

*Piero Giordanetti,
Riccardo Pozzo, Marco Sgarbi (Eds.)*

KANT'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Kant's Philosophy of the Unconscious

Edited by

Piero Giordanetti · Riccardo Pozzo · Marco Sgarbi

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Introduction

Marco Sgarbi

In a recent publication on the history of the unconscious in the nineteenth-century German culture, Angus Nicholls and Martin Liebscher state that “Immanuel Kant arguably determined the way in which unconscious phenomena were understood in nineteenth-century German thought more than any other philosopher of the eighteenth century”.¹

The present volume aims to assess Kant’s account of the unconscious in its manifold aspects, and to discuss it from various perspectives: psychological, epistemological, anthropological, and moral. We aim to show Kant’s relevance for future discussions on the topic. Kant’s philosophy of the unconscious has for a long time been a neglected topic in Kant scholarship, especially in English language publications. In his *Transzendentaler Idealismus, romantische Naturphilosophie, Psychoanalyse*, Odo Marquard outlined some seminal ideas on the philosophy of the unconscious in the German intellectual *milieu*, but he limited his discussion mainly to the Romantic intellectual background and to their reception of Kant’s philosophy.² In *Vor Freud: Philosophiegeschichtliche Voraussetzungen der Psychoanalyse*, Wilhelm W. Hemecker dealt very briefly with Kant’s notion of the unconscious relating it with the Leibnizian standpoint on *petites perceptions*.³ The impact of the Leibnizian and Wolffian perspective on the philosophy of Enlightenment has been the subject of Hans Adler’s investigation on Johann Gottfried Herder’s philosophy,⁴ but no parallel researches have been devoted so meticulously to Kant’s philosophy. In *Kant and the Mind*, Andrew Brook, who is a worldwide expert on Kant and Freud, gives some insightful remarks on Kant’s theory of the unconscious beginning from the Kantian conception of con-

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- 1 Angus Nicholls and Martin Liebscher, *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.
 - 2 Odo Marquard, *Transzendentaler Idealismus, romantische Naturphilosophie, Psychoanalyse* (Köln: Dinter, 1987).
 - 3 Wilhelm W. Hemecker, *Vor Freud: Philosophiegeschichtliche Voraussetzungen der Psychoanalyse* (Wien: Philosophia 1991).
 - 4 Hans Adler, *Die Präganz des Dunklen. Gnoseologie–Ästhetik–Geschichtsphilosophie bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990).

consciousness and self-awareness.⁵ In 2005, two important works on the unconscious came out. Micheal B. Buchholz and Günter Götde edited three volumes on the pre-history of the notion of the “unconscious” from the early modern philosophy, which first and foremost addressed medical and psychoanalytical issues only.⁶ Elke Völmicke, in *Das Unbewußte im deutschen Idealismus*, suggested the relevance of Kant’s problematic conception of the unconscious for the post-Kantian scholars such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schelling, but without a careful examination the Kantian position.⁷ Recently, the most important investigation on the unconscious in a broad sense has been carried out by Robert Hanna focusing on the “non-conceptual”.⁸ The notion of the “unconscious” still remains a stumbling block of the Kantian scholarship, probably because Kant himself leaves undetermined and unthematized his very idea of it.

If we look at the dictionaries on the Kantian philosophy,⁹ just two of them present an entry on the unconscious, which in addition both narrow

5 Andrew Brook, *Kant and the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 46–68.

6 Micheal B. Buchholz and Günter Götde (eds.), *Das Unbewusste*. 3. Vol. (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005–2006).

7 Elke Völmicke, *Das Unbewußte in deutschen Idealismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005).

8 Robert Hanna, “Kant and Nonconceptual Content,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 247–290; Robert Hanna, “Kantian Non-Conceptualism,” *Philosophical Studies* 137 (2008): 41–64; Robert Hanna and Monima Chanda, “Non-Conceptualism and the Problem of Perceptual Self Knowledge,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2010); Robert Hanna, “Kant’s Non-Conceptualism, Rogue Objects, and the Gap in the B Deduction,” in Robson Ramos dos Reis and Andréa Faggion (eds.), *Um Filósofo e a Multiplicidade de Dizeres* (Campinas: CLE, 2010), 335–354.

