

Notes on the Unconscious

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An unconscious mental state, according to Searle, is a physical (brain) state that has the power to cause a state that is intrinsically intentional and aspectual — a power whose realization is more or less permanently blocked. Language, in Searle's view, is not intrinsically intentional. I argue that language is an authentic way of representing reality under some aspect, and should, therefore, be regarded as a genuine mental phenomenon. An unconscious mental phenomenon should be defined as a physical state that can cause conscious experiences and speech acts, but is not doing so at present. While Freud believed that unconscious mental events were just like conscious ones (minus being conscious), he was also aware of the type of theory advocated by Searle. This theory, Freud thought, had problems with explaining gaps in mental life. But filling in gaps in sequences of conscious mental events with unconscious mental happenings of the same type, is unrealistic.

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According to common sense psychology, which “explains vastly more of the facts about behaviour than any of the alternative theories available” (Fodor, 1988, p. x), human actions are guided by reasons. And reasons consist of mental phenomena (desires, beliefs, intentions) with propositional contents. These contents can be used by the agent as the basis for practical reasoning, for formulating arguments *pro et contra* various courses of action, for gaining insight into what is most rational and right to do, and for forming intentions to act.

But contents can affect us in a different way. In numerous everyday life situations, I know what to do without having to consciously think. That is, after we have learned what to do and why (or have thought this out for ourselves), we can, and frequently do, act automatically. We don't have to rehearse arguments before we do everything. But it seems wrong to generally say in such cases that we couldn't have been acting for reasons. For, if challenged by

someone to explain or justify what we just did, we are, very often, capable of giving convincing reasons, reasons that once may have been consciously formulated prior to action. This seems to indicate, in turn, that mental contents and processes must be capable of existing in some unconscious form, and of influencing our actions, without us being explicitly aware of it (see also Weisskrantz, 1986; and Gazzaniga, 1988 for scientific evidence).

The question is, what is a mental content when we are not conscious of it? According to my opinion, the simplest and most plausible way of understanding the unconscious is the approach adopted by Searle (1992). In the present paper, I shall first present the theory, and then voice two critical comments — one about the role language plays in the theory — and the other about Searle's view on Freud's understanding of the unconscious.

Searle rejects the idea that unconscious mental phenomena are just like corresponding conscious ones, minus the property of being conscious. Having unconscious thoughts thus does not consist in the occurrence/existence of words, sentences, or images somewhere inside one's head that one is temporarily or permanently unaware of. When I am totally unconscious, e.g., deep asleep and not dreaming, no talking goes on, no propositional contents are linguistically expressed, no images are formed, nothing is experienced. When I am totally unconscious, all that exists inside my head is my brain, and all that goes on is the activity of networks of neurons. And yet, also when in such a state, we have to assume that I have a large number of beliefs, memories, intentions and other mental phenomena. If I tell you at breakfast that Paris is the capital of France, and have not just read it in the morning newspaper, surely I must have known this the night before as well, when totally unconscious. Mental properties, at least some of them, must be capable of lasting, also through periods of unconsciousness. But if I have mental properties when I am totally unconscious, yet the only things existing inside me at such times are neural structures and activity, then the conclusion seems inescapable that unconscious mental properties must be something neurophysiological.

The problem, however, is this. Mental properties like desires, beliefs, and intentions, whether conscious or unconscious, are intentional phenomena. They have contents, are about something, represent states of affairs outside themselves. And, whenever we grasp or think of something, we always represent some aspect of it, under some description. We represent it in one out of many possible different ways. Beliefs, desires, and intentions always have "aspectual shape," to use Searle's expression. Intentionality and aspectual shape are essential characteristics of the mental. Aspectual shape is also something that matters to the agent. It constitutes the agent's own way of thinking about a subject matter, and this first-person perspective, in turn, guides her behaviour. But, according to Searle, "there is no aspectual shape at the level of the neurons" (1992, p. 161). That is, even if we had a complete neurophys-

iological description of all the facts making up the state of a person's brain, that *alone* would tell us nothing about her intentional states and their aspectual shapes. Our first-person understanding of the world, the context of our actions, is simply not constituted by neurophysiological facts.

