

The Problem of Unconscious Motivation

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Introduction

Ever since man has reflected upon his own behavior, he has attempted to understand and enumerate his motives. In the language of contemporary vernacular, we may say that he has endeavored to know "what makes him tick." During the past century, especially in the writings of Sigmund Freud, man has begrudgingly come to realize that some of his motives, perhaps the most important ones, are necessarily veiled from him. They are unavailable, under everyday circumstances, to conscious inspection and modification.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore and elaborate upon the possible meanings of the phrase "unconscious motivation." Such an exploration and elaboration is necessary because both terms of the phrase, both *unconscious* and *motivation*, are currently clouded in a smog of confusion. Take the term motive for example. If one talks to an orthodox psychoanalyst, motivation ultimately refers to energies of either a sexual or aggressive nature, which are said to propel the organism to action. If one talks to some learning theorists in psychology, they will tell you that motives are drives which are associated with various conditions of bodily, physiological deprivation. If one talks to other learning theorists, they will describe motives in terms of incentives which, in turn, refer to needs and the qualities of some objects or events called reinforcements. If one talks to still other psychologists, they will tell you that motives are the needs

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to do certain things, such as achieve, be with people, dominate people, and so on. Finally, if one talks with the most scientific of all psychologists, they will tell you that the term motive is too confused and that it should be dropped from the vocabulary of psychology.

Roughly the same problem exists with the term unconscious, especially with regard to the question and nature of its existence. A brief review may help here. Originally, Freud used the term unconscious as nothing more than a descriptive adjective. He wanted to point out that people were not always self-consciously aware of what they were doing or why they were doing it. Subsequently, he found that although they did not demonstrate this self-awareness, the unacknowledged actions continued to occur and the unacknowledged reasons for the actions continued to operate. He concluded that the reasons people have for their actions exist and influence behavior whether or not people are aware of them. Further, the influence of these unacknowledged or unconscious reasons upon behavior is greater just because they are unconscious. Thus, he came to his second use of the term unconscious, that is, unconscious in the dynamic sense. Finally, in his concerns with organization and intelligibility, Freud conceived of a spatialized model for what he called the mental apparatus. Now unconscious reasons had a place and, as one might expect, that place was called the unconscious. Needless to say, this led to difficulty. Some people preferred to take this literally and insisted on proclaiming that there really is a place, probably in the brain or nervous system, called the unconscious. Others did not take this literally and claimed that Freud was only interested in making his system more intelligible. Still others, the vast majority, admit they are confused.

On the Nature of Motives

In order to explore and elaborate upon the possible meanings of the phrase "unconscious motivation," it will be necessary to clarify our understanding of the term motive and to distinguish between some of the meanings of motive and cause. It will also be important to question what we mean by the terms conscious and unconscious, hopefully shedding some light on our conceptions of what it means to be a human being.

We shall begin with the term motive. As has already been suggested, the question of why people do what they do has been asked for many years, having arisen well before men called themselves scientists or psychologists. While I am both grateful and indebted to those who have already raised the question, I will not and probably could not review their answers for you. Instead, rather than plunge head-long into philosophical or psychological theories, I will attempt to incorporate their insights, insofar as I have understood them, into my own reflections.

Perhaps it would be most fruitful to begin in an environment with

which we are all familiar, the world of everyday life. Here, we are all at home with our understandings of such characters as motives, choices and causes. Can we make explicit that which in everyday life is grasped so well implicitly?

Let us start with a question so apparently obvious that it usually never gets asked. Under what conditions does the issue of human motives get raised? To put it another way, when in everyday life do we ask about an individual's motives? Such a situation is always a sociopsychological one, even if it refers to the individual in relation to himself. To say that it is a socio-psychological situation is to say that it always involves at least two people: one, an actor who has done, is doing, or is about to do something, and the other, an observer. The observer has adopted an interrogatory stance vis a vis the actor. He asks him "Why did you do that?" or "Why are you doing that?" or "Why are you going to do that?" In this interrogatory stance, the observer lives in what Husserl called "the natural attitude." That is, the observer sees the actor as the cause of his own actions and when these occur or are promised, he asks him to reveal his reasons for them. The fact that the observer does not immediately grasp the actor's reasons, the fact that he must ask him to reveal them, already suggests an essential characteristic of motives: their hiddenness. Motives are not things we see. They are not like houses, trees, stones, flowers, people, or cars. Instead, they are the reasons which people have for their actions; they are the "because" which legitimize, justify, support and provide a unifying meaning for one's choices and actions.