9 These dictionaries have not an entry on the “unconscious”: Carl C. E. Schmid, *Wörterbuch zum leichtern Gebrauch der Kantischen Schriften* (Jena: Erdkerchen, 1788); Samuel Heinicke, *Wörterbuch zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft und zu den philosophischen Schriften von Herrn Kant* (Perssburg: Malher, 1788); Karl H. Heydenreich, *Propaedeutick der Moralphilosophie nach Grundsätzen der reinen Vernunft* (Leipzig: Weygandschen, 1794); Georg S. A. Mellin, *Encyclopädisches Wörterbuch der kritischen Philosophie* (Leipzig: Frommann, 1797–1804); Georg Wegner, *Kantlexikon: Ein Handbuch für Freunde der Kant’schen philosophie* (Berlin: Wiegandt, 1893); Thorsten Roelcke, *Die Terminologie der Erkenntnisvermögen. Wörterbuch und lexikosemantische Untersuchung zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1989); Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), Helmut Holzhey and Vilem

the question to the topic of the obscure representations.¹⁰ But is Kant's philosophy of the unconscious restricted only to the problem of obscure representation? Did Kant address the "unconscious" not also in other ways? Does it or does it not have a prominent position in Kant's philosophical system?

The purpose of the present volume is to fill a substantial gap in Kant research while offering a comprehensive survey of the topic in different areas of investigation, such as history of philosophy, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, moral philosophy, and anthropology. The essays collected in the volume show that the unconscious raises relevant problems for instance in the theory of knowledge, as non-conceptual contents and obscure representations (Kitcher, Heidemann). In the philosophy of mind, it bears on the topic of the unity of the consciousness and the notion of the transcendental self (Crone, Schulting). It is a key-topic of logic with respect to the distinction between determinate-indeterminate judgments (Lee), and to mental activity (Duque, Rockmore). In aesthetics, the problem of the unconscious appears in connection with the problems of reflective judgments and of the genius (Otabe, Giordanetti). Finally, it is a relevant issue also in anthropology and moral philosophy in defining the irrational aspects of the human being (Pollock, Sánchez Madrid, Tuppini).

Murdoch, *Historical Dictionary of Kant and Kantianism* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2005).

10 Heiner Ratke, *Systematisches Handlexikon zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, (Hamburg: Meiner, 1929), 258; Rudolf Eisler, *Kant Lexicon, Nachschalgewerk zu Kants sämtlichen Schriften Briefen und handschriftlichem Nachlaß* (Berlin: Mittler, 1930), 549–550.

Kant's Unconscious "Given"

Patricia Kitcher

The main doctrines of Kant's epistemological theory are well-known: Cognition requires both intuitions and concepts; it requires both *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements; it is empirically real, yet transcendently ideal. Oddly, however, none of these well-known claims can be fully appreciated without also understanding his view that cognition requires unconscious representations. In the next three sections, I try to clarify the role of unconscious representations in Kant's theory by contrasting his reasons for assuming such representations with those of his predecessors, in particular, with Leibniz's arguments for *petites perceptions*, and by filling in the sparse account of unconscious representations in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by drawing on some of his unpublished notes and lectures. This material will show the direct link between his hypothesis of unconscious representations and his doctrines that cognition requires intuitions and *a posteriori* elements, and is empirically real.