This presents us with a dilemma. If unconscious mental phenomena exist, the only thing they can be is something neurophysiological. But neurophysiological properties themselves are not intentional and therefore cannot be mental. So how *can* unconscious mental phenomena exist? Searle's solution is to suppose that even if neurophysiological phenomena are not themselves (intrinsically) intentional, some neurophysiological phenomena are causally connected to phenomena that are themselves genuinely intentional. Such neurophysiological phenomena can be regarded as mental in virtue of this relation to the genuinely mental, in virtue of the power to cause something that is intrinsically intentional and aspectual. A neurophysiological phenomenon can be regarded as an *unconscious* mental state or process if it (the neurophysiological phenomenon) has the power to cause a genuinely mental happening, but this power is more or less permanently blocked by various forms of pathology, e.g., "psychological repression or brain damage" (Searle, 1992, p. 160).

The Role of Language

Searle's theory is simple and plausible. It takes away the mystery surrounding the concept of the unconscious. There is one aspect of the theory, however, that I find problematic. A neurophysiological structure or process is regarded as being mental if it can cause a phenomenon that is itself intrinsically intentional. But what is intrinsically intentional? Paradigmatic examples of intrinsically intentional states (according to Searle) are conscious perceptual experiences like seeing and hearing, and "feelings" like thirst and hunger. Being able to see and hear and feel hungry are natural capacities that we and many other animals are born with. The intentionality of such states, moreover, is an original (underived) part of their natures. To have visual experiences, e.g., is to see objects having shapes and colours. To feel thirsty "involves a desire to drink" (Searle, 1992, p. 78). What seeing and hearing and feeling and desiring have in common is that they are conscious experiences with a subjective mode of existence. Phenomena with an objective mode of existence like rocks, plants, organisms, nervous systems, behaviour, are equally accessible to all of us. Conscious experiences with a subjective mode of existence are not. A conscious experience is always the experience of one particular person. It constitutes his point of view of some part of the world and cannot be transferred to anyone else. The upshot, then, is that neurophysiological states and events can be regarded as mental phenomena if they have the power to cause

subjective conscious experiences. Neurophysiological facts can be regarded as unconscious mental phenomena if their power to cause subjective states of consciousness has been blocked.

The problem with this theory is that language is not regarded as a mental phenomenon for words and sentences are not, according to Searle, intrinsically intentional. Language only has a derivative kind of intentionality. Language derives its intentionality from us *assigning* meaning to it. Only subjective, conscious experiences are intrinsically intentional, and only intrinsically intentional phenomena are genuinely mental. The reason why this is problematic is that aspectual shape (according to Searle) is an essential characteristic of the mental, and that, for a large number of mental phenomena, aspectual shape is a matter of representing some object under a certain description. Even the aspectual shape of perceptual experience can be influenced by language. Thus, while my experience of the form and colour of some object may just depend on the special physical perspective from which I am looking at it (and on other purely physical conditions), how can I have “a visual experience of a lot of boats on the lake” (Searle, 1992, p. 80) without knowing the meanings of the linguistic categories “boat” and “lake.” Put differently, what I perceive something *as* (its meaning), is determined by the categories of description made available to me by language.

The role of language in determining aspectual shape is, however, shown most clearly in the case of mental phenomena like beliefs, desires, intentions, thoughts, plans, decisions, expectations, etc. Typical for all these mental properties is that some part of reality is grasped/represented in the form of a proposition. For instance, after marrying Jocasta, *Ødipus* thought of himself as the husband of the queen of Thebes. Before he got married, “*Ødipus* is married to the queen” was a proposition *Ødipus* entertained a number of attitudes towards. He believed it was false, but he wanted it to be true. Therefore he intended and planned to make it true and expected that it would be true.

