

TIMOTHY D. WILSON



*Strangers to Ourselves*

DISCOVERING  
THE  
ADAPTIVE  
UNCONSCIOUS

**Timothy D. Wilson**

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## Preface

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It might seem that self-knowledge is a central topic in psychology. In some ways it is; from Freud onward, psychologists have been fascinated by the extent to which people know themselves, the limits of this knowledge, and the consequences of failures of self-insight. Surprisingly, however, self-knowledge has not been a mainstream topic in academic psychology. There are few college courses on self-knowledge and few books devoted to the topic, if we rule out self-help books and ones from a psychoanalytic point of view.

I think this is about to change. In recent years there has been an explosion of scientific research on self-knowledge that paints a different portrait from the one presented by Freud and his followers. People possess a powerful, sophisticated, adaptive unconscious that is crucial for survival in the world. Because this unconscious operates so efficiently out of view, however, and is largely inaccessible, there is a price to pay in self-knowledge. There is a great deal about ourselves that we cannot know directly, even with the most painstaking introspection. How, then, can we discover our nonconscious traits, goals, and feelings? Is it always to our advantage to do so? To what extent are researchers in academe rediscovering Freud and psychoanalysis? How can

self-knowledge be studied scientifically, anyway? These are the questions to which I turn in the following pages. The answers are often surprising and have direct, practical, implications for everyday living.

I have been interested in these questions since I arrived in Ann Arbor to attend graduate school in the fall of 1973, fresh from my graduating class of twelve at Hampshire College (a small, experimental college in Massachusetts then in its third year of existence). The University of Michigan was an amazingly stimulating place, and I am grateful to the many there who helped launch my career in social psychology. I owe a special debt to my mentor, Dick Nisbett, who taught me how to pursue ideas about self-knowledge empirically and to think about them theoretically. Many of the ideas in this book took seed in the stimulating conversations we had at the Institute for Social Research in the mid-1970s. Even more important, Dick showed me that social psychology is not just a profession or academic pursuit, but a way of life that challenges basic assumptions about the world.

I also want to thank the many graduate students I have worked with over the years who helped me investigate the issues discussed here, including Sarah Algoe, David Centerbar, Michelle Damiani, Dana Dunn, Liz Dunn, Sara Hodges, Debby Kermer, Kristen Klaaren, Dolores Kraft, Jaime Kurtz, Suzanne LaFleur, Dan Lassiter, Doug Lisle, Jay Meyers, Nicole Shelton, Julie Stone, and Thalia Wheatley. I can't imagine having pursued these ideas without this impressive bunch to share the fun and hard work.

I also thank John Bargh, Jon Haidt, Angeline Lillard, Jonathan Schooler, Dan Wegner, Dan Willingham, and Drew Westen, who read all or part of the manuscript and provided valuable feedback. Finally, I am grateful to my Harvard University Press editor, Elizabeth Knoll, for her wise, witty, and patient counsel during the seemingly endless time it took to write this book.

The topic of self-knowledge is an intimate one, and in the following pages I draw upon my own and many of my friends' experiences. To avoid any embarrassment I have sometimes changed the names of my friends and the details of their experiences. My own embarrassing experiences are pretty much intact.

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## Freud's Genius, Freud's Myopia

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Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,—  
These three alone lead life to sovereign power.  
—Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Oenone" (1833)

What are more important than matters of the heart? Or more difficult to decipher? Some people are blessed by knowing exactly what it is their hearts desire, but are cursed by not knowing how to achieve it. Like King Lear, some stumble into a course of action precisely opposite to the one that would satisfy their hearts and minds. Because of their own pride, stubbornness, or lack of self-insight, their goals remain unfulfilled.