In *Mind and World*, John McDowell argues that Kant's transcendental epistemology makes unacceptable use of the "Given",¹ because it has an isolable contribution from sensibility, namely the susceptibility of receptivity "to the impact of a supersensible reality, a reality that is supposed to be independent of our conceptual activity." (1994, 41)

McDowell's criticism rests on the widespread assumption that, for Kant, cognition must begin with noumenal "affection." In section 5, I argue that, despite solid textual evidence for this attribution, Kant's ultimate defense of the necessity of introducing *noumena* is not that empirical cognition must be grounded in noumenal objects affecting a noumenal self. The considerations raised in sections 2 and 3 lay out the distinctively Kantian reasons for maintaining that human cognition can only begin with the receipt of unconscious representations. In section 6, I show

1 McDowell (2008) revises this estimation. There he suggests, in essence, that Kantian intuitions provide a model for a non-objectionable given. As I argue in section 5, however, intuitions can play their role in Kant's empirical realist epistemology only because they depend on materials given in unconscious sensations.

that his theory of an unconscious given opens up a sound middle way between the myth of the Given and the myth that there is no isolable sensory contribution to cognition—but a way that is available only to those who are willing to follow other doctrines of transcendental idealism.

Why Assume Unconscious Representations?

In prefatory remarks to the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz presented a classic, if not entirely satisfactory, argument for the existence of unconscious perceptions. When a person is aware of the roar of the ocean, he is not conscious of (cannot distinguish) the sounds of the individual waves. Yet he must be aware of the sounds of the individual waves in some sense or he would not hear the combination of these sounds as a roar (Leibniz 1765/1982, 54). Hence

[e]very moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflection ... of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own. But when they are combined with others they do nevertheless have their effect and make themselves felt, at least confusedly, within the whole. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 53)

Perhaps, however, each ocean wave does not make a sound, but contributes to a large sound-wave, which is then propagated to the hearer.² Leaving this problem aside, it is natural to read Leibniz's preface as setting the stage for one of main controversies in the ensuing "dialogue," Philalethes's and Theophilus's debate over the existence of innate principles.

In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke had taken up the Cartesian challenge of providing an empirical basis for ideas claimed to be innate. With the ancient debate about nativism rejoined, Leibniz offered a critique of Locke's rejection of innate ideas and principles in the *New Essays*. Leibniz (in the persona of Theophilus) argued that since the principles of logic and mathematics were necessarily true, they could not be established by experience (Leibniz 1765/1982, 50, 86, 80). He countered Locke's preemptive rebuttal (delivered by Philalethes), that principles such as "everything that is, is" could not be innate, because they were unknown to children (Leibniz 1765/1982, 76), with the hypothesis that the minds of cognizers have many principles of which they were not immediately conscious (Leibniz 1765/1982, 76). Thus, they know the principles,

² I owe this objection to Philip Kitcher.

but not explicitly; they cannot articulate them. Again, Locke had considered this move and dismissed it as incoherent:

It seeming to me near a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, which it perceives or understands not: imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else but the making of certain truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible. (ECHU 1:1:5)

Leibniz/Theophilus replies that there is another possibility:

Why couldn't the soul ... contain things without one's being aware of them? ... Must a self-knowing subject have, straight away, actual knowledge of everything that belongs to its nature? ... [and] [o]n any view of the matter, it is always manifest in every state of the soul that necessary truths are innate, and that they are proved by what lies within, and cannot be established by experience as truths of fact are. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 78–79)

At this point, Leibniz has Philalethes make the obvious reply on behalf of Locke. Knowledge of any truth must be subsequent to possession of the ideas from which it arises, and all ideas come from experience. Theophilus then notes that the ideas that are contained in necessary truths are intelligible (meaning presumably, that their elements are clear and distinct), whereas any idea that comes in from the senses is confused (Leibniz 1765/1982, 81).

The reply seems somewhat off the mark. The possibility of principles of which the possessor is unaware raises the specter of unconscious ideas, though it does not require it. Explaining that thinkers have clear and distinct intellectual ideas—of which they are conscious—exacerbates, rather than lessens, the problem of innate, but unknown principles. If cognizers have a clear conscious grasp of the ideas “from which they [the principles] arise” (Leibniz 1765/1982, 81), then why are they not also cognizant of the principles?

