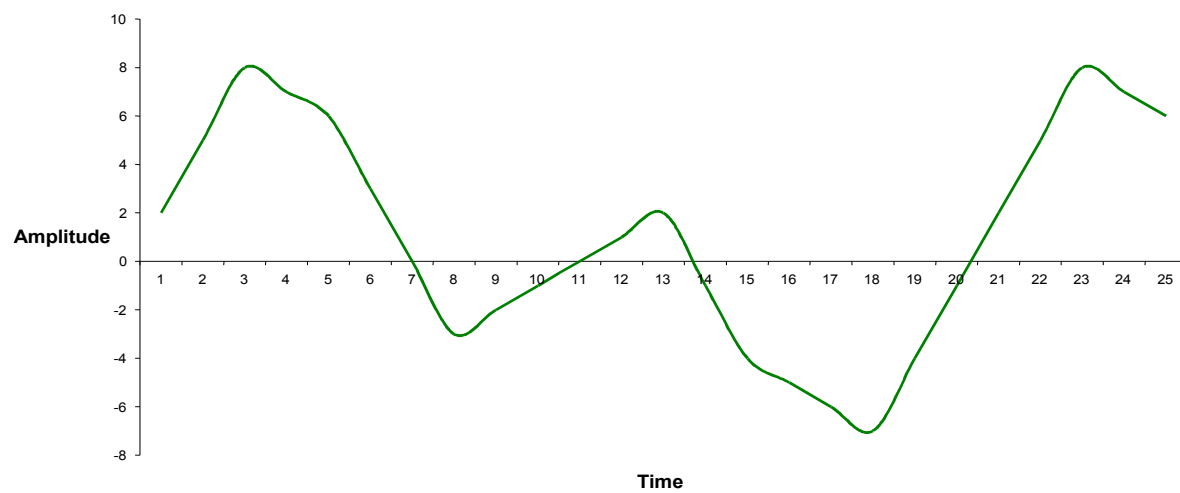


Figure 3: Combined Waves.

Were one to hear each of two different sound waves separately – one at a time – each one would be graphically represented as in figures 1 and 2. But, when these sounds are recorded together, the result is not some sort of image of two separate lines. We still only have *one* line represented by the fusing of the two different sounds, as we see in figure 3. These graphs demonstrate that conscious perception *presents us with a unity that we call an aggregate*.³⁰ This unity is perceived by consciousness. What is interesting is not something unconscious, but rather the question of how it is *in consciousness* that we can perceive a unity, a singular sound wave, and yet distinguish within it distinct sound sources. This happens through education, experience, and habituation, such as when master chefs learn to recognize the many flavors in a dish, which at an earlier time tasted like a unified whole when he or she was a non-specialist. In similar fashion, James's theories of habituation, attention, and focus in consciousness offer explanations for the ways in which different sounds are distinguished from an audible totality.

2. The second proof that James evaluates involves habit. Every day we perform countless tasks automatically. Some of them are complex. A factory worker can learn a set of complex maneuvers that eventually become nearly automatic, much in the way that musicians practice until they no longer have to think about certain movements. After strong habituation, if we observe the worker or the musician, we might be stunned to see him or her performing the very same task with eyes closed, or while in an engaged conversation with a co-worker. They can seem to pay no attention to their work, and yet complete more or perform better than the novices who give the work their full attention. How can we explain this odd phenomenon? The complex activities with which they are engaged require a certain comprehension, perception and volition which seem to be entirely absent from consciousness.

James believes that there are several ways to explain complex automatic behavior. One is that consciousness relating to these behaviors merely passes so rapidly that our consciousness neither focuses attention on it, nor remembers it later. Another possibility is that our consciousness can be “*split-off* from the rest of the consciousness of the hemispheres.”³¹ One way to understand this handling of several tasks at once, in terms of “splitting” consciousness happens all the time. The modern term, “multitasking,” refers to this phenomenon. Some joke that those who cannot multitask “can’t walk and chew gum at the same time,” because it is odd

when people are incapable of attending to more than one action at a time. Someone, for instance, who learns to play guitar at first can do little else at the same time. Eventually, she becomes adept at singing while strumming. What is achieved with practice is a certain *balance of attention*. James writes, "either lack of memory or split-off cortical consciousness will certainly account for all the facts."³²

It may be helpful to note that computers only very rarely multitask, contrary to popular language on the matter. Windows based machines have given us the ability to perform multiple tasks at once. Our computer processors, however, each only performed one calculation at a time.³³ They simply made calculations incredibly quickly, such that we perceived these tasks as being computed simultaneously. I mention this example for those who believe James's first possibility here is fanciful.