But at least such people know what they want, be it their daughters' devotion, a lover's embrace, or peace of mind. A worse fate is not knowing what it is our hearts desire. Consider Marcel, in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, who is convinced that he no longer loves Albertine and broods and plots and schemes about ways of leaving her, until his housekeeper rushes in with the news that Albertine has left him. At the instant he hears the words, Marcel realizes how much he still loves Albertine: "These words: 'Mademoiselle Albertine has gone!' had expressed themselves in my heart in the form of an anguish so keen that I would not be able to endure it for any length of time. And so what I had

supposed to mean nothing to me was the only thing in my whole life. How ignorant we are of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Marcel’s ignorance of his own feelings is far from rare. Consider Susan, a friend of mine who was once involved with a man named Stephen. Stephen was a very nice guy, kind and attentive and reliable and clearly head over heels in love with Susan. Both he and Susan were social workers and shared many interests. They dated for over a year, and the relationship seemed to be getting quite serious, except for one problem—it was obvious to all Susan’s friends that she did not love Stephen. She *thought* she did, but as far as we could see, Susan had convinced herself that she felt something that she didn’t. Stephen was a dear friend, yes, but was he someone she deeply loved and wanted to spend the rest of her life with? No way. Eventually Susan realized that she had been mistaken and ended the relationship.

Perhaps Marcel and Susan are exceptions, people who are especially blind to their own hearts and minds. Yet I suspect that most of us can think of times when we were in a similar state of confusion, like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, who found that her feelings toward Mr. Darcy “could not be exactly defined”:

She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in his welfare; and she only wanted to know how far she wished that welfare to depend upon herself, and how far it would be for the happiness of both that she employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine that at such times of confusion we could hook ourselves up to a machine called an Inner Self Detector. After attaching electrodes to our temples and adjusting the dials we could ask questions like “How do I really feel about Stephen (or Mr. Darcy)?” After a few whirs and clicks the machine would display the answer on a little monitor (a more technologically advanced version, perhaps, of the Magic Eight Ball that kids use at slumber parties to tell their futures).

To see how people would make use of an Inner Self Detector, I asked the students in one of my college seminars to list the questions they

would ask of it. Like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, some of the students wanted to know how they really felt about someone. One person, for example, said her first question would be “How do I truly feel about a couple of people in my life?” How nice it would be to have a machine to tell us the answer to questions like this!

The students also had questions about the nature of their own personalities, including their traits and abilities (e.g., “What is my main objective/motivation in life?” “Why am I socially inept in certain situations?” “Why do I sometimes lack motivation for doing homework?”). Some of these questions, such as those about academic performance and careers, are undoubtedly specific to the uncertainties of early adulthood. Even seasoned adults, however, sometimes wonder about their personalities and abilities. Blindness to one’s character can lead people to make poor choices, such as the man who assumes that he has what it takes to lead a fulfilling life as a lawyer when he is better suited to be a teacher, or the woman who turns down an offer to make an important speech because of the mistaken belief that she could never pull it off.

The students also wanted to know why they felt or acted the way they did, such as what it was that made them happy. Understanding the causes of our responses is crucial to avoiding unwanted influences on our feelings and behavior. Consider a lawyer who interviews an African-American applicant for a job as an associate in her firm. She finds the candidate to be cold, unfriendly, and a tad aggressive, and thus recommends that he not be hired. She is a fair-minded person who believes that her negative impression had nothing to do with the applicant’s race. But what if she is wrong, and his race did influence her impression without her knowing it? She cannot confront her racism and try to change it if she does not know that it exists and is influencing her judgment.

This book is concerned with two main questions: Why it is that people often do not know themselves very well (e.g., their own characters, why they feel the way they do, or even the feelings themselves)? And how can they increase their self-knowledge? There are undoubtedly many reasons for a lack of self-insight; people may be blinded by their hubris (a

favorite Greek and Shakespearean theme), confused, or simply never take the time to examine their own lives and psyche very carefully. The reason I will address—perhaps the most common of all—is that much of what we want to know about ourselves resides outside of conscious awareness.

The idea that a large portion of the human mind is unconscious is not new and was Freud's greatest insight. Modern psychology owes Freud a large debt for his willingness to look beyond the narrow corridor of consciousness. A revolution has occurred in empirical psychology concerning the nature of the unconscious, however, that has revealed the limits of the Freudian conception.

Initially, research psychologists were skittish about even mentioning nonconscious mental processes. In the first half of the twentieth century, the behaviorist onslaught in psychology was fueled by a rejection of mentalism; behaviorists argued that there was no need to take into account what occurred inside people's heads, consciously or unconsciously. In the late 1950s, mainstream psychology took the giant step of rejecting behaviorism and initiating the systematic study of the mind. But the first experimental psychologists to leap off the behaviorism bandwagon said little about whether those aspects of the mind they were studying were conscious or unconscious. This was a taboo question; few psychologists wanted to jeopardize the newfound respectability of the mind as a scientific topic by saying, "Hey, not only can we study what people are thinking; we can study what goes on inside their heads that even they can't see!" In the psychological laboratories of academe, few self-respecting psychologists wanted to risk the accusation that they were, God forbid, Freudians.