Philalethes returns to the issue, observing that the ideas in which innate principles are couched are so general and abstract as to be alien to ordinary minds (Leibniz 1765/1982, 83). Leibniz/Theophilus replies that general principles are nevertheless in all thinking,

General principles enter into our thoughts, serving as their inner core and as their mortar. Even if we give no thought to them, they are necessary for thought, as the muscles and tendons are necessary for walking. The mind relies on these principles constantly; but it does not find it so easy to sort them out and to command a distinct view of each of them separately, for that requires a great attention to what it is doing, and the unreflective majority are highly capable of that. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 83–84)

This reply also seems somewhat askew. Philalethes complains that general ideas are “alien” to the ordinary person, that is, the ordinary person is unfamiliar with them, unaware of them. Theophilus replies that the innate principles are necessary for thinking.

Although Theophilus allows that innate principles are not known by children, he is less concessive about uneducated adults. He thinks that principles such as non-contradiction are known implicitly by laypeople. People constantly use the principle, when, for example, determining that someone is lying. And when presented with the principle, they immediately assent (Leibniz 1765/1982, 76). Leibniz’s hypothesis is that just as reasoners use enthymematic premises in spoken and internal argumentation, laypeople make tacit use of the principle of non-contradiction in reaching their judgments (Leibniz 1765/1982, 76). To support the claim that people make constant use of implicit principles, he invokes the standard test of acceptance upon first hearing.

In a sense, Leibniz’s argument for innate and so unconscious principles runs parallel to his argument for unconscious perceptions of the sound of each wave: It is possible to make sense of conscious mental states—hearing the roar or judging someone to be a liar—only on the assumption of that these depend on perceptions or principles that are unconscious. As we have seen, however, the hypothesis that innate principles and their constitutive concepts are unconscious does not fit very well with his view of the relevant concepts. He regards those concepts not as confused, but as intelligible—indeed as far clearer than sensory perceptions. They would not be at all like his parade case of unconscious perceptions: the minute, numerous, and easily confused sounds of individual waves. Hence I think that Leibniz’s prefatory example is not intended to pave the way for an acceptance of innate principles. He does not and need not rely on the existence of unconscious perceptions in this case, because he has two knockdown arguments for such principles—the principles are in constant use and, as necessary and universal, they could not be acquired from experience. Further, since they are recognized on first hearing, it is not much of a stretch to see them as known implicitly.

If not the argument about innate principles, then what is the famous discussion of the roar of the ocean intended to presage? Since Leibniz appeals to minute, indistinguishable perceptions in his discussion of the metaphysics of personal identity, that seems a likely candidate. Leibniz/Theophilus introduces Locke’s familiar view that personal identity is secured by continuity of consciousness or memory and immediately endorses it:

I am also of the opinion that consciousness or perception of the ego proves a moral or personal identity. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 236)

Leibniz's support for the memory criterion is unsurprising, since he had advocated it himself in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, published four years before Locke's *Essay* (*Discourse* §34, Loemker, 1969, 325).

But the agreement on the importance of memory to moral identity masks a deep metaphysical disagreement between Locke and Leibniz. For Leibniz, the moral identity must rest on real substantial identity:

[he] should have thought that, according to the order of things, an identity which is apparent to the person concerned—one who senses himself to be the same—presupposes a real identity obtaining through each immediate [temporal] transition accompanied by reflection, or by the sense of *I*. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 236)

The transitions in question are from one conscious perception to another. Leibniz holds our consciousness of such transitions to be indubitable. Such consciousness cannot, in the natural order of things (i. e. without Divine intervention), be mistaken (Leibniz 1765/1982, 236). In a slightly later, discussion, however, he suggests that the real bond across the states of an individual rests on unconscious perceptions. In considering whether a spirit could lose all perceptions of past existence, Theophilus demurs:

[A] spirit retains impressions of everything which has previously happened to it ... but these states of mind are mostly too minute to be distinguishable and for one to be aware of them ... It is this continuity and interconnection of perceptions which make someone really the same individual. (Leibniz 1765/1982, 239)

That is, self-identity is carried by the train of "petites perceptions."

