

Consciousness

The *topographical* position of consciousness is not easy to the down: although the 'Project' locates it in 'the upper storeys' of the system, its close link to perception soon causes Freud to place it on the frontier between the outside world and the mimetic systems: '... the perceptual apparatus of our mind consists of two layers, of an external protective shield against stimuli whose task it is to diminish the strength of excitations coming in, and of a surface behind it which receives the stimuli, namely the system *Prpmt.-Cs*' (55b) (see 'Protective Shield'). This peripheral position prefigures the one later assigned to the ego: in *The Ego and the Id* (1923b) Freud looks upon the system *Prpmt.-Cs* as the 'nucleus' of the ego (60a): '... the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the *Prpmt.-Cs*'; in a sense it is an extension of the surface-differentiation' (66) (see 'Ego').

From the economic point of view also, consciousness inevitably presented Freud with a specific problem. For consciousness is a qualitative phenomenon—it is aroused by the perception of sensory qualities; quantitative phenomena only become conscious in qualitative form. Yet at the same time a function such as attention, which, despite the apparent assumption that it is *more or less* intense, is manifestly bound up with consciousness, or a process such as the accession to consciousness, which plays such an important role in the treatment, obviously need explaining in economic terms. Freud hypothesises that the energy for attention, which is said, for example, to 'hypertheatise' perceptions, is derived from the ego ('Project'), or from the system *Pcc. (Interpretation of Dreams)*, and that it is directed by the qualitative indications furnished by consciousness: 'For the ego, then, the biological rule of attention runs: *If an indication of reality appears, then the perceptual cathexis which is simultaneously present is to be hypertheatized*' (20).

By the same token the attention which is attached to thought-processes allows for a more sensitive control of these processes than that achieved by the pleasure principle alone: 'We know that perception by our sense-organs has the result of directing a cathexis of attention to the paths along which the in-coming sensory excitation is spreading; the qualitative excitation of the *Prpmt.* system acts as a regulator of the discharge of the mobile quantity in the psychical apparatus. We can attribute the same function to the overlying sense-organ of the *Cs.* system. By perceiving new qualities, it makes a new contribution to directing the mobile quantities of cathexis and distributing them in an expedient fashion' (30) (see 'Free Energy, Bound Energy', 'Hypertheatization').

Lastly, from the *dynamic* perspective, we may note a certain evolution in Freud's position on the importance of consciousness as a factor in the defensive process as well as in the effectiveness of the treatment. We cannot retrace the whole course of this evolution here, but we can point out a few aspects of it:

a. A mechanism such as repression is conceived of in the early period of psycho-analysis as a voluntary rejection still akin to the mechanism of attention: 'The splitting of consciousness in these cases of acquired hysteria is [...] a deliberate and intentional one. At least it is often *introduced* by an act of volition' (7).

As we know, it was the gradually increasing emphasis laid on the at any rate partially unconscious character of defences and resistances, as expressed in

the treatment, which prompted Freud to revise the notion of the ego and to introduce his second theory of the psychical apparatus.

b. An important stage in this development is marked by the metapsychological writings of 1915, where Freud states that 'the attribute of being conscious, which is the only characteristic of psychical processes that is directly presented to us, is in no way suited to serve as a criterion for the differentiation of systems' (80a). Freud does not mean by this that consciousness is no longer to be attributed to a system—to an actual specialised 'organ'—but he points out that the capacity of a given content to gain access to consciousness does not suffice to determine its position in the preconscious or in the unconscious system: 'The more we seek to win our way to a metapsychological view of mental life, the more we must learn to emancipate ourselves from the importance of the symptom of "being conscious"' (80b, *ff.*).

c. In the theory of the treatment the difficult question of the *privé de conscience* and its curative value has always been a major concern. What is called for here is an evaluation of the relative importance, and of the combined action, of the different factors that play a part in the treatment: remembering and constructions*—repetition in the transference* and working-through*, and finally interpretation*—whose impact, in so far as it induces structural reorganisation, is not confined to conscious communication; '... psycho-analytic treatment is based upon an influencing of the *Ecs.* from the direction of the *Cs.*, and at any rate shows that this, though a laborious task, is not impossible' (80). Yet at the same time Freud constantly increased his stress on the fact that communicating the interpretation of a particular unconscious phantasy to the patient, no matter how apt it may be, does not suffice to bring about structural changes: 'If we communicate to a patient some idea which he has at one time repressed but which we have discovered in him, our telling him makes at first no change in his mental condition. Above all, it does not remove the repression nor undo its effects' (80f).

The transposition to consciousness does not of itself imply a real integration of the repressed into the preconscious system: it has to be complemented by a whole effort which is capable of overcoming the resistances that impede communication between the unconscious and preconscious systems, and capable too of binding the memory-traces and their verbalisation closer and closer together. Only at the end of this work can what has been heard and what has been experienced come together: 'To have heard something and to have experienced it are in their psychological nature two quite different things, even though the content of both is the same' (80e). The period of working-through is said to be the one during which this gradual integration into the preconscious takes place.

(7) The adjective '*Bewusst*' means conscious in both the active sense (conscious of) and the passive one (the quality of whatever is an object of consciousness). German can call upon several substantival forms based on '*Bewusst*': *Bewusstheit*—the quality of being an object of consciousness, the fact or attribute of being conscious; *Bewusstsein*—consciousness *qua* psychological reality; this tends to mean the activity or function of consciousness; *Das Bewusste*—the conscious, used especially to designate a type of content distinct from preconscious or unconscious contents; *Das Bewusstwerden*—the 'becoming conscious' of a particular idea, accession to consciousness; *Das Bewusstmachen*—the fact of making a given content conscious.

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