One can never speak of a motive or motives as such. A motive is always a motive to do something, to be something or someone, to have something or someone. Motives are always particular and hence refer to particular meaningful situations or states of affairs. These states of affairs are what the individual is attempting to actualize. Thus, a motive refers to the individual as he comprehends and attempts to manipulate the objects, people, thoughts, feelings, etc. that constitute his world. As such, a motive is an example, perhaps the example par excellence, of what some philosophers have called an "intentional act." That is to say, a motive points to the relationships which exist between the individual and the meaningful structures of his world. Through his motives the individual is profoundly related to his world.

As the reasons which people have for their actions, as "because" phenomena, as intentional acts that relate the individual to particular meaningful states of affairs in his world, motives constitute amalgamations of both force and meaning. If we ask Webster (1956) for a definition, we find that a motive is "that within the individual, rather than without, which incites to action; any need, idea, emotion, or organic state that prompts to action." A motive inclines the individual to do certain things. It has a fore-

ing quality about it, a propelling quality. But as a force within a person, it is not just any old force. It always has a referent or referents. It always points to some meaningful state of affairs within the individual's world which he is trying to actualize. It involves force and meaning and the two can never be separated.

Another characteristic of motives is their "to be fulfilled" aspect. Their referents, the states of affairs to which they point, their noematic correlates, are always "not yet." Thus, a motive is a temporal phenomenon. It refers to the individual's present, to his being so motivated. It refers to the individual's future, to that state of affairs which, though not yet fulfilled, he is trying to actualize. And, it refers to the individual's past, to that time in his life when the motive was conceived. Hence, motives not only relate the individual to his world, they also situate him in it as a temporally unfolding being. Through an understanding of motives, one's own motives, an individual can grasp who he is, was, and can be.

In many respects an individual is his motives. One is not a person first, who later happens to have motives. To be a person is to be involved in the world as one understands it. To be a person is to be continually attempting to actualize certain situations, relationships, or states of affairs, whatever their character. The fact that one's motives may change in the course of one's life does not negate the assertion that they are essential aspects of being human. While an individual's motives may vary in their particularity, the fact of being motivated to do something, to be something or someone, to have something or someone never varies. To be human is to be motivated and to be motivated is to be perpetually incomplete, chronically deficient with respect to one's being as one understands it. Thus, to be motivated is to be profoundly finite.

Before we go on to discuss the nature of consciousness and unconsciousness, and the relations of motives thereto, let us briefly summarize the characteristics of motives which we have already outlined. We have said that a motive is an intentional act, that is, it expresses a meaningful relationship between an individual and the world as he grasps it. We have said that a motive is a reason why, a support for and justification of an individual's choices and acts. We have said that motives are not things seen in the world, that they are essentially hidden. We have said that motives are temporal phenomena, that they relate the unfolding individual to his world and that they can announce to him, if he will listen, his past, his present and his future. Finally, and I would like to stress this point as perhaps the most significant, we have said that motives constitute a fusion of both force and meaning in human life.

On the Nature of Consciousness

We are now ready to go on to the questions of consciousness and unconsciousness. I think it is important to state at the outset that my con-

cerns here are multiple. First, I want to consider and dwell upon the everyday meanings of consciousness, hopefully shedding some light on the term unconscious, especially as it pertains to the process of motivation. Secondly, I would like to offer a few tentative speculations as to the nature of man, perhaps helping us to understand how it is possible for him to manifest both consciousness and unconsciousness.

