# WITHDRAWING FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS

Toward a model of association-dissociation

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Alberto Varona, Psy.D.

Assistant Professor, Core Faculty

Clinical Psychology

Adler School of Professional Psychology

17 N. Dearborn

Chicago, IL. 60602

707-228-9718

aevarona@gmail.com

Biographical statement:

Dr. Alberto Varona is Assistant Professor of clinical psychology at Adler School of Professional Psychology where he teaches Psychopathology I & II, Psychoanalytic Approaches and History & Systems. He earned his doctorate from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA, after many years studying religion and philosophy. His current interests include philosophy of mind, philosophical phenomenology, process philosophy and psychoanalysis and neuropsychoanalysis.

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## Abstract:

The use of the concept 'the unconscious' and the collapse of spacial metaphors into literal reality has made accurate theorizing a challenge. However, the phenomena of non-awareness or partial awareness is crucial to psychoanalytic investigations. As such, a model of dissociation (and its conceptual partner association) that articulates the mechanisms of its process may advance our theorizing significantly. Dissociation, as a process rather than a structural content, clearly covers the phenomena of unconsciousness without the use of spatial metaphors. In order to accurately accomplish this task the relationship between subjective experience (phenomenal consciousness), awareness and cognitive notations (first and second-order judgements) will be explored more fully.

# WITHDRAWING FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS

## Toward a model of association-dissociation

When I was learning about the concept of the unconscious as a graduate student I asked, "What is in the unconscious and how does it get there? " I really can't remember the answers my instructors gave  but I do remember I was left with a nagging feeling of discomfort.  Don't get me wrong, I continued to use the concept. Over the years I drew several conclusions about *what* was in the unconscious from the statements of my instructors, some explicit and others not.  My instructors correctly interpreted my questions to be about the content of the unconscious.  This was not a new or profoundly innovative question as it has certainly been asked and explored before.  Once the questions had been set up in this manner there are subsequent natural extensions to those questions. Did the unconscious contain our motives, memories, fantasies, impulses, language and emotions?  Did our 'internal object relations' live at least partially submerged within this unconscious realm?  Did the contents of the unconscious get there because they sprung from there, the conscious mind being its second home?  Did unconscious mental content originate from the external world of experience and then somehow find itself plunged into the realm of darkness, eternally bound therein?

What I wish someone had said to me was that the questions themselves needed consideration. Now, several years later, I feel prepared to consider the initial questions themselves without throwing the phenomenal baby out with the conceptual bathwater.  There is a need to question,

clarify and adjust our concept of the unconscious so that psychoanalytic thinkers can be better aligned with developments in psychology and philosophy and yet retain the phenomena of non-conscious content. It is important that psychoanalytic thinkers persevere with their concern with the subjective realm of experience; an elusive and immanent realm that sometimes borders on unconscious oblivion but never fully disappears into it.

This paper unpacks the two questions: "*what* is *in* the unconscious and *how* does it get *there*?" I will address some of the difficulties with the concept of the unconscious as a location in mental or brain space and the subsequent difficulty with the mental content that would find itself contained in such a location. I will also address the difficulty with explaining how mental content gets to the unconscious location and *what it is like* consciously to have unconscious content. Once I have done this, I will try to go beyond the difficulties themselves and suggest a model of the mind that addresses the phenomena we find ourselves clinically and conceptually concerned with, without falling into these same difficulties. In order to do this I will use the concepts of *psychological consciousness* and *phenomenal consciousness* (Chalmers, 1996). These concepts will help me elaborate the concept of *dissociation* as a primary function of the mind, a function that is intricately related to and on a continuum with the function of *association*. I suggest that the *association–dissociation continuum* is conceptually correlated with phenomenal consciousness and that mental content (motives, memories, fantasies, impulses, language and emotions) is conceptually correlated with psychological consciousness and is flexibly stationary. The relationship between the association–dissociation continuum and mental content is crucial in this regard and will be discussed as well.

**Unconscious location**

There are two primary ways to use the word 'unconscious'. The word can be used as a noun or as an adjective. As a noun the article 'the' often precedes the word. This article precedes a noun. The question, "What is in the unconscious" also contains the preposition 'in'. This suggests that the noun it precedes contains the object in question. The object in question is "the unconscious", a thing that contains other things. A thing that is a reservoir for other things, thereby possessing space, is a container. As a container that holds mental things 'the unconscious' has a location. It becomes both a thing and a place. This is the reason it naturally leads to questions about *what* it contains and investigations into *where* the unconscious part of the mind is in the brain. This is a troubling use of the concept unconscious. Not all theories use this concept as a noun and those that do are often using a container metaphor as an aid to conceptualizing. However, this aid can quickly become a conceptual hurdle when the metaphor is lost and the container becomes literal. This use of the word 'unconscious' is problematic.

