

Preconscious (sb. and adj.)

From the metapsychological point of view, the preconscious system is governed by the secondary process. It is separated from the unconscious system by the censorship\*, which does not permit unconscious contents and processes to pass into the preconscious without their undergoing transformations.

II. In the context of the second topography the term 'preconscious' is used above all adjectivally, to describe what escapes immediate consciousness without being unconscious in the strict sense of the word. As far as systems are concerned, the unconscious in the strict sense and processes associated, mainly, with the ego—but also, term qualifies contents and processes associated, mainly, with the ego—but also, to some extent, with the super-ego.

The distinction between preconscious and unconscious is a fundamental one for Freud. It is true, however, that apologetic considerations—the need to support the hypothesis of an unconscious psyche in general—led him on occasion to invoke the incontestable existence of a mental life extending beyond the boundaries of the immediate field of consciousness (1a). And, if we understand 'unconscious' in what Freud calls the 'descriptive' sense—i.e. as meaning that which lies outside consciousness—the distinction between preconscious and unconscious fades away. This distinction has therefore to be taken essentially as a topographical\* (or systematic) and dynamic\* one.

In developing his metapsychological views, Freud had established this division very early on (2a). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), the preconscious system lies between the unconscious\* system and consciousness\*; it is cut off from the former by the censorship, which seeks to prohibit unconscious contents from taking the path towards the preconscious and consciousness; and at its other extremity it commands access to consciousness and motility. In this sense, therefore, consciousness may be looked upon as connected with the preconscious—Freud speaks of the system *Pre-Cx*. But in other passages of *The Interpretation* the preconscious and what Freud calls the perception-consciousness system are sharply demarcated off from each other. This ambiguity apparently derives from the fact (later noted by Freud) that consciousness does not lend itself easily to a structural approach (1b) (see 'Consciousness'). Freud considers that passage from the preconscious to the conscious is controlled by a 'second censorship', but that this differs from the censorship proper (that between *Cx* and *Pre-Cx*) in that it *distorts* less than it *selects*—its function consists essentially in preventing disturbing thoughts from reaching consciousness. In this way the focussing of attention is facilitated.

The preconscious system is distinguished from the unconscious one by the form of its energy (which is 'bound\*') and by the type of process occurring there (secondary process\*). This distinction is not an absolute one, however: just as certain contents of the unconscious (e.g. phantasies) are modified by the secondary process, a point stressed by Freud, so preconscious elements may be governed by the primary process (e.g. the day's residues\* in dreams). In a more general way, examination of preconscious operations in their defensive aspect reveals the central exercised by the pleasure principle\* and the influence of the primary process.

Freud always put the difference between *Cx* and *Pre-Cx* down to the fact that preconscious ideas are bound to verbal language—to 'word-presentations'.

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It may be added that the relation between the preconscious and the ego\* is clearly a very close one. Significantly, when Freud first introduces the preconscious he identifies it with 'our official ego' (2b). Later, when the ego is redefined in the second topography, the preconscious system falls automatically within its confines, although the two are not seen as coextensive; part of the ego being unconscious. Lastly, the newly-identified agency of the super-ego\* may be shown to have preconscious dimensions.

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What does the notion of the preconscious correspond to in the subject's lived experience, especially in the experience of the treatment? The most frequently given illustration is that of memories which are not immediately conscious but which the subject can recall at will. More generally, the preconscious is understood to designate whatever is *implicitly* present in mental activity without constituting an object of consciousness; this is what Freud means when he defines the preconscious as 'descriptively' unconscious yet accessible to consciousness, whereas the unconscious remains cut off from the conscious realm. In 'The Unconscious' (1915f) Freud describes the preconscious system as 'conscious knowledge' (*bewusste Kenntnis*) (1c). The choice of terms here is significant in that it stresses distinctiveness from the unconscious: 'knowledge' implies a certain cognisance regarding the subject and his personal world, while 'conscious' points up the fact that the contents and processes in question, though non-conscious, are attached to the conscious from a topographical point of view.

A dynamic validation of the topographical distinction is furnished by the treatment—particularly by a fact that has been underlined by Daniel Lagache: while the subject's acknowledgement of preconscious contents may occasion *reticence*—the reticence which the rule of free association\* aims to eliminate—the recognition of unconscious elements runs up against *resistance*, themselves unconscious, which the analysis must gradually interpret and overcome (though, naturally, reticences are for the most part based on resistances).

(a) This word of Freud's does not seem to be a very happy choice. It is possible, in fact, while limiting oneself to the level of description alone, and without calling upon any topographical distinctions, to establish differences between what is preconscious and what is unconscious. The formulation 'unconscious in the descriptive sense' is an indiscriminate designation for all psychological contents and processes having in common the sole negative characteristic of not being conscious.

(1) Cf. FREUD, S. 'The Unconscious' (1915f). a) G.W., X, 264-65; S.E., XIV, 166-67. b) G.W., X, 291; S.E., XIV, 192. c) G.W., X, 265; S.E., XIV, 167.  
(2) Cf. FREUD, S., letter to Fliess dated December 6, 1896; a) *Abf.*, 185; S.E., I, 234, b) *Abf.*, 186; S.E., I, 234-35.