But as cognitive and social psychology flourished, a funny thing happened. It became clear that people could not verbalize many of the cognitive processes that psychologists assumed were occurring inside their heads. Social psychologists, for example, were developing models of the way in which people process information about the social world, including how they formulate and maintain stereotypes of other groups, judge other people's personality, and make attributions about the causes of

their own and other people's actions. The more researchers studied these mental processes, the clearer it became that people were not aware of their occurring. When researchers debriefed participants about what they must have been thinking during their experiments, they were disconcerted to find that the participants often shook their heads and said, "That's a very interesting theory, professor, but I'm afraid that I don't recall having had any thoughts remotely like that."<sup>3</sup> Most of the mental processes studied by cognitive and social psychologists turned out to occur out of view of the people who had them. This fact became impossible to ignore, and theories of nonconscious processing began to creep into experimental psychology.

Still, many psychologists were reluctant to use the word "unconscious," out of fear that their colleagues would think they had gone soft in the head. Several other terms were invented to describe mental processes that occur outside of conscious awareness, such as "automatic," "implicit," "pre-attentive," and "procedural." Sometimes these terms do a better job of describing a specific type of mental process than the general term "nonconscious." The study of automatic processing has flourished, for example, and a lack of awareness of these processes is only one of its defining features.<sup>4</sup>

But the terms "unconscious" or "nonconscious" now appear with increasing frequency in mainstream journals. A picture has emerged of a set of pervasive, adaptive, sophisticated mental processes that occur largely out of view. Indeed, some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that the unconscious mind does virtually all the work and that conscious will may be an illusion. Though not everyone is prepared to relegate conscious thought to the epiphenomenal refuse heap, there is more agreement than ever before about the importance of nonconscious thinking, feeling, and motivation.<sup>5</sup>

The gulf between research psychologists and psychoanalysts has thus narrowed considerably as scientific psychology has turned its attention to the study of the unconscious. This gap has not been bridged completely, however, and it is clear that the modern, adaptive unconscious is not the same as the psychoanalytic one.

## The Adaptive Unconscious versus the Freudian Unconscious

Freud changed his views often, most notably from his topological model of the mind to the structural theory, with the publication of *The Ego and the Id* in 1923. There are also several schools of modern psychoanalytic thought, with varying emphases on unconscious drives, object relations, and ego function. To compare the modern view of the adaptive unconscious with the Freudian unconscious is like trying to aim at moving targets. Nonetheless there are clear differences between the views.

### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS?

Freud's topographic model of the mind distinguished between two types of unconscious processes. First, people have a multitude of thoughts that are simply not the focus of their current attention, such as the name of their seventh-grade math teacher. This kind of information is in the pre-conscious, Freud said, and could easily be made conscious by directing attention to it. More importantly, Freud noted, there is a vast storehouse of primitive, infantile thought that is kept out of consciousness because it is a source of psychic pain. These kinds of thoughts are repressed for a purpose, not simply because our attention is drawn elsewhere. Freud's subsequent structural model of the mind was more complex, in that it allocated unconscious processes to the ego and superego as well as to the id, but he continued to focus on unconscious thought that was primitive and animalistic, and characterized conscious thought as more rational and sophisticated.

According to the modern perspective, Freud's view of the unconscious was far too limited. When he said (following Gustav Fechner, an early experimental psychologist) that consciousness is the tip of the mental iceberg, he was short of the mark by quite a bit—it may be more the size of a snowball on top of that iceberg. The mind operates most efficiently by relegating a good deal of high-level, sophisticated thinking to the unconscious, just as a modern jumbo jetliner is able to fly on automatic pilot with little or no input from the human, “conscious” pilot. The adaptive unconscious does an excellent job of sizing up the world, warn-

ing people of danger, setting goals, and initiating action in a sophisticated and efficient manner. It is a necessary and extensive part of a highly efficient mind and not just the demanding child of the mental family and the defenses that have developed to keep this child in check.