3. The third proof that James evaluates also resembles one of Freud's justifications in 1915. When "thinking of A, we presently find ourselves thinking of C. Now B is the natural logical link between A and C, but we have no consciousness of having thought B."³⁴ In this event, it must be that thought B was present *unconsciously*, thereby providing the missing link.

James deals with this proof quickly. He provides two simpler alternatives to explain this phenomenon. First, it could be that B was indeed present in consciousness, but was forgotten.³⁵ Or second, B's "*brain-tract* alone was adequate to do the whole work of coupling A with C, without the idea B being aroused at all, whether consciously or unconsciously."³⁶ Moreover, why must we believe that logic is the director of consciousness. The mind's ideas need not progress necessarily according to logic. John Dewey believed there to be a sort of "interconnectedness ... [and] points of contact and mutual bearings"³⁷ in the realm of ideas. Why believe that idea A cannot bring about the thought of idea C? It might only be the case that idea A cannot alone *imply* idea C, but the difference between implication and the arousing of consciousness is substantial.

4. The fourth proof points to oddities of sleep. Somnambulists can perform complex actions while in a sleep state. When they awake, they do not remember their actions performed while asleep. Others can awaken precisely at a specific target hour. Still others find the previous

night's problem solved when they awake. How can this be, except through the presence of unconscious mentality?

James answers that we must forget when we awaken from sleep the conscious activities we performed. He likens this sort of forgetting to the kind we experience when we awaken from hypnosis. Because James's reply is brief, we might also add that we experience a similar phenomenon when inebriated. In all three instances of affected consciousness, states of sleep, hypnosis and inebriation, our ordinary capacities of consciousness are skewed. Why would the faculty of memory be different? We make choices differently, we see differently, and our coordination is different. In fact, particularly in the case of dreams, it seems that our conscious imaginations are most uninhibited. It could simply be that our control over memory is simultaneously diminished.

5. The fifth proof that James evaluates is similar to the fourth, except that the sort of altered consciousness is "an attack of epileptiform unconsciousness."³⁸ In this case, it is upon "coming to" from the trance, rather than waking up, that the patient has forgotten all the complex actions they performed, and the forms of reasoning that must have been required for them. James compares the "rapid oblivescence of common *dreams*"³⁹ to the present phenomenon. We can awaken from dreams and *immediately* forget what they were about.

6. The sixth proof is also short. It claims that in "musical concord the vibrations of the several notes are in relatively simple ratios. The mind must unconsciously count the vibrations and be pleased by the simplicity which it finds."⁴⁰ James replies that the response of the brain to the vibrations might be what is agreeable. It may simply be a physical reaction of the body to stimulus that is the agreeable element in our experience of musical "concord." Adding to this, I would again appeal to evolutionary causes. In a converse case, consider that human beings were more likely to survive if they found children's discordant cries unappealing, and similarly with the growl of animals and the cacophony of friction.

7. The seventh proof asks how it is we seem to "know more than we can say."⁴¹ When children are capable of inference they cannot verbalize, there must be some explanation. James refers to an example given by the author of this proof, J.E. Maude. Maude claims that often we cannot even remember which way a door opens when asked about it. Nevertheless, we open it

every day without fail. How can this be? There must be some repository of stored knowledge of which we are not conscious to account for it.