'Unconscious' is also an adjective[1],. As an adjective it modifies or describes the noun and cannot be used alone. If I ask, "Is that memory unconscious?" what I am wondering is, "Is the memory (noun) not conscious (adjective)?" The subject in question is "memory", which may or may not be associated with consciousness. In my opinion this is an appropriate use of the word. When the word is used in lectures and in articles it is often used both ways. This is troubling because this can cause the greatest conceptual confusion. Bouncing between a descriptive modifier and a

[1] In other psychological literature the word unconscious is often used appropriately as an adverb as in: "his unconscious activity…" This use acknowledges the automatic quality with which many acts are performed without controlled cognitive effort.

spatial object often results in the abandon of the metaphor. To the extent that the word is used as an adjective it is implicitly distinguishing between three aspects of the mind: mental *content, awareness* and *consciousness*. The *content* in the example given above is "the memory". *Consciousness* is related to *awareness* (Chalmers, 1996) and it thereby elucidates the content of memory by being associated to it. This is a meaningful distinction to make, as these three aspects of mind: mental content, awareness and consciousness, are phenomenologically distinct and conceptually useful.

**Unconscious mental content**

Mental content is a general concept that includes memories, fantasies, thoughts, language, object-relations and emotions. When mental content is discussed in relation to 'the unconscious' it is assumed that 'the unconscious' *contains* mental content. Psychoanalytic thinkers sometimes believe that "the conscious" and "the preconscious" can contain mental content as well. Having lost the spatial metaphor, we presume that mental content migrates from one location to the other. The concept of repression is proof that the loss of the spatial metaphor has necessitated a mechanism that explains the movement of mental content from the conscious mind to the unconscious mind. This is very confusing. Does mental content literally migrate? Of course not. Given a robust correlation or identity between the mind and the brain, we would likely conclude that mental content is relatively stationary. It would be bound by the structures of the brain wherein it is encoded. So if mental content (i.e. the memory of a traumatic event) is sometimes conscious and sometimes not, should we presume that it is moving around in the brain going from unconscious regions to conscious regions? Of course not. The spatial use of 'the

unconscious' aims to capture phenomenological experience; we are sometimes aware and sometimes not aware of mental content. This can be explained differently and with more precision.

**Repression: mental content's migration to the unconscious**

The mind-as-iceberg metaphor (Fechner, 1860), adopted by Freud and later psychoanalysts, is useful for visualizing the phenomena of non-conscious mental content but it comes with a great price. The price of this metaphor is that the mind and its properties (consciousness, pre-consciousness and unconsciousness) are misunderstood as locations and containers with content (memories, fantasies, thoughts, language and emotions) moving in and out of them. This may seem unusual to the reader but I believe that it is common in everyday theoretical discussions and conceptualizations. The great price paid for this loss of metaphor is theoretical stalemates and confusions. The greatest evidence for this is the concept of repression.

Repression is a supposed defense mechanism that suggests mental content (i.e. the memory of a traumatic event) is moved from the container of the conscious to the container of the unconscious passing as it must through the container of the preconscious. As a defense mechanism what repression does *not* suggest is *how* mental content would migrate from one place to another. The defense mechanism does not explain this because it does not make sense for mental content to migrate. Repression as a defense mechanism aims at explaining one thing: how mental content sometimes eludes conscious awareness entirely when it *should* be

remembered. Repression may succeed at explaining this, but does so with troubling use of the concept of a spatial unconscious as well as mental content as migratory.

**Does unconscious mental content have the quality of unconsciousness?**

Unconsciousness itself is a problematic descriptor. It is contrasted, of course, with consciousness. It suggests that there is mental content (memories, fantasies, thoughts, language and emotions) that has eluded consciousness. However, unconsciousness goes even further than that, suggesting there is mental content that is unavailable to consciousness altogether. This is why the under-theorized concept of the preconscious becomes a compelling necessity in order to explain the relationship between unconsciousness and consciousness. It is critical to state that mental content that is unconscious would be unavailable to consciousness by the mere definition of the term. Mental content that is supposedly unconscious but is available to consciousness indirectly through dreams, symptoms, relational patterns, etc. is preconscious at best. It is preconscious by virtue of the fact that those dreams, symptoms, relational patterns, etc. are properties of that mental content and thereby partially conscious. They may be marginal, peripheral properties of the mental content but they are not entirely distinct from that content. To the extent that the dreams, symptoms, relational patterns, etc. are available to consciousness, so is the mental content of which they are properties. To say that they are not properties of the mental content is to disconnect them from each other in a manner that would prove theoretically counterproductive.