Nor is the unconscious a single entity with a mind and will of its own. Rather, humans possess a collection of modules that have evolved over time and operate outside of consciousness. Though I will often refer to *the* adaptive unconscious as a convenient shorthand, I do not mean to characterize it as a single entity, as the Freudian unconscious typically is. For example, we have a nonconscious language processor that enables us to learn and use language with ease, but this mental module is relatively independent of our ability to recognize faces quickly and efficiently and our ability to form quick evaluations of whether environmental events are good or bad. It is thus best to think of the adaptive unconscious as a collection of city-states of the human mind and not as a single homunculus like the Wizard of Oz, pulling strings behind the curtain of conscious awareness.<sup>6</sup>

#### WHY DOES THE UNCONSCIOUS EXIST?

Freud argued that our primitive urges often do not reach consciousness because they are unacceptable to our more rational, conscious selves and to society at large; they “remind one of the legendary Titans, weighed down since primaeval ages by the massive bulk of the mountains which were once hurled upon them by the victorious gods.”<sup>7</sup> People have developed myriad defenses to avoid knowing what their unconscious motives and feelings are, some of which (sublimation) are healthier than others (repression, reaction formation, etc.). The therapeutic process involves the elucidation and circumvention of unhealthy defenses, which is difficult precisely because people are so motivated to keep their unconscious motives and feelings hidden.

According to the modern view, there is a simpler reason for the existence of unconscious mental processes. People cannot directly examine how many parts of their minds work, such as basic processes of perception, memory, and language comprehension, not because it would be

anxiety provoking to do so, but because these parts of the mind are inaccessible to conscious awareness—quite possibly because they evolved before consciousness did. If we were to ask people to tell us exactly how they perceive the world in three dimensions, for example, or how their minds are able to parse a continuous stream of noise emitted by another person into comprehensible speech, they would be quite tongue-tied. Consciousness is a limited-capacity system, and to survive in the world people must be able to process a great deal of information outside of awareness. Carl Jung acknowledged this point in the 1920s:

The unconscious has also still another aspect: within its compass are included not only the *repressed* content but also all such psychical material as does not reach the threshold of consciousness. It is impossible to explain the sub-threshold character of all this material by the principle of repression, otherwise a man, at the release of repression, would certainly achieve a phenomenal memory that forgot nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Freud undoubtedly would agree, saying something like “Yes, yes, but this kind of unconscious thinking is the small stuff; nuts and bolts, low-level thinking that is much less interesting than matters of the heart and mind, such as love, work, and play. Of course we do not have conscious access to such things as how we perceive depth, just as we do not have conscious access to how our digestive tracts operate. The fact remains that repression is the reason why more important, higher-order mental processing is unconscious. People *could* directly access their primitive urges and desires, if repression and resistance were circumvented, but generally we do our best to keep such thoughts and feelings outside of awareness.”

In contrast, the modern view of the adaptive unconscious is that a lot of the interesting stuff about the human mind—judgments, feelings, motives—occur outside of awareness for reasons of efficiency, and not because of repression. Just as the architecture of the mind prevents low-level processing (e.g., perceptual processes) from reaching consciousness, so are many higher-order psychological processes and states inaccessible. The mind is a well-designed system that is able to accom-

plish a great deal in parallel, by analyzing and thinking about the world outside of awareness while consciously thinking about something else. This is not to deny that some thoughts are quite threatening and that people are sometimes motivated to avoid knowing them. Repression may not, however, be the most important reason why people do not have conscious access to thoughts, feelings, or motives. The implications of this fact for how to gain access to the unconscious cannot be underestimated and are a major topic of this book.

### **The Non-Freudian Unconscious**

To illustrate further how the adaptive unconscious differs from the Freudian version, let's engage in a bit of counterfactual history, in which we imagine how ideas about the unconscious would have developed if Freud had never proposed his theory of psychoanalysis. To do so, it is necessary to consider briefly the status of pre-Freudian thinking about unconscious processes.