If we again consult Webster (1956), this time as to the meaning of consciousness, we find the following definitions: "Awareness, especially of something within oneself; that state or fact of being conscious in regard to something; that state of being knowledgeable or aware of something." Thus, to be conscious of something is to be aware of it, to know it in some way. Further, consciousness is the state of being aware of something, of knowing something. Consciousness is a human state, not a thing. It is a condition in which human beings may find themselves. But it is not just any condition. Consciousness is that condition in which a human being is related to something in an aware, knowing way. I would like to emphasize that. Consciousness is not a container or a receptacle. It does not have contents, things which inhabit it. It is a condition in which a human being is related to some object, person, place, thought, feeling, wish, hope, etc. in an aware, knowing way. But what do we mean when we say that a human being is related to something in an aware, knowing way? To be aware of something, to know something, is to grasp it as being there in some manner. The manner may be clear or unclear, safe or dangerous, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, large or small, red or green, etc. Nevertheless, however the manner in which the something or someone is there, it is grasped as there in the manner in which it is. An example may help to make this clear. If I were to become conscious of my car at this moment, then I would be in an aware, knowing relationship with that object which I grasp as my car. I might grasp it as needing new tires, as having a dent in the side, as needing to be lubricated, or as pleasantly reliable. However, I grasped it, it would always be there in some manner, as having some meaning for me.

Are there any limits to consciousness? That is, are there limits to an individual's ability to enter into aware, knowing relationships? Of course there are. The most general limit is the one set by learning, or, more precisely, one's learning experiences. For any given individual, the possibilities of aware, knowing relationships are bounded by the number and ways in which he has learned to comprehend the being of beings, what makes something what it is. For example, if I had never heard, seen, or learned anything of an igloo, then I could never comprehend it and certainly could never enter into an aware, knowing relationship with it. To put it succinctly, if I never had any experience with an igloo or the concept thereof, then I could never become conscious of that arrangement of snow and ice known as an igloo, a habitat for people we call Eskimos.

Are there any other limitations to consciousness? Again we must an-

swer in the affirmative. In any given situation, an individual is, if I may say so, up to something. He may be trying to actualize some motive, he may be trying to think certain thoughts, or feel certain feelings, or acquire certain objects or people. Whatever the nature of his involvement, he is involved in some way and that involvement defines the situation for him. To be in a situation is to comprehend it in some manner, even if that manner be boredom. Now in what sense does this act as a limitation upon the possibilities of consciousness? To comprehend a situation in some particular way at some particular time means that one does not comprehend it in other ways at the very same time. For example, as I stand here and speak to you, I am concerned with communicating certain thoughts. I am not counting the number of people in the audience, nor am I wondering about next week's classes, nor am I trying to decide what I would like to eat for lunch. These latter interests are not constitutive of this situation for me right now. In fact, they are incompatible with this situation as one in which I am trying to communicate certain thoughts. Only if I relinquish my communication interests could I reorganize the situation into one in which my interests could lie in counting the audience, or thinking about next week's classes, or deciding what to eat for lunch.

Thus, we may assert that there are always two types of limitations set upon consciousness. The first is more general. It restricts the possibilities of aware, knowing relationships to those beings about whose being I have in some way learned. The second is specific. It restricts the possibilities of aware, knowing relationships in terms of the interests I have in that situation. To the extent that some of my interests in a situation are incompatible with each other, then to that extent will I be unaware of some of them.

Now what can we say about that state of affairs that may exist when an individual has more than one interest in some situation and where one of the interests is involved with the denial of another? To put it another way, what can we say when an individual has conflicting interests in some situation?

An Example of Unconsciousness

A few years ago I treated an individual who had been brought up to think, feel, and believe that the expression of anger—no, even the feeling of anger, was bad in the worst sense. He had been taught by his parents that it was utterly sinful to feel angry. In the course of therapy, as you might expect, there were many occasions when his facial expression, the tone of his voice, and his general bodily posture all indicated to me that, despite his previous upbringing, he was angry with me. If on these occasions, I would say to him "You seem to be rather angry with me," he would invariably assert, in an even more angry manner "No!" These were not simple lies. He had such an over-riding interest in not experiencing

himself as angry with me that he literally could not do so. True, he was aware that he was uncomfortable, anxious perhaps, but not angry.