But what is a proposition — and what fixes the propositional content of a certain propositional attitude — what gives it the special aspectual shape that it has? As already mentioned, Searle doesn't think it can be anything neurophysiological since “there is no aspectual shape at the level of the neurons.” Neither is it, according to Searle, anything linguistic, for words alone can never tell us what a person means. There is, he claims, no way “to determine whether the person means by ‘ H_2O ’ what I mean by ‘ H_2O ’ and whether the person means by ‘water’ what I mean by ‘water’” (Searle, 1992, p. 158). Propositional content cannot be anything objective. It can only be something subjective. It can only be conscious experience.

But this assumption is open to the following kind of critique. Among my many beliefs is the belief that democracy is the best kind of government. Now what conscious experience do I have to have in order to believe something

like that? For my own part, introspection reveals that there is no particular experience or image present in all cases when I think of this content. On some occasions, I may have images of people discussing or arguing, at other times I may imagine people standing in line in a gymnasium waiting to put pieces of paper in a box, or sitting in red leather chairs with their hands raised, or marching in demonstrations, etc. But most of the time when I express this belief I have no images or experiences at all that could be thought of as constituting the propositional content that democracy is the best form of government. So no particular subjective experience seems to be a necessary condition for believing such a thing. Neither are subjective experiences sufficient for fixing the propositional contents of a belief of the kind we are discussing. Suppose I told you that I regularly had the types of imagery described above. Would you then know that I believed that democracy is the best form of government? You might just as well conclude that I believed that democracy ought to be abolished. Experiences and images are like pictures. They can mean different things. We need to be told which aspects are relevant and how they are to be interpreted.

If propositional content, however, is neither fixed by neurophysiological facts nor by subjective experiences, what else is left to do the job other than language? What else can propositional contents be but linguistic entities (see Harman, 1975)? A more positive argument for the view that propositional attitudes like beliefs are of a linguistic nature, has been formulated by Davidson (1982), who claims that beliefs are things we have beliefs about. We believe that they are true or false or have some degree of probability. But in order to have conceptions of the truth values of our beliefs, we need to have access to something independent of these beliefs. We need to have access to the beliefs of others. Thus we may believe in the truth of some of our beliefs because we have acquired them from others who, by way of rational argument, or other techniques of persuasion, have convinced us of their validity. Or we may believe in them because we have defended them against criticism and objections from others. It is also in the nature of beliefs that we can change our minds about them (Dennett, 1985). But again, the basis for doing this is that we have access to the independent viewpoints and arguments of others who can convince us that we are wrong. What all of this shows is that our beliefs, or at least many of them, are of an irreducibly social nature. They are acquired, exchanged, transferred, shared, and discussed. They are not, like subjective experiences, essentially private. But this presupposes that they (their contents) can be expressed in some common medium. And the medium, for us human beings, is (mainly) language.

But this brings us back to Searle's objection that words are one thing, their contents or meanings another, and that one can never know what a person means, what propositional contents he has in mind, by just listening to what

he says (or reading what he writes). According to Wittgenstein (1953), however, there are ways of finding out what a person means on the basis of what he says and does. Meaning is something that can be explained: "the meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains" (1974, p. 59). Explaining the meaning of a word or sentence, in turn, typically involves providing other words and sentences that mean the same, or the opposite, or that are implied or related. But explanation of meaning can also comprise giving examples of correct usage of a word in different sentences and practical contexts, giving ostensive definitions, and demonstrating what a sentence (e.g., an order) means (see Baker and Hacker, 1980, 1985). "We say 'The order orders this' — and do it; but also 'The order orders this: I am to.' We translate it at one time into a proposition, at another into a demonstration, and at another into an action" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 459). According to Wittgenstein, then, we can understand words, mean something by them, without there being any definite experiences or images accompanying them every time they are uttered/written. Understanding (knowing what words mean), in Wittgenstein's view, is not a process accompanying another process. It is a disposition, an ability, of a practical, linguistic nature. And having such an ability is not just a symptom of understanding. It is what meaning something consists in, a criterion.