Here again, James's reply gives an important place to the brain in automatic functions. When one knows a friend's voice because of its overtones, this does not mean there need be any knowledge of the overtones. Rather, the "particular collocation of the molecules in certain tracts of the brain" may serve the same function of triggering the idea of the friend.⁴²

The present proof is a version of 2 above – in saying that with all action that at one time was conscious and deliberate, it must somehow remain in the mind, but have been pushed into the unconscious. This need not be the case. Either the body or consciousness is conditioned over time to respond to stimuli in a certain repetitive, simple fashion – such that the answer that individuals will give is "I never think about it!" when asked, for example, how their front door opens – to the right or to the left. This does not imply unconscious knowledge. It implies an ability whose explanation is *not conscious*.⁴³ Again James looks to the power of habituation, therefore. When breaking in a new baseball glove with oil, pressure, a baseball, and time, we do not create an unconscious mind in the glove, yet we leave in it an impression and behavioral inclination that has a purpose and a shape.

8. The eighth proof is also answered in terms of the brain, with the inclusion of the whole nervous system. The proof alleges that instincts are signs of intelligence whose ends are unknown to us. The intelligence must imply a sort of mentality, but we are not conscious of it, so it must imply the unconscious. James replies by referring to his chapter on instinct in volume 2 of *The Principles of Psychology*.⁴⁴ He writes, "Instinct is usually defined as the faculty of acting in such a way as to produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in performance."⁴⁵ The question to ask of the defenders of the unconscious, is *why believe all these faculties are mental?* We have already said here above that we can grow accustomed to certain behavior to the point at which it can become non-cognitive. The body performs these actions in a sense *for us*. Any wrestler having engaged in the sport for several years knows how much one forgets from year to year. Nevertheless, as training begins again in the new year, somehow the body performs the actions even though we ourselves do not remember them. Why believe this involves unconscious mentality? In fact, the phenomenon to

which I refer here is metaphorically called “muscle memory.”⁴⁶ The metaphor may seem to ignore the mind/body problem, but this need not be. First, it is only a metaphor to call what is done to the body “memory,” which could instead be called “conditioning” or “habituation.” If we bend a straight piece of metal of a certain sort, and in a certain way, we will produce a spring. It would be incorrect to claim that we have given the spring memory in a mental sense, and yet the spring will react in a purposeful way when stimulated. That reaction was not possible before the spring was conditioned. The mistake in calling attention to instinctual responses involves the interpretation of actions of the body in mental terms only because of the similarity between the body’s tendencies and similar mental functions and decisions. What we have are body capacities, tendencies, or faculties that somehow inhere in a given organ. Mentality need not enter the picture.

It may be objected that instincts are not simple motions or muscle memory. They involve imitation (as in the behavior of small children), love, belligerence, fear, shame and curiosity, to name a few.⁴⁷ They are not simple motions. They are tendencies of human actions. James explains them in an evolutionary way, dealing with the nervous system. The answer James would give to this objection, the claim that the important human instincts are more abstract, regards all instinct. James claims that “every instinct is an impulse.”⁴⁸ Curiosity serves as a helpful tendency that is often interpreted as mental. Curiosity involves a sort of attentiveness. Given one’s nervous system, certain stimuli will necessarily seem more interesting than others. With dogs, it is usually relating to scent, for example. Impulses are all driven by the way our nervous systems receive stimuli. James explains the variation in our instincts with the example of a cat, attracted to mice and fearful of dogs. He writes, “His nervous system is to a great extent a preorganized bundle of such reactions – they are as fatal as sneezing, and as exactly correlated to their special excitants as it is to its own.”⁴⁹ James gives other examples, such as the hamster’s inclination to store food. This does not seem dramatically different in kind from the sorts of human instincts listed above. What we are referring to involves a certain inclination of our actions. The most complex of these are human, but they are all inclinations of a similar kind. In the case of the hamster, James explains that when the hamster sees an ear of corn, his nervous impulse is to immediately go fill his mouth with kernels. Once filled, he has the impulse to rush off

somewhere that becomes his store, and once in safety, he releases the corn. This complex instinctual action does not require human mentality, nor a theory of the unconscious. So its human correlate need not either.