In fact, if there were such a thing as completely unconscious mental content, mental content not at all available to consciousness, it would be clinically irrelevant. This mental content would be irrelevant in the same way that the existence of gnomes is to your daily work performance. If there are gnomes but they have no impact whatsoever on your mind and life then it truly does not matter at all whether or not they exist. Unconscious mental content is like gnomes. To the extent that they are un-impactful to the mind and life, they do not matter clinically at all. Furthermore, unconscious mental content, as previously understood, does not have the quality of unconsciousness. It has the quality of partial consciousness or pre-consciousness. It is always available in some relevant way to consciousness. Mental representation, at its most elemental level, represents the entire horizon of experience as responses to the world in a complex (multi-sensory, somatic, emotional and cognitive) manner (Varona, 2012). Taking one aspect of that complex representational horizon in isolation from other aspects may be useful for simplification, but is phenomenally inaccurate.

The phenomenon being described as unconscious is a phenomenon that is evident to the observer in an indirect way. Let's explore the previous example more fully. Suppose a clinician has hypothesized that there was a traumatic sexual event in a client's life that is unconscious. The clinician has noticed some aspects of the complex representational horizon (dreams, symptoms, relational patterns, etc.) but is seeking another aspect, the cognitive (symbolic) aspect, to address in therapy. The clinician believes the event has aspects more central to or critical for the healing of the phenomena exhibited. For example, suppose a clinician notices that a patient has a persistent pattern of getting involved in relationships in which he is treated with overt sadism, he

possesses unusual sexual preoccupations and he is prone to dissociative consciousness when under acute distress. The clinician may presume the patient has an unconscious sexual trauma.

What the clinician is likely presuming is that the person has no conscious experience of the cognitive memory of sexual abuse. This cognitive memory is deemed more central to or critical for the healing of the phenomena (abusive patterns, unusual sexual preoccupations and dissociation). To the extent that the entire mental content is a broad series of *responses* (broad, multi-sensory, somatic, emotional and cognitive) to the traumatic event, the cognitive memory of the traumatic event is only one aspect. It may be deemed a clinically critical aspect, useful for the healing of traumas, but it does not make the entire phenomenon unconscious. In fact, it could be argued that the majority of the traumatic *responses* are quite available to consciousness, even if they are not overtly associated with a sexual traumatic event memory. The phenomena in question (being treated with overt sadism, possessing unusual sexual preoccupations and being prone to dissociative consciousness when under acute distress) are aspects of the alleged traumatic event and thereby render the trauma partially conscious, even if the cognitive *memory* of the alleged sexual trauma is not. In this example the unconscious mental content does not really have the quality of unconsciousness. Rather, all the phenomena that make the example relevant for investigation are relatively available to consciousness even if one aspect, the cognitive memory, is not. Having a more substantive idea of mental content (responsive, broad, multi-sensory, somatic, emotional and cognitive representation) highlights how unconsciousness is a poor descriptive term for most of the phenomena relevant to therapeutic investigation. Pre-

reflective consciousness, thoroughly discussed by Dorothy Legrand (2007), might be a more useful term.

**Phenomenal and psychological consciousness**

So far I have focused primarily on mental content and its relationship to a spatial unconscious. This falls under the realm of *psychological consciousness,* sometimes defined in the philosophy of mind as the "easy problem" (Chalmers, 1996). Psychological consciousness (*cognition* from here on) refers to thinking, memories and awareness. It is called the easy problem because despite its complexity it is well within the explanatory scope of philosophy and science. Neurological and cognitive scientific explanations are not complete, but it is safe to presume that they will one day suffice for explaining thinking, memory and awareness. These domains are crucial for understanding human phenomena and despite being the "easy problem" they are quite complex.

Some philosophers have found it useful to distinguish these cognitive processes from *Phenomenal consciousness* - a word that refers to the phenomena of *subjective experience*. David Chalmers calls this the "hard problem" because, as things stand today, there is an explanatory gap between psychological consciousness (cognition) and phenomenal consciousness (subjective experience). Phenomenal consciousness is best articulated as '*something it is like to experience X'* (Chalmers, 1996. Nagel, 1974).

Chalmers says:

> "on the phenomenal concept, mind is characterized by the way it feels; on the psychological concept, mind is characterized by what it does. There should be no question of competition between these two notions of mind. Neither of them is *the* correct analysis of mind. They cover different phenomena, both of which are quite real" (1996, pg. 11).