Can we take a closer look at what happened in that situation? The patient acted in a number of ways which, given his framework of understanding, meant to him that he was uncomfortable. I, the therapist, a participant observer in that situation with him, and given my framework of understanding, grasped a different meaning of his acts. For me, his performances meant that he was angry with me. Am I now to say that he was unconscious of his angry feelings? "Yes." But this "Yes" needs further clarification. What exactly is the locus of the patient's unconsciousness? What conditions had to exist such that this phenomenon of unconsciousness could appear? For whom was this phenomenon of unconsciousness an object of consciousness? The point that I am trying to make is that the meaning of his actions as "being-angry-with-me" was not something "in" him. It was not an entity to be found within his skin or in some container of his called "my unconscious." The meaning of his actions as "being-angry-with-me" belonged to the situation of both of us together, each with our various frameworks of understanding and each with our various interests in that situation. His unconsciousness was an object of my consciousness. Whether this meaning would still be unavailable to him in a different interpersonal situation, co-constituted by another person besides myself with different interests in the relationship, is an entirely debatable question. And even if this would be the case, the patient's unknowing, unawareness of certain meanings of his actions would still have to be defined by the particular interpersonal relationship in which he was involved. Only in terms of the various frameworks of understanding and various interests of the participants could the meaning of unconscious be understood.

You may ask "Under what conditions could the patient have become knowingly aware of himself as being angry with me in that situation?" I would say that he could have become so knowingly aware if he could have given up his over-riding interest in not experiencing himself as being angry. But this would have meant that he had learned that he could be angry and still be safe, still be someone who was worthwhile and lovable. In the absence of this new learning, the awareness of himself as angry would have crippled him with shame and insecurity. His whole system of personal meanings would have been disrupted. He would no longer have felt at home with himself and his past and future would have lost whatever safe quality he had previously experienced.

Unconscious Motivation

What does all this have to do with the problem of unconscious motivation? We have said that human beings can enter into knowingly, aware relationships with a multiplicity of interests, some of which are incompatible

with others. We have also said that when this occurs the particular person in question is restricted in his awareness of the meanings of his actions. He is prevented by one interest from becoming knowingly aware of another. I would suggest that the phenomenon of unconscious motivation is to be found here. It is the phenomenon which emerges in an interpersonal situation when one participant, because of the interests and framework of understanding that he brings to the situation, is unable to grasp a meaning of his actions which the other participant, because of his interests and framework of understanding, readily understands.

What is the experience of the person who is confronted with a meaning of his actions which he has an interest in not acknowledging? At first he usually feels surprised and confused. There is a sense of irritation with the one who has confronted him. Gradually, the confusion and discomfort increases. He has never grasped that which the observer saw so readily and there is something particularly disquieting about the possibility of the observer's insight. In an effort at self-protection, he thinks of an acceptable explanation, a meaning which is still consistent with the ways in which he comfortably thinks about himself and his actions. But the observer points out the deficiencies of his rationalization and the validating aspects of his own interpretation. At this point the individual's anger and confusion mount even higher. He begins to lose his sense of familiarity with himself and with this loss there is increasing anxiety. He has been brought before himself from a new, strange, and threatening perspective. Tentatively, he tries to look at what the observer saw so readily, but his discomfort mounts. It could not be. Now a sense of doubt begins to creep in. He is no longer sure of why he did what he did and, if it should happen to be the case, why he continually does these sorts of things. At this point he feels the grasp of the uncanny, the driven or compelled quality of some of his actions. By the same token, it is at this point that we enter the realm of causality in human behavior. Each time a human being loses touch with his motives, each time he is prevented by some of his interests from becoming knowingly aware of others which also determine his choices and actions, then, as the psychiatrist Georg Groddeck would say, he tends to be lived by unknown and uncontrollable forces.

To put it more generally, I am asserting that to the extent that a human being is unknown and unaware of his motives, then to that extent they act as *causes* rather than *because*s for his actions. We all know that our *because*s, the motives of which we are aware, can be appropriately modified as our lives unfold. What we do not like to realize is that our *causes*, the motives of which we are not aware, cannot be so modified. They continue to influence our choices and actions throughout our lives, perhaps unchanged from their earliest childhood form.