Let me sum this up — first Searle's view. Mental phenomena are intentional. They represent things and events outside themselves, and they represent them in one out of many possible different ways, under a certain aspect. Neural events and behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, are not intrinsically intentional. One can never know how a person represents some part of reality just on the basis of knowledge of what goes on in his brain, or knowledge of his behaviour, including his verbal behaviour. How a person represents some part of reality is essentially something subjective, his perspective, which cannot be transferred to someone else. A person can use language to describe his way of representing some part of the world, but the underlying content or meaning, the person's understanding of the words, is still something subjective and inaccessible to others. Searle identifies the mental with subjective, conscious states and processes. Neurophysiological states and processes which are not themselves mental (intrinsically), may, however, have the power to cause subjective states of awareness. Such neurophysiological phenomena can, because of this capacity, be regarded as mental. Neurophysiological states and processes that can cause conscious experiences, but are not doing so, because they are temporarily or permanently hindered from doing so, can be regarded as unconscious mental phenomena.

While agreeing with this general approach to understanding the unconscious, I have pointed out that an important class of mental phenomena, including beliefs, desires, and intentions, represent reality in the form of

propositions (thoughts). I argued that these propositional representations of reality, many of them at last, cannot be anything but linguistic constructions, and that there are ways of determining what a person's words mean. Meanings (propositional contents) are not essentially subjective, but sharable, transferable, things that can be explained and discussed. The conclusion this points to is that language — though learned — is a genuine creator of meaning — an authentic way of representing reality under some aspect — probably the only way of creating all the abstract propositional representations that we humans typically believe in. Language should, therefore, be regarded as a genuine mental phenomenon. And it should be considered to be one of the psychological phenomena that confer mental status on neurophysiological events. With regard to the unconscious, an unconscious mental phenomenon should be defined as a physical state or process that can cause conscious experiences and speech acts, but is not actually doing so, because of some obstacle.

Freud's Views

Searle attributes to Freud the view that unconscious mental states are just like conscious ones, minus the property of being conscious. In Searle's opinion, Freud's conception of unconscious mental states is naïve, built on a simple model: "unconscious mental states in the mind are like fish deep in the sea. The fish that we can't see underneath the surface have exactly the same shape they have when they surface. The fish don't lose their shapes by going under water" (Searle, 1992, p. 152). Searle thinks this model gives us a wrong picture of the unconscious and its relation to consciousness. He suggests, instead, a computer analogy:

When I turn my computer off, all the words and images on the screen disappear. But unless I have made some terrible mistake, they do not cease to exist. Rather, they continue to be stored on the computer disk in the form of magnetic traces. What fact about those magnetic traces make them into words and pictures? Right then and there, they are not in the form of words and pictures. Even with a powerful magnifying glass I cannot see words and pictures on the hard disk. The fact that they are still words and pictures is constituted by the fact that the magnetic traces can be converted into words and pictures when the machine is turned on. This remains true even when in fact I cannot make the conversion because the CPU is broken or some such. The computer is not like a filing cabinet, in spite of the frequent use of the filing cabinet metaphor to describe computers. When I put my texts and pictures in my filing cabinet, they retain exactly their original form. But our unconscious mental states are not like the words and pictures in the filing cabinet, still in their pristine original form; rather, they are like the words and pictures in the computer when they are not on the screen. Such mental states have a totally different, nonmental, nonconscious form, but they are still unconscious mental states, capable of acting causally in ways similar to conscious mental states, even though at the particular time they are unconscious there is nothing there except neurobiological states and processes describable in purely neurobiological terms. (1998, p. 87)

Now let us see how Freud himself conceives of the unconscious, in two early papers, and in one of the last ones he wrote. In "A Note on the Unconscious" (1912/1958), Freud discusses the possibility that an unconscious mental phenomenon is "a physical disposition for the recurrence of the . . . psychological phenomenon" (p. 260). But Freud rejects this hypothesis. He claims "that this is a theory far overstepping the domain of psychology proper, that it simply begs the question by asserting 'conscious' to be an identical term with 'psychical,' and that it is clearly at fault in denying psychology the right to account for its most common facts . . . by its own means" (p. 260). Freud offers us an "account" in the form of an analogy. The relation between a mental phenomenon in its unconscious and conscious forms is like the relation between a photograph in its negative form and as a developed picture.