In his book *The Conscious Mind,* Chalmers sustains a naturalistic position that takes phenomenal consciousness (*subjective experience* from here on) seriously as a distinct property of the mind. It is the natural property of the mind that is characterized by the immanent phenomena of experiential life. This distinction is crucial for psychoanalytic thinkers because it can aid in understanding the nuanced processes that underlie mysterious human phenomena. In a sense, this distinction has been implicit in psychoanalysis for some time. In much contemporary discourse the distinction between thoughts and subjective experience has featured prominently.

In my view, psychoanalysis is inherently property dualistic. For property dualists both cognition and subjective experiences are considered natural and related, yet distinct properties of the mind. This distinction has been crucial to psychoanalytic theorizing, subjective experience being its special concern. If this is so, expanding the understanding of the relationship between these properties could be useful for advancing our theories. Chalmers also distinguishes subjective experience (e.g. 'what it is like to experience red-ness') from *awareness* in that awareness involves a purely cognitive judgment (e.g. '*that* is red'). Nevertheless, Chalmers argues that

subjective experience finds its psychological correlate in awareness and can be investigated therein. To be *aware* of something is to cognitively note it[2]. Chalmers (1996) says, “Where there is consciousness, there is awareness. My visual experiences of a red book upon my table is accompanied by a functional *perception* of the book” (pg. 220). Chalmers (1996) says:

> "The primary nexus of the relationship between consciousness and cognition lies in *phenomenal judgments*. Our conscious experience does not reside in an isolated phenomenal void. We are aware of our experience and its contents, we form judgments about it, and we are led to make claims about it... The various judgments in the vicinity of consciousness I call phenomenal judgments, not because they are phenomenal states themselves, but because they are concerned with phenomenology or with its objects. Phenomenal judgments are often reflected in claims about consciousness: verbal expressions of those judgments"(pg. 173).

Phenomenal judgments are cognitive notations made through the link between awareness, subjective experience and/or the objects of subjective experience. For Chalmers there are three kinds of phenomenal judgments. The *first-order judgments* are, “the judgments that go along with conscious experiences, concerning not the experience itself but the *object* of the experience” (pg. 175). He continues,

[2] An example that distinguishes awareness from subjective experience is given by David Chalmers: You are having a conversation with a friend only to suddenly “realize” that there has been a car alarm sounding for several minutes. Once you realize this you also realize you have been aware of it for sometime. The realizing of the sound is not awareness itself but rather subjective experience.

> "This cognitive state is what I am calling a first-order judgment... We may think of the contents of these first-order judgments as making up the contents of awareness, where awareness is the psychological counterpart of consciousness... These judgments are not strictly about consciousness. Rather, they are parallel to consciousness, and generally about objects and properties in the environment, or even in the head... experience and first-order judgments -and therefore consciousness and awareness- share their contents" (pg. 175).

For Chalmers, the first-order judgment is the cognitive correlate concerned with the *object* of experience, not with experience itself. This will be central for a theory of association-dissociation. This will be explored later. Even more useful is Chalmers *second-order judgments* which are:

> "… more straightforward judgments about conscious experiences. When I have a red sensation, I sometimes notice that I have a red sensation. ..second-order judgments also include judgments about particular kinds of conscious experiences, as when one notes that some drug produces particularly intense sensations, or that a tingle one gets before a sneeze is particularly pleasurable." (pg. 176)"..our second-order judgments about consciousness are by and large correct. We can call this the *reliability* principle... When I think I have just experienced a pain, I have usually just experienced a pain. There is also a converse principle, which we might call the *detectability* principle; where there is an experience, we generally have the capacity to form a second-order judgment about it...

> Our second-order judgments can sometimes go wrong, providing exceptions to the reliability principle. This might happen due to inattention..., failure to grasp relevant categories, mental illness or neurophysiological pathology, and for various other reasons." (pg. 218-219)

For Chalmers a second-order judgment is the cognitive correlate concerned with the experience itself. It operates under two basic principles: *reliability* and *detectability.* In the reliability principle we can assume: if there is a cognitive judgment of an experience, there has usually been an experience with which the judgment is concerned. In the detectability principle we can assume: if we have an experience we will usually make a judgment that is true to the experience. Nevertheless, he makes it very clear that there are exceptions to these principles and thereby exceptions to the accurate link between second-order judgments and the subjective experience. This, together with linkage errors in first-order judgments, will form the foundation of a theory of association-dissociation. Chalmers suggests that these failures of accuracy may have to do with, "inattention..., failure to grasp relevant categories, mental illness or neurophysiological pathology, ..(or)… for various other reasons." (pg. 219)