On the Meaning of Instinct

In the final section of this paper, I would like to examine that class of motives which Freud claimed to be the most decisive for human life. I am referring here to the Triebe or, depending upon your translation, the instincts or the drives. In order to facilitate this examination, it will be necessary to clarify two issues: 1) Why did Freud designate the instincts as human motives? and 2) How did Freud elaborate his concept of the instincts?

In an essay entitled "Freud and the Magna Charta of Clinical Psychiatry," Ludwig Binswanger (1963), one of Freud's few life-long friends and a rather famous psychiatrist in his own right, describes one of their many conversations. They had been discussing the difficulties of a patient with whom they were both familiar and Binswanger, in an effort to explain the latter's failure to improve, suggested that he (the patient) suffered from a "deficiency of spirit." Much to his surprise, Freud responded with "Yes, spirit is everything . . . Man has always known that he possessed a spirit; I had to show him there is such a thing as instinct." (1963, p. 1) What did Freud mean by this?

I believe that Freud's concern with showing man that he possessed instincts, as well as a spirit, stems from two major sources: 1) his actual experiences with patients and 2) his dissatisfaction with the history of philosophical and theological conceptions of man which tended to divorce the human spirit from the human body and which relegated the latter to a very secondary, often accursed position. In the forty years during which he treated people suffering from various psychological disturbances, Freud found again and again that the living human body with its needs, demands and orientations, determined not only behavior, but even more importantly, the ways in which the human beings grasped and understood the whole of the cosmos. The meanings of objects, places, persons and events which constitute an individual's world are, to a great extent, determined by the living human body. Thus, if one reads Freud, one finds not only a theory of behavior, but also theories of symbolism, culture and even religion. All of these are grounded in his understanding of the living body. In a letter to Binswanger, written after the latter had delivered an address in commemoration of Freud's eightieth birthday, the founder of psychoanalysis asserted, "You claim that with a change of viewpoint one is able to see an upper story which houses such distinguished guests as religion, art, etc. You're not the only one that thinks that, the most cultured specimens of homo natura believe it. In that you are a conservative, I revolutionary. If I had another lifetime of work before me, I have no doubt that I could find room for these noble guests in my little subterranean house. . . ." (1963, p. 4)

Freud is not alone in his belief that it is the living human body which

gives meaning to and determines our various grasps of the world. Is not this belief consistent with Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body-subject as co-constitutive of human meanings? In any event, for Freud, human meanings are, by and large, bodily meanings. To put it another way, in Freud's language, the human ego is originally and for the most part a bodily ego.

In a paper entitled "The Philosophy of Will and Action," presented at the Second Lexington Conference on Phenomenology, Paul Ricoeur (1964) noted that until very recently, those who had philosophically reflected on the nature of the human will did so primarily in terms of thought or spirit. The living human body, with its needs and demands, was either overlooked completely or relegated to a position of secondary importance. As Ricoeur (1964) says in his discussion of Plato, "The problem of motivation is raised and will no longer be forgotten, even if it too, *is overshadowed by the narrow concept of deliberation.*" This criticism applies equally well to Aristotle, Descartes, and even Sartre. It seems to me that Freud, at least in this respect, would be in complete agreement with Ricoeur. Human motivation cannot be fully understood without realizing and giving full due to the impact of the living body. For Freud, as we shall see, it is through the instincts that the body, with its meanings and forces, makes itself known to the spirit. As Needleman (1963) expresses so eloquently, "No longer is man's essential freedom seen as separate from his participation in matter and body; no longer is science seen as warring against freedom and spirit. Rather, science is embraced by the spirit as a movement of the spirit, and the instinctuality that is discovered in man is welcomed as man's instinctuality." (1963, p. 4) But what exactly is an instinct in the Freudian sense?