9. The ninth proof pertains to sense perception. We often perceive objects in one way, and interpret them in another. On similar grounds, Descartes claims that the intellect is more trustworthy than the senses, for it lets us know that distant objects are not *actually* small. They are only far away.⁵⁰ When we see a white rabbit in low lighting, we don't necessarily assume the animal is gray, but assume or infer that it is white. Why is it we jump to these more correct conclusions from the empirical data we are given from the senses? These inferences happen so immediately, *and* we are not conscious of them, so they must be unconscious inferences.

James replies by claiming that all these alleged inferences are merely sensational phenomena.⁵¹ In fact, in volume 2 of the *Principles*, James dedicates a chapter each to sensation, imagination, perception of things, and perception of space. When we see the small image of a man, interpreted as a person at a distance, it is simply false that some spatial inference is at play. The eye adjusts its focus when changing from looking at close objects to those far away. In this sense, we *feel* the difference between looking at objects that are close and at those at a distance. Of course, this sort of distinction depends on the relation of our visual perception of one thing to seeing others. The authors of this proof would likely point to the fact that we do not *see* space. But, this seems to discount the importance of focus. When attending to one object we see, an entire field is in focus, while others go out of focus as a consequence. So, at the least, what we can generally do simply with our senses is to determine whether an object is in the same planar field of focus. In sum, though we can see similarities between what in other instances could involve an inference, here we only have sense perception and its relation to consciousness.⁵²

10. The tenth proof that James evaluates is to him "less obviously insufficient than those which we have reviewed." He continues, "there is a great class of experiences in our mental life which may be described as discoveries that a subjective condition which we have been having is really something different from what we had supposed."⁵³ We sometimes find ourselves in love with the least likely of persons, just like Lord Benedick and Lady Beatrice of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.⁵⁴ The proof also points to discoveries of other kinds. At culinary

school, one learns a great deal of information on how we can distinguish and blend certain flavors. But, those who are unschooled have a general sense for a number of these differences. We discover things about ourselves, about our sense of taste, about our likes and dislikes. We can be shocked to learn that in fact *we would* like certain vegetables, for example. Concerning these matters of taste that we can in some sense distinguish, but cannot explain, “the elements must exist, for we use them to discriminate by; but they must exist in an unconscious state, since we so completely fail to single them out.”⁵⁵ In matters of love, we find a particularly difficult challenge. How can we explain the discovery that Benedick loves Beatrice? He must have loved her all along, particularly given all the attention he paid her. How could he have missed it? His love must have resided in his unconscious.

Though James offers a lengthy reply to this kind of proof, the main element to be drawn from his answer is succinct. He explains the misguided proof as follows

Two states of mind which refer to the same external reality, or two states of mind the later one of which refers to the earlier, are described as the same state of mind, or ‘idea,’ published as it were in two editions; and then whatever qualities of the second edition are found openly lacking in the first are explained as having really been there, only in an ‘unconscious’ way ... The psychological stock-in-trade of some authors is the belief that two thoughts about one thing are virtually the same thought, and that this same thought may in subsequent reflections become more and more *conscious* of what it really *was* all along from the first. But once, make the distinction between simply *having an idea* at the moment of its presence and subsequently knowing all sorts of things *about it* ... one has no difficulty in escaping from the labyrinth.⁵⁶

In the example of Benedick and Beatrice, each throws the other harsh, biting words with regularity, and greatly enjoys the challenge of wit. With as much as each desires to mock and embarrass the other, these would be impossible when they are apart. So, whether they seek each other out as a game or for love, they at least seek each other out. In the passage above, James

first alludes to “*having an idea*,” such as the thought that Benedick enjoys being with Beatrice – to battle with poisoned tongues. The later thought – that Benedick loves Beatrice – need not have *been* the former thought. Rather, it is a new, interpretive *idea*, different from the first one. There need not *have been* love in the former. Nevertheless, the idea that Benedick enjoys the company of Beatrice was there. To James the fallacy of inferring there to have been love in the first idea is remarkable. He explains, “it would be difficult to believe that intelligent men could be guilty of so patent a fallacy, were not the history of psychology there to give the proof.”⁵⁷ The claim that Benedick loves Beatrice from the very beginning of the story is wrong. Their attention tends toward each other, and later, love is fostered with some friendly prodding. In sum, in matters of discovered love, perhaps it is not so different from learning one loves broccoli. Until the thought has arisen, one does not love. Nevertheless, one can later think longingly about past circumstances previously deemed unpleasant, as with Benedick and Beatrice. There is no need for a theory of the unconscious here. We suddenly come to have new feelings and thoughts about previous ideas, of which we had thought differently. I’ll conclude this point with James’s thoughts on the matter of discovered love:

When I decide that I have, without knowing it, been for several weeks in love, I am simply giving a name to a state which previously *I have not named*, but which was fully conscious; and which, though it was a feeling towards the same person for whom I now have a much more inflamed feeling, and though it continuously led into the latter, and is similar enough to be called by the same name, is yet in no sense identical with the latter, and least of all in an ‘unconscious’ way.⁵⁸

This tenth challenged proof concludes what James had to say about the unconscious and sends a clear message that he did not accept theories of the unconscious mind, even if James noted that there are indeed mental habits and conditioning, which pass below the level of focused attention in consciousness.

CONCLUSION

It is important to think carefully about concepts like the unconscious, distinguishing it from processes and practices that have been habituated. Today, psychology is studying important related ideas, such as stereotype threat, a phenomenon whereby women and minorities perform worse on tests when they are asked to state their gender, race, or ethnicity at the beginning of tests, for example. The Implicit Associations Test is used to check the extent to which certain ideas and assumptions have been internalized, including undermining personal attitudes or assumptions which undercut persons' self-respect. These phenomena are often not matters that people believe explicitly or consciously, yet culture and behavior can be patterned in such a way that prioritizes dominant groups. Therefore, it is vital to look at patterns and behaviors that are not conscious and that cause people harm, consciously or unconsciously. At the same time, James is right that it is vital not to muddy the waters with overstated ideas, used to justify whichever view one cares to hold. This accusation James leveled against earlier theorists of the unconscious can be raised against elements of Freud's theory. At least it should be clear that James paid considerable attention to the concept of the unconscious, arguing against key justifications for it, and despite this, Freud rehashed many of the same arguments that James had already taken apart. Given this analysis, James's generous academic spirit should not be interpreted too strongly as a serious appreciation for Freud's ideas about the unconscious, contrary to Weinberger's view. It is certainly vital that we consider the crucial role of habit and of culture in shaping the patterns of people's behavior, which can clearly bolster or undermine their sense of self-respect and their pursuit of happiness. When we take these things seriously, furthermore, we see why we ought to be concerned about those elements of behavior and consequences of our actions that conflict with our conscious intentions. Nevertheless, we can consider these matters without depending on Freud's questionable concept of the unconscious.

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NOTES

¹ See Joel Weinberger, "William James and the Unconscious: Redressing a Century-Old Misunderstanding," *Psychological Science* 11, Issue 6 (2000): 439-445.

² Gerald E. Myers, "James and Freud," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, Issue 11 (1990): 593-599.

³ Ibid., 593.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious," in *The Unconscious*, as collected in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 573-577. Hereafter referred to as Freud, "J.U."

⁵ Freud, "J.U.," p. 573.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Freud, "J.U.," p. 573.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 574.

¹⁰ Ibid. It would have been more precise to say that at one point in time we only have a limited content as the focus of our attention. Attention, however, is not equivalent with consciousness – as we will see in the section that follows, on William James.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 575.

¹² James mentions the effectiveness of "any good hypnotic subject" in his work, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 65.

¹³ Freud, "J.U.," p. 574.

¹⁴ Freud, "J.U.," p. 574.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Freud, "J.U.," p. 575.

¹⁷ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He presents this sort of view in other works as well, of course.

¹⁸ Freud, "J.U.," p. 576. Given the context of Freud's point, we can interpret the term "unconscious *psychical*," as most likely the sort of mentality that is unconscious and that lacks consciousness. This he would be contrasting with an "unconscious *consciousness*," which would instead be a consciousness of which one's ordinary, current, or primary consciousness is unaware.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 576-577.

²² Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 232.

²³ James, *P.P.*, chapter 6, p. 145.

²⁴ James, *P.P.*, p. 162-176.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁷ James specifically mentions E. von Hartmann, E. Colsonet, T. Laycock, W.B. Carpenter, F.P. Cobbe, F. Bowen, R.H. Hutton, J.S. Mill, G.H. Lewes, D.G. Thompson, and J.M. Baldwin. James, *P.P.*, p. 164.

²⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 164.

²⁹ On page 164 of *P.P.*, James cites Leibniz's "Nouveaux Essais, Avant-propos."

³⁰ The important point to note here is that we do not need a concept of the unconscious to make some sort of conversion between aggregates and parts. This claim does not rule out the possibility, however, that the unconscious could experience the unity that is also an aggregate. Rather, the point here is to correct a misunderstanding that originates at least as early as with Leibniz concerning the way we experience wholes and parts. This understanding explains how it is consciousness can account for the problem of wholes and parts.

³¹ James, *P.P.*, p. 165. By "hemispheres," James refers in part to the portion of the brain that relates to conscious deliberation. So, automatic action, he is suggesting, need not be understood as action that involves deliberation. For a clear explanation of James's use of the term "hemispheres," see his *P.P.*, p. 20-23, "General Notion of Hemispheres." He explains that animals without the deliberative hemispheres cannot "deliberate, pause, post-pone, nicely weigh one motive against another, or compare," on page 21.

³² Ibid., p. 165. Though James does not mention it here, we should understand this "splitting-off" as a division of attention, not of the mind.

³³ This was at least true in early computers, if it is no longer true today.

³⁴ James, *P.P.*, p. 165.

³⁵ This sort of forgetting, it should be noted, does not demand a theory of repression. The theory of repression adds a great deal of assumptions to the commonplace phenomenon of forgetting to which James is referring here.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166. By "brain-tract," James might be interpreted as referring to the relevant physical portion of the brain that might in some way connect certain ideas. But these connections, then would clearly not involve unconscious desires, but rather simple physical and biological connections.

³⁷ Dewey, *D. E.*, p. 163.

³⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴³ Note well that unconscious and not conscious are *not* equivalents. I am not conscious of a great many things that I simply don't know – the melting point of Helium, for instance. The unconscious, according to Freud is something that houses desires, fears, and more.

⁴⁴ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

⁴⁵ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

⁴⁶ For just one of many possible sources for learning more, see Chris Chafe and Sile O'Modhrain, "Musical Muscle Memory and the Haptic Display of Performance Nuance," *ICMC Proceedings* (1996): 1-4.

⁴⁷ Though some of these examples may not in every occasion be instinctual, these behaviors could be encompassed by James's definition of instinct.

⁴⁸ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 385.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

⁵⁰ Descartes, René, *Meditations*, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy, Volume I*, Roger Ariew, and Eric Watkins, eds. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Group, Inc., 2000), p. 28.

⁵¹ By sensational I mean ‘relating to the senses,’ not the sense which means ‘exaggerated.’

⁵² James provides us a reminder here that should be noted. He explains that even if there were an inference involved in this process, there may be reason to believe it is a conscious inference that is quickly forgotten, because it seems common and ordinary.

⁵³ James, *P.P.*, p. 170. We must not read James too liberally here, as saying this proof is acceptable. It is “insufficient,” but more subtly than the others.

⁵⁴ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁶ James, *P.P.*, p. 172. It is worth noting as an aside at least that John Dewey’s ideas about what is at first inchoate in inquiry and becomes definite through the progress of inquiry can also explain the case here. Dewey called the mistake of believing an idea or phenomenon existed in the inchoate phase *the philosopher’s fallacy*, a thought which James appears to have anticipated here. He wrote, “The commonest of all philosophical fallacies is the fallacy of converting eventual outcomes into antecedent conditions thereby escaping the need (and salutary effect) of taking into account the operations and processes that condition the eventual subject-matter.” See John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Collected Works: Later Works, 1925, Vol. 1* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 352.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 174.