Briefly returning to the example of the supposed sexual trauma listed above, there was no awareness of a sexual trauma memory, a failure of first-order judgment. However, there was awareness of the *subjective experiences* presumably related to sexual trauma, a successful second-order judgment. There has also been a failed linkage between subjective experience related to sexual trauma and its object, the cognitive memory of the event. Chalmers has not

articulated a model that addresses the breach that sometimes exists *between* first-order and second-order judgments. A concept must be applied for occasions when a person is aware of a subjective experience and forms a cognitive notation but still fails to associate that notation with the object related to the experience. This is a detectability failure of first-order judgment and a linkage failure between first-order and second-order judgments. The result of this is the lack of awareness of the *object* of experience coexisting with the awareness of the *subjective experience* itself. The converse sometimes may be true: a lack of awareness of subjective experience with a subsequent failure to form a cognitive notation of that experience, coexisting with the awareness of the object of experience, the memory of an event, with the subsequent successful cognitive notation of that event. The associative failures between these are likely caused by the failure of either a first-order or second-order judgment. The cognitive notations must both be symbolically encoded in order to actually be associated to each other. Failure on either side can make such an associative link impossible. An example of this would be when someone knows of a traumatic event, but cannot have a notable experience to accompany that event. The opposite example is when someone has subjective experiences of an event, but cannot associate them with the memory of an event. The association-dissociation model can accurately be applied to give conceptual shape to these phenomena.

**The dissociative end of the continuum**

Subjective experiences should not be understood in isolation from the objects of those experiences. The dynamic property dualism I propose does not assume that *subjective experience* is an isolate. Rather, subjective experience is a natural, non-material *property* of the mind that is

enhanced by cognitively noting it; the creation of second-order judgments. Awareness, and its correlate subjective experience, is *intentional* (Brentano, 1874), which means that it always has an object of awareness that likely results in subjective experience. If awareness must have an object of awareness, then a shifting of awareness from one object to another may result in a failure of linkage. Peter Goldberg (1995) also suggests that a necessary aspect of dissociation is in the shift of awareness to an alternative source of experience, usually found in rhythmic processes or on the surface of one's own body. This automatic process could result from anticipated dangers and arousals that are correlated with attending to particular phenomena that resemble historical phenomena.

Definitions of dissociation have often alluded to the distinction between cognition and subjective experience. For example, according to the DSM-IV-TR, dissociation is the "splitting off of clusters of mental contents from conscious awareness" (DSM-IV-TR, p 693). Cardeña (1994, p 31) defines one of the broad categories of dissociation as an alteration of consciousness involving a disconnection from the self or the world. Dissociation is best defined by reference to three domains: attention, awareness and its subsequent cognitive notations (first-order & second-order judgments), memories or events (objects) and subjective experiences (something it is like to experience x). Dissociation is therefore the *process* of attentional shifting, shifting awareness and subsequent difficulty creating cognitive notations of either subjective experiences or the objects of experience. In this definition attentional shifts, associated with *awareness,* are transitory. Subjective experiences and objects can either be attended to or not attended to: impacting the success in making cognitive notations. This symbolic failure is the *consequence* of

dissociation not the mechanism itself. The failure of cognitive notation in either first-order or second-order judgments makes the linkage between these impossible. This results in the common structural problems often associated with pathological expressions of dissociation. It is important to note that dissociation itself, the process of shifting attention, thereby impacting awareness, is normative and useful in daily functioning. These normative shifts of attention explain how we are sometimes not conscious of certain experiences or mental content, even though we are always capable of becoming conscious of them; especially those experiences or mental content symbolically encoded in first-order and second-order judgments. Those subjective experiences or objects of experiences that have been most vulnerable to the dissociative process are those furthest from conscious memory although never in their entirety.

**The associative end of the continuum**

With these definitions in place, it is useful to revisit the concept of association. For a long time association has been a vague concept in psychoanalysis, despite its long history in philosophy and psychology. However, for a model of association-dissociation to be useful both ends of the continuum must be defined. Association, as the other end of dissociation, would be defined as a link between *the cognitive notation* of subjective experience and the objects of experience. The cognitive notations are created with the aid of awareness as are the links between them. These associative links or notations occur as a result of the contiguity between experience and its objects, contiguity in time and space. The objects of experience are either present external events or their symbolic correlates. The link would be defined as a relationship in which *awareness* has aided in the creation of a cognitive notation that is contiguous in either time and space with

another cognitive notation. Association is the conceptual counterpart of dissociation in the sense that it represents the attentional *process* correlated with awareness of subjective experience or the object of experience and the resultant cognitive notation links. The concept of dissociation is therefore inexorably linked to the concept of association. Every dissociation implies an association, even if that association constrains the process of constructing a contiguously accurate symbolic notation of actual experience. In actual experience, awareness of subjective experience, its objects and their cognitive notations, is never eliminated, it shifts; a process that carries both benefits and costs. The shift to an alternative object of attention in the process of dissociation will often be a shift to the surface of one's own body or to rhythmic processes as the usual danger is perceived as danger from the external environment. However, what is most important to note is that there is a shift of attention from the object of danger to an alternative object. Therefore, if one finds a dissociative process in which an external object is being attended to the implication is that the source of danger is perceived as danger from the internal milieu.

