



Book Review

Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious by Timothy Wilson.
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Reviewed by Keith S. Harris

In the earlier part of the previous century, the unconscious was popularly perceived as a sinister place of primordial urges and internal conflict. Lust, jealousy, failures, fears, rages, losses, secret desires and worse were believed to be churning about in a spooky region of the mind that starts just on the other side of our awareness. [1] Except for emergent traces that sometimes surface from dreams, the content of the unconscious was thought to be hidden from everyday awareness, for what would certainly have seemed (especially in that era) good reason — it was believed that the rational, moderating influences of the ego was all too easily overwhelmed, resulting in actions or feelings that the conscious (but often powerless) part of the mind would itself abhor. However, by mid-century, in no small part due to the influence of Jung (a former member of Freud's inner circle) and Eastern mysticism, a growing number of writers began to attribute to the unconscious the qualities of spirituality, liberation and wholeness rather than (or in addition to) primal emotions and impulses. [2]

Among the general public today, the earlier, darker view of the unconscious still seems perfectly reasonable and, ironically, almost as

comforting as it is alarming. Such an unconscious side of us could account for a lot of the unpleasant things about human nature. After all, who does not wonder occasionally why we find ourselves struggling with the compulsion to succumb to what we “know” to be unhealthy or hurtful behaviors; why do we suffer from disagreeable moods; and why we are often plagued by persistent and unpleasant thoughts? Surely, since we would not intentionally create such disagreeableness, it must be the product of irresistible (and even alien) unconscious forces.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Timothy Wilson offers an assessment of the human unconscious that is very different from these extremes. He proposes that the unconscious is neither especially wicked nor spiritual, but rather its role is to assist us in maneuvering through our daily lives. In Wilson's research, the unconscious mind is shown to house the bulk of our practical decision-making apparatus, conveniently tucked away in the back rooms of our cognitive machinery. He convincingly argues that what this form of the unconscious does for us is useful, adaptive, and even essential; hence his reference to it as the *adaptive unconscious*. Wilson demonstrates that this unconscious man-

ages most of the lower-level processes that occur without awareness, and he defines the unconscious as that set of “*mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgments, feelings, or behavior*” [italics in text] (p. 23).

Nonetheless, we should not mistake the unconscious for an assemblage of automata, mental servants or homunculi. In a chapter entitled “Who’s in Charge?” Wilson notes that “our nonconscious minds are not just the janitorial staff or even low-level managers” (p. 43). In fact, in addition to resolving the simple problems of daily life, the unconscious seems to play a central role in making important life decisions, such as what career to pursue, what person to marry, and whether, in the heat of the moment, it is really a good idea to point out the boss’s shortcomings in public.

We tend to assume that we are consciously in charge of our *intentional* actions (despite the pressures of that primitive unconscious mentioned above). However, Wilson explains that this is a misapprehension, referencing the recent work of fellow psychologist Daniel Wegner [3]. “We often experience a thought followed by an action, and assume it was the thought that caused the action” (p. 47). However, it may be that, Wegner suggests, both the thought *and* the action derive from a third, unconscious process. It is only the apparent (consciously experienced) sequence of thought-then-act that gives us the illusion that the thought caused the action.

Trying to figure out how our minds function can be frustrating, both in theory (regarding the minds of others) and practice (regarding our own individual minds). Early in *Strangers*, Wilson addresses the question of why we should bother to learn about the workings of the personal unconscious. First, nothing we now know about the unconscious precludes the possibility that the *conscious* part of us can also have some degree of control over our behavior; and second, it is likely that we can consciously influence the workings of our unconscious

(even if we usually do not). Therefore, learning about the unconscious gives us a greater ability both to directly effect conscious decisions and behaviors, and to harness the unconscious processes for intentionally chosen purposes.

In order to understand and predict the workings of the unconscious, we must learn first to perceive its influence in our lives — we first need a way to differentiate between actions that are consciously initiated and directed, and actions that primarily derive from unconscious processes. That is, we need to become conscious of, to the degree possible, our “true” motivations and our usual ways of responding to situations. By observing how we feel and behave in a variety of different situations, we can *infer* who we are and what motivates us. [4] We can intentionally engage in an adult version of our early-childhood strategy — we can carefully observe what we do and how we feel about and react to novel situations, and then make plausible inferences about unconscious processes from this information.

However, there are natural limitations on the usefulness of the inferential approach, including the self-serving bias [5]. “When it comes to maintaining a sense of well-being,” Wilson notes, “each of us is the ultimate spin doctor” (p. 38). How can we get around this spin doctor? First, by developing our capacity for *methodical* introspection. It must be as free as possible from the pressures of social and personal expectation, in order to minimize bias. “The trick is to allow the feelings to surface and to see them through the haze of one’s theories and expectations [about one’s self]” (p. 173).

But the introspective process is necessarily limited, and our self-understanding would be incomplete if we relied too heavily on it. Supplementary sources of information about our unconscious processes are the perceptions and assessments of others, with which we can compare and contrast our self-appraisals. (However, there are two major caveats here: others may not give us their unfiltered perceptions, and even when they do, their assessments may

be less accurate than the self-view we obtained via our introspection.)

Each of these sources of self-information will necessarily provide only a reflection of the workings of the unconscious, of course, because the unconscious must always remain hidden from us. Reliable guesses about our unconscious motivations will have to suffice.

Wilson rounds out this book with a discussion of how we might use this fuller awareness of the unconscious to our advantage. We can, for example, act *as though* first and self-assess later — that is, behave in ways that are consistent with the type of person we would wish to be, rather than wait to *be* that type of person and then act like her. Wilson explains, “‘The do good, be good’ principle is one of the most important lessons psychology has to offer” (p. 215).

This book is written in an informative style that should be very accessible to the general reader, yet because it is well based on research it should also be of interest to clinicians and academics. For those interested in mind and consciousness, this book will be a complimentary and thought-provoking read.

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Notes

1. However, it should be noted that Freud did not believe that the unconscious performs only primitive processing, or that “higher order” thought is restricted to the conscious mind. For example, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* he observed, “the most complicated achievements of thought are possible without the assistance of consciousness” (Pelican Library Edition, 1976, p. 751).
2. The sinister understanding of the unconscious has arguably had the greater influence on literature and art, especially in the middle to late 20th century. The continuing impression this view made on Hollywood screenwriters seems especially graphic.
3. Wegner, D. M. (2002). *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
4. This is much like an adult version of the childhood developmental process identified by the object relations theorists.
5. See also the fundamental attribution error or bias.