The concept of an instinct is a fundamental one for Freud. In "The Instincts and their Vicissitudes," (Freud, 1924, p. 61) he defines it as "a borderland concept between the mental and the physical, being both the mental representation of the stimuli emanating from within the organism and penetrating to the mind, and at the same time, a measure of the demand made upon the energy of the latter in consequence of its connection with the body." What does this mean? My interpretation of this definition is that Freud wanted to depict the instincts as that which links the body, as a living body, to the mind. But the link is not just an empty channel of communication, a connection that has no meaning in itself. For Freud, the instincts are somehow the representations of bodily conditions which make themselves known to the mind or spirit and which demand that the latter do something about them. How is such a state of affairs possible? Specifically, how does Freud conceptualize the instincts in their activities?

Elsewhere in "The Instincts and their Vicissitudes," (1924) Freud attempted to clarify what he meant by an instinct. He assumed the validity of the concept of homeostasis, that is, the theory which proposed that the

body, in all its systems, attempts to maintain itself at a relatively constant level of functioning. He further assumed that the mind or mental apparatus functions in a similar manner, that is, that it too attempts to maintain itself in a relatively constant state. Fortified with these assumptions, he took as his point of departure the concept of the stimulus as it was used in physiology. He argued that there are two kinds of stimuli, those which are of external origin and those which arise internally. The task of both the nervous system and the mental apparatus is to deal with stimuli in such a way as to keep themselves in a relatively constant state. Still, what exactly is a stimulus for Freud and what is its relation to an instinct?

In my readings of his works I have concluded that by the term stimulus, he was referring to an hypothesized entity or process which introduces a change of condition in the body or mental apparatus. The response to this is to act in some way so as to retrieve the original, or something like the original state of affairs. For Freud the two kinds of stimuli are fundamentally different. Those of external origin have a momentary impact and can, as it were, be turned off or avoided. For example, if I turn on my car radio and discover a program which annoys me, I can either change the station or turn the radio off. Stimuli of internal origin cannot be avoided or turned off. They have a relatively constant impact and make a relatively constant demand, e.g., hunger or thirst. Further, they are said to be of a biological nature and are, therefore, presumed to be purposeful. To say that they are purposeful is to say that they make a demand for satisfaction. For Freud, stimuli of internal origin represent needs and hence are instinctual in their nature. Thus, all stimuli which arise from within are instinctual or, to put it another way, an instinct is that which originates within the living body and makes itself known to the mind in the form of a stimulus of constant force demanding action which leads to biological satisfaction. If this is so, that is, if an instinct can be said to represent a bodily condition to the mind or spirit, then it must be so constituted as to be intelligible to that mind or spirit. Or, if that which in everyday life we call the mind is constituted by systems of meaning, then the instincts must also be so constituted. But instincts are meanings which make demands; they have a forcing quality about them. In fact, they are fusions of both force and meaning. They are motives.

Yet instincts are not just any kind of motive. If you will recall our earlier discussion of motives, you will remember that they were described as intentional acts, as that through which the individual is related to certain meaningful structures in his world. In what sense does an instinct relate the individual to his world? I believe that the concept of instinct, at least as Freud used it, must be understood as an extension of the concepts of intentional meaning and motivation. To use Ricoeur's (1964) words, "What Freud teaches us is that the notions of intention and motivation are not

necessarily linked to that of consciousness, there can be meaning before there is an explicit ego." Compare this statement with the following by Needleman (1963, p. 52): "An instinct intends an object; it is not like the objective processes, say, of physics something in itself and needing the theorizing of physics to relate it conclusively with other data. An instinct points beyond itself to its satisfaction. . . . The problem that now arises is to ascertain the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental acts. The temptation to assume that since all acts of this sort have an agent behind them and then to draw the distinction by claiming that the agent of the unconscious act is different from that of the conscious act must be avoided for it can only involve us in difficulties of formulating a concept of an agent that is not a self (Ego) and that performs the functions that a self performs. The distinction between conscious and unconscious mental acts must, rather, be drawn more broadly in this same direction: an intentional act with no agent is unconscious; one emanating from or having essential reference to an agent would be conscious . . . Thus we may define instincts in this context as intentional acts having no original essential reference to an agent-self."

It seems to me that these men are suggesting that an instinct is a motive which relates the person as a living, meaning constituting body, to the world. An instinct is not a relationship between a spirit or consciousness or ego and the world. It is an unconscious motive.

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