**Pathological dissociation**

The process of dissociation described above explains the mechanisms of normative dissociation. It would be overly simplistic to reduce all expressions of dissociation, especially those of trauma-based dissociation, to the exact mechanism. Trauma-based dissociations are extreme, and despite their function, also represent great dysfunction. Elizabeth Howell (2005)[3] states trauma is the event that causes dissociation (pg. ix) but, as she herself counters, dissociation does

[3] Elizabeth Howell's book *The Dissociative Mind* is a wonderful collection and summary of the phenomena of dissociation. Most of the views expressed therein are in line with my own views. I differ with her view of dissociation as related to mental structure whereas I see dissociation as a dynamic process that *results in* implicated mental structure. For me the mind is a verb (a process or activity) not a noun (a thing or substance).

not require trauma. In fact, trauma is likely to activate mechanisms of dissociation to a degree that is extreme and with more structural consequences.

One technical difference I have with Howell is in my emphasis on dissociation as a *process* that *results in* separations of structural mental content. Howell says, "in a general sense, (dissociation) refers to a rigid separation of parts of experience, including somatic experience, consciousness, affects, perception, identity, and memory" (pg ix). She continues, "Dissociation refers to the separation of mental and experiential contents that would normally be connected" (pg. 18). Extreme forms of dissociation do have problematic structural consequences but those do not define dissociation, they define traumatization. In order to explain the mechanisms of extreme dissociation it is useful to keep in mind the unique state of consciousness that exists while those processes are operable. During extreme dissociative processes a person experiences a quality of consciousness that is unlike that of normative dissociative processes. The quality is often described verbally as, "being out of it", "disconnected", "lost in my head" and sometimes, "feeling vacant". Herein we have clues about the mechanisms of extreme dissociative processes.

Utilizing the model described above, it can be supposed that what has shifted in extreme dissociative processes is the object of one's attention and awareness. In normative and extreme dissociative processes, attention and awareness shifts from one object of experience to another. However, the differences between normative dissociation and extreme dissociation is in the

object of experience selected[4]. This selection process is automatic and the object of attention is selected on the basis of its unlikeliness to increase arousal and distressed states. In extreme dissociation, shifting attention and the resultant awareness occurs to ensure the utter avoidance of somatic, external and mental experiences that are likely to be difficult to endure. This difficulty is a result of a constitutional and individually variable sensitivity to physical and mental threats or danger. This automatic process requires the finding of an object of experience that withdraws attention and awareness, as far as possible, from the threatening objects of experience. As such, somatic threats result in attention to out-of-body objects of experience, external threats result in attention to mental objects of experience and mental threats result in attention to external objects of experience. In the most extreme cases in which somatic, external and mental threats coincide, the attentional function itself, and its conscious correlate awareness, becomes reduced and a subjective experience of vacancy becomes prominent. Vacancy is also the chronic subjective experience of a person who frequently utilizes extreme dissociation. This experience of vacancy results from the turning of the extreme dissociator's attention to their own mental world or sense of self and not finding well-linked mental content but rather disparate fragments of mental content that have resulted from the dissociative process.

**Repression and its disconnects**

How does the model of association–dissociation impact repression if repression is characterized as a total non-awareness (or at least a partial non-awareness) of certain mental content? Repression is an unnecessary concept and the phenomena it describes would be better described

[4] I use volitional language only for the sake of clarity. I believe the 'selection' process is an automatic process.

with the use of dissociation (Davies, 1996, pg. 564). Dissociation itself has two expressions: 1. non-awareness of an object of a subjective-experience or 2. non-awareness of the subjective-experience of a known object of experience. In either case, these would be noted by the 'alteration of consciousness' that is characterized by shifts in attention and awareness. Repression historically has been used to explain expression number 1. Unlike repression, this definition of dissociation has a possible explanation of *how* this process is accomplished. It does so by highlighting the *redirecting* of awareness and of subjective experience to an alternative *object* or *experience.* Extreme dissociation can be identified through uncommon fixation objects, alterations of awareness, the reduction of expectable subjective experience, and/or a sense of pseudovitality (Goldberg, 1995).