In his 1915/1957 paper, "The Unconscious," Freud pointed out that "our most personal daily experience acquaints us with ideas that come into our head we do not know from where, and with intellectual conclusions arrived at we do not know how" (pp. 166–167). These discontinuities can only be made intelligible by assuming the existence of unconscious mental events — events that can be described in terms of the same concepts that apply to conscious mental states and processes, and that are, therefore, meaningfully related to conscious ideas.

In "Outline of Psycho-Analysis" (1938/1964a), Freud again points out that there are gaps in consciousness. But in this paper he asserts that one can only explain these gaps by assuming that "there are physical or somatic processes which are concomitant with the psychical ones and which we should necessarily have to recognize as more complete than the psychical sequences, since some of them would have conscious processes parallel to them but others would not. If so, it of course becomes plausible to lay stress in psychology on these somatic processes, to see in them the true essence of what is psychical" (p. 157). It is a fundamental hypothesis of psycho-analysis, Freud asserts, to regard "the supposedly somatic concomitant phenomena as being what is truly psychical" (p. 158). Making this assumption, Freud holds, enabled psychology "to take its place as a natural science like any other" (p. 158).

In "Some Elementary Lessons in Psycho-Analysis" (1938/1964b, p. 286), however, Freud claims that it is an "indifferent matter of definition" whether we regard the unconscious as a physical or psychic process/state. Choosing to define the unconscious as a somatic process, however, would, in Freud's view, make an "unjustifiable and inexpedient . . . breach in the unity of mental life."

Freud did, then, like Searle claims, believe that unconscious mental states were just like conscious ones, minus the consciousness. And to illustrate this he used a model quite similar to the one attributed to him by Searle. What Searle doesn't mention is that Freud was also aware of the possibility of understanding the unconscious as something physical. Let me try to reconstruct what Freud is saying in the "Outline."

Underlying any sequence of mental (M) happenings with a gap in it, is a parallel sequence of physical (p) events without gaps:

M	M		M	M
p	p	p	p	p
1	2	3	4	5

The physical events (p1–p5) make up an unbroken chain and should be regarded, (according to Freud), as “the true essence of what is psychical” (1938/1964a, p. 157). Unconscious mental states are physical states that lack mental concomitants (or effects), like p3, but have the power to cause mental states, a power that is hindered from being realized.

This reconstructed version of Freud’s theory is pretty much like Searle’s. Why was Freud sceptical to it? Why — after having presented and embraced it in the “Outline” — did he (in a footnote) take it back? The reason why Freud didn’t like the physical theory was, I think, that it doesn’t establish unity in mental life. It doesn’t fill the gaps. It doesn’t make the sequence of mental happenings intelligible. Instead of filling the gap in the series of M (mental) events with another M event that is conceptually related to the others, it brings in a physical (neuro-physiological) event of a different kind than the psychological ones. Instead of seeking an explanation on the same conceptual level (horizontally), it looks for an explanation vertically, one level down.

A defender of the physical (Searlean) theory could reply here that the physical event (p3) that connects M2 and M4 is also a mental event, because it has the power (unrealized) to cause a mental event of the same kind (on the same level) as M2 and M4.

To this Freud could reply: If the mental aspect of p at 3 is not realized, but only exists as a potential, how can it explain why M4 occurs some time after M2? How can something that doesn’t actually exist, explain something that is a reality? And the Freudian reply is: it can’t. Something is missing. Between M2 and M4 there has to be another mental occurrence, in addition to p3 and its powers, of the same kind as M2 and M4, only unconscious. And Searle’s reply: there is no such thing.

Conclusions

Freud’s views on the nature of the unconscious can hardly be called naïve and simple. While Freud did believe that unconscious mental events were just like conscious ones (minus being conscious), he was also aware of the type of theory advocated by Searle. This theory, Freud thought, had problems with explaining gaps in mental life. But filling in gaps in sequences of conscious mental events with unconscious mental events of the same type, is unrealistic.

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