In the nineteenth century, the long shadow of Descartes influenced thinking about the nature of the unconscious. Descartes is best known for his sharp division of the mind and the body. So-called Cartesian dualism, or the “mind-body” problem, has occupied philosophers and psychologists ever since. Many have rightly objected to the idea that the mind and the body are separate entities that obey different laws, and few philosophers or psychologists today would identify themselves as dualists; in fact Antonio Damasio has dubbed the “abyssal separation between body and mind” as “Descartes's error.”<sup>9</sup>

Descartes made a related error that is less well known but no less egregious. Not only did he endow the mind with a special status that was unrelated to physical laws; he also restricted the mind to consciousness. The mind consists of all that people consciously think, he argued, and nothing else. This equation of thinking and consciousness eliminates, with one swift stroke, any possibility of nonconscious thought—a move that was called the “Cartesian catastrophe” by Arthur Koestler and “one of fundamental blunders made by the human mind” by Lancelot Whyte.

Koestler rightly notes that this idea led to “an impoverishment of psychology which it took three centuries to remedy.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite Descartes’s blunder, a number of nineteenth-century European theorists, such as Pascal, Leibniz, Schelling, and Herbart, began to postulate the presence of nonconscious perception and thought. Especially noteworthy were a group of British physicians and philosophers who developed ideas about nonconscious processing that were openly anti-Cartesian and remarkably similar to current thinking about the adaptive unconscious. These prescient theorists, especially William Hamilton, Thomas Laycock, and William Carpenter, can rightly be called the parents of the modern theory of the adaptive unconscious. They observed that a good deal of human perception, memory, and action occurs without conscious deliberation or will, and concluded that there must be “mental latency” (Hamilton’s term, drawing on Leibniz), “unconscious cerebration” (Carpenter’s term), or a “reflex action of the brain” (Laycock’s term).<sup>11</sup> Their description of nonconscious processes is remarkably similar to modern views; indeed, quotations from some of their writings could easily be mistaken for entries in modern psychological journals:

- *Lower-order mental processes occur outside of awareness.* Hamilton, Carpenter, and Laycock observed that the human perceptual system operates largely outside of conscious awareness, an observation also made by Hermann Helmholtz. Though this view seems obvious today it was not widely accepted at the time, largely as a result of the legacy of Cartesian dualism. It was not widely accepted by modern psychologists until the cognitive revolution of the 1950s.
- *Divided attention.* William Hamilton observed that people can consciously attend to one thing while nonconsciously processing another. He gave the example of a person who is reading aloud and finds that his or her thoughts have wandered onto some other topic altogether: “If the matter be uninteresting, your thoughts, while you are going on in the performance of your task, are wholly abstracted from the book and its subject, and you are perhaps deeply occupied in a train of seri-

ous meditation. Here the process of reading is performed without interruption, and with the most punctual accuracy; and, at the same time, the process of meditation is carried on without distraction or fatigue.”<sup>12</sup> Hamilton foreshadowed the influential theories of selective attention that were developed a century later.

- *Automaticity of thought.* The nineteenth-century theorists argued that thinking can become so habitual as to occur outside of awareness with no conscious attention, an idea that was not formally developed in psychology until the 1970s. William Carpenter, for example, noted that “The more thoroughly . . . we examine into what may be termed the Mechanism of Thought, the more clear does it become that not only an *automatic*, but an *unconscious* action enters largely into all its processes.”<sup>13</sup>
- *Implications of nonconscious processing for prejudice.* One of the most interesting properties of the adaptive unconscious is that it uses stereotypes to categorize and evaluate other people. William Carpenter presaged this work more than a century ago, by noting that people develop habitual “tendencies of thought” that are nonconscious and that these thought patterns can lead to “*unconscious* prejudices which we thus form, [that] are often stronger than the *conscious*; and they are the more dangerous, because we cannot knowingly guard against them.”<sup>14</sup>
- *Lack of awareness of one's own feelings.* A controversial claim about the adaptive unconscious is that it can produce feelings and preferences of which people are unaware. Carpenter argued that emotional reactions can occur outside of awareness until our attention is drawn to them: “Our feelings towards persons and objects may undergo most important changes, without our being in the least degree aware, until we have our attention directed to our own mental state, of the alteration which has taken place in them.”<sup>15</sup>
- *A nonconscious self.* Do central parts of our personalities reside out of view, such that we do not have access to important aspects of who we are? William Hamilton wrote extensively about the way in which habits acquired early in life become an indispensable part of one's