**Consciousness–unconsciousness in a model of subjective experience**

So where does this exploration leave the concept unconscious? There would be two possible uses for the concept unconscious. Neither involves using 'the unconscious' as a location and container. The first use for the concept is as an adjective and modifies a noun to acknowledge the lack of cognitive notation of a subjective experience or its object. However, a nuanced understanding of the symbolic mind makes this use problematic. A concept that implies partial consciousness would be more useful. The terms preconscious, marginally conscious or pre-reflective may be more useful.

The second use for the concept 'unconscious' attempts to explain the lack of subjective experience related to the cognitive notation of an object of experience. For this phenomenon we

currently use the terms ‘isolation of affect’, ‘compartmentalization’ and ‘denial’. This may result from dissociation from an expectable object of experience that resulted in an association to an alternative object of experience. This alternative object of experience can result in: 1. A lively distraction, 2. A vacant distraction or 3. A pseudovitality. The consequence of these processes may be called unconscious in the sense that the expectable subjective experience is not evident. This said, the model of association–dissociation, in which attentional shifts are primary and normative, captures the phenomena much more clearly and with greater explanatory power than the model of conscious–preconscious–unconscious. To be clear, there are mental contents and processes not privy to awareness and reflection. In fact, these make up the vast majority of mental content or processes. However, there is no unconscious mind or space. This would be an erroneous use of the word that objectifies the mind and reduces it’s dynamic processes to moving or shifting solids. This may seem like a purely semantic argument, but when defining and applying theory to the human mind, words matter.

**Objections**

It is difficult to anticipate all objections to the arguments presented here. In fact, the ability to do so would undermine the purpose of writing a paper to stimulate dialogue. Nevertheless, initial reviewers have posed questions that are worthy of address. The first of these is: Are you just splitting semantic hairs when discussing the concept unconscious? The short answer is no, but the question deserves greater attention. Second: Is your argument an attempt to draw a line in the sand separating you from more traditional psychoanalytic thinkers? Probably, but not just. Psychoanalytic theorizing is often too insular; as such, it is useful to attempt integration with

other schools of investigation to stimulate a broader exchange of ideas and eventual growth. Third and more content related: Are you inaccurately reducing dissociation to the process of attention? Fourth and related to the third: Doesn't your argument suggest a type of conscious and controllable dissociative process more than it does an unconscious dissociative process of defense as it has been previously understood? These are both valid presumptions, but not intended.

Back to the first question: Are you splitting semantic hairs? I do enjoy the analysis of words used in theory, their meanings and their implications. That acknowledged, I do not think that this entire paper can be disregarded as *just* a semantic argument. Let me be clear, in psychology, there is nothing trivial about semantics or arguments about them. No analysis in our field can be purely semantic in the sense that semantic arguments actually matter in theorizing. Semantics define the referents of a syntax or word. When speaking of the word unconscious what is referred to, non-awareness or partial awareness, is a valid referent. However, the word itself possesses multiple meanings, albeit implicit, depending on how it is used. Some meanings, such as the unconscious as container with location, can confuse matters when elaborating theories. Also, if we return to the referent, non-awareness or partial awareness, we might find other concepts that can still describe the phenomena with less confusion. This leads to the second question.

Is your argument an attempt to draw a line in the sand separating you from more traditional psychoanalytic thinkers? Again an admission: I have a wish to be in dialogue with a group

sometimes deemed exclusive. This said, I am not the first person to question some of the psychoanalytic assumptions, including the unconscious and the neglect of dissociation models, while still wishing to remain in the dialogic fold. I do however, want to be very clear that there are domains of investigation that psychoanalysis has generally neglected and yet are worthy of consideration. Also, there are problems with some of the assumptions of psychoanalytic investigations (the unconscious and repression) and that is a bane for all of us, not just for a few. Finally, there are some areas of investigation, like dissociation, that lost prominence for reasons other than theoretical. Some of the reasons many psychoanalytic ideas flourished or floundered was due to the personality cults associated with them. Nevertheless, one of the things that distinguishes a pseudo-science from science is the openness to being critiqued and allowing for information that might invalidate our investigations. Also, once this has occurred, it is crucial that the contested be allowed to respond or submit to having their theory fall by the wayside. There is no true gain (only pseudo-gain) in bolstering our ideas when they have been shown for their inadequacies.

Are you inaccurately reducing dissociation to the process of attention? Partially. I am suggesting that what we call dissociation is related to the process of attention and that when we turn our attention away from something that seemingly demands it, we are doing something normatively dissociative. This does not mean all attentional processes are dissociative. Dissociation would be the *process* in which attention is shifted in defensive avoidance of mental content, events or subjective experience, thereby creating procedural barriers to linking processes. As such, dissociation could be discussed as a normative and sometimes problematic defensive process

with the automatic aim of avoiding distressing arousal. Willful attentional shifts, aimed at attending to meaningful mental content, events or subjective experiences would thereby be non-dissociative. The distinction is then based on whether the attentional process is defensively *avoidant* of an object of perceived danger or willfully *pursuant* of an object emotionally meaningful for notation. The greatest objection here may come if neurological investigations produce evidence that attention and dissociation are distinct neural processes. However, in his most recent synthesis of neurological findings Allan Schore (2012) suggests that dissociation is a process of parasympathetic conservation-withdrawal that disengages a person from external world stimuli (p. 61).

The dissociative process, Schore suggests, represents a metabolic shutdown that serves the purpose of feigning death and producing pain-blunting opiates. The further suggestion made in this current paper is that the shift of attention away from the source of potential danger serves the disengagement from external world stimuli and serves the additional function of avoiding increasing amounts of fear and reactivity that would likely result from attending to the object of danger. If dissociation involves a shift of attention from one object to another, particularly from objects in the external environment and/or perceptions of distress from the internal milieu of the body (emotional, state-dependent information), then the objective of reducing the perception of danger is accomplished. This would suggest that in many cases of pathological dissociation an observer would notice a shift of attention to the surface of one's own body and to rhythmic processes. Even fixation on a particular benign object in the external milieu, under deeper scrutiny, is experienced as fixation on the reflection of the object on the retinal surface, not

attention to the projection of that object in the mind. We may discover that the shift to a fixed object in the external environment or to the surface of one's own body is simply a subset of the freezing process that represents the feigning of death.

Finally, doesn't your argument suggest a type of conscious and controllable dissociative process more than it does an unconscious dissociative process of defense as it has been previously understood? Yes and no. No, I do not believe that this process is conscious or willful. I believe that the attentional process is an automatic process that evolved in the human for survival and to manage other mental boons and burdens. This same evolved attentional process has been utilized by humans to ensure distance from perceived dangers inherent in having a well-developed mind (i.e. - awareness of one's history, anticipation and enhanced subjective experience). It can be used to avoid distressing experiences and events. This great, albeit derivative, capacity is both promising and problematic as it offers a solution but can also come with great fallout. Nevertheless, this otherwise automatic process, which is an exploitation of another primary process (attention), can be employed in a willful manner. I am not suggesting that it is useful or recommended to do so, but it is conceivable. Still, conscious employment of the dissociative process would not be defensive as much as it would be a coping strategy. What I mean by this is that if it is employed at a conscious level it would necessitate greater awareness of what is being avoided and thereby a less effective process of defense. In other words, by the time one employs a conscious "dissociation" or distraction, the material being avoided has already been attended to, demanded awareness, been cognitively noted and subjectively experienced. The success of its conscious employment of attentional shifting would be minimal.

**Conclusion**

What is in the unconscious and how did it get there? There is no such place as the unconscious. This is a murky way to talk about human experience that probably needs to be shifted. On the other hand, there are a great deal of mental processes that occur to which attention is not drawn and awareness is not accomplished. However, it is difficult to relinquish the use of the concept 'unconscious.' It is difficult because psychoanalytic thinkers and clinicians are quite identified with this word and in a sense the entire practice of psychoanalysis is based on exploring the unconscious. However, psychoanalysis has not based its exploration on 'the unconscious' as much as on the phenomena of the *absence of awareness* and/or the *absence of subjective experience*. These phenomena are quite immanent, useful to retain and to explore, even if the concept previously used to describe them is not.

When there is an absence of awareness of mental content or of subjective experience, there is nevertheless a great amount of relevant and derivative mental content and subjective experience with which the person does has contact. For this the word 'unconscious' really does not apply. More precision in the use of the word 'unconscious' is warranted. It would be more pragmatic and therapeutically promising if there were more precision in describing what *aspect* of mental content or subjective experience is unconscious. The absence of awareness of subjective experience, the objects of experience and the structural failures that result from these processes, always involves the dissociation process. The dissociation of awareness and sometimes of subjective experience from one object to another always co-occurs with the association of

awareness and the resultant subjective experience to another object. If this true, the most precise descriptive model for the phenomena of non-awareness or structural problems of linkage would be ‘association–dissociation’ rather than ‘conscious–unconscious’.

The reclaiming and elaboration of the association–dissociation model in psychoanalysis should prove very fruitful. Also, the continued psychoanalytic focus on shifts of awareness, the resultant subjective experiences and the cognitive notations or structural mental content should bring much needed clarity to our investigations. My hope is that this paper will stimulate dialogue and responses that will continue to help move innovative psychoanalytic investigation forward.

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