This doctrine is clear in the *Monadology* as well as in the *New Essays*. After explaining, in effect, how Monads could be substances—because they perdure through change understood as changes in their perceptions—he preemptively rebuts the obvious criticism that rocks, and so forth, do not have perceptions:

Monadology § 20. For we experience in ourselves a condition in which we remember nothing and have no distinguishable perception; as when we fall into a swoon or when we are overcome with a profound dreamless sleep. In this state the soul does not perceptibly differ from a bare Monad; but as this state is not lasting, and the soul comes out of it, the soul is something more than a bare Monad.

Monadology §21. And it does not follow that in this state the simple substance is without any perception. That, indeed, cannot be, for the reasons already given; for it cannot perish, and it cannot continue to exist without

being affected in some way, and this affection is nothing but its perception ...

Monadology §22. And as every present state of a simple substance is naturally a consequence of its preceding state, in such a way that its present is big with its future.

Monadology §23. And as, on waking from stupor, we are conscious of our perceptions, we must have had perceptions immediately before we awoke, although we were not at all conscious of them; for one perception can in a natural way come only from another perception, as a motion can in a natural way come only from a motion. (Loemker, 1969, 645)

What is interesting about the reasoning of the *Monadology* is that it is exclusively metaphysical. Leibniz does not press the necessity of assuming *petites perceptions* in order to explain conscious cognitions, but in order to avoid gappy substances. If all perceptions had to be conscious, then his Monads would be liable to the same objection as Descartes' souls whose fundamental attribute was (conscious) thought: They would be annihilated by bouts of unconsciousness, including dreamless sleep. Leibniz turns this objection on its head and claims that waking from a stupor establishes the existence of unconscious perceptions in souls—on the further metaphysical assumption that perceptions can arise only from other perceptions. But if unconscious perceptions must be assumed in this case, they must be possible and so could also exist in soulless Monads.

Kant then was aware of Leibniz's claims in the *Monadology*, since he criticized one of them³ in one of his earliest writings, the *Nova Dilucidatio* of 1755. That Leibniz's theory of self-identity rested on the assumption of *petites perceptions* also seems to have been generally accepted at the time. Johan Nicolaus Tetens catalogued and synthesized many then contemporary psychological and philosophical theories in his *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur and ihre Entwicklung* of 1777. Tetens attributes this view to Leibniz without explanation or argument: "The foundation and basis of the soul consists, as Leibniz said, in unperceived representations." (1777/1979, vol. I: 265)

Since Kant's reading of Tetens's *Versuche*⁴ has been well-documented, it is clear that he would have been aware of the metaphysical charac-

3 The thesis he criticizes is that a Monad can change from having one perception to having another through the work of an inner principle (1.411).

4 The oft-recounted story from Hamann is that Tetens's book lay open on Kant's desk as he wrote the *Critique*. See Bona-Meyer (1870, 56). Kant also reports his reading of Tetens in a letter to Marcus Herz of April 1778 (10.232).

ter of Leibniz's support for *petites perceptions* both first-hand and as a matter of common knowledge.

Although Leibniz's striking hypothesis of a teeming unconscious was bound up with Monad metaphysics, other contributors to the debate offered epistemological arguments. For example, in "An Essay On the Origin of Knowledge," the French Sensationist, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1746/1987, 445) considered several phenomena that illustrated the problem of insensible or unreportable perceptions. In reading, the subject is aware of the sense, but not of the shapes of the letters. Condillac maintained that subjects must have been conscious of these shapes, because their conduct, reading, proved that they were. On his view, consciousness could sometimes be so superficial that it left no memory trace. Some of Kant's remarks indicate that he was aware of a position very like Condillac's. In "Negative Magnitudes" (1763), he exclaimed:

But also what admirable bustle is concealed in the depths of our minds, which we fail to notice as it is exercised ... and that because the actions are very many and because each is represented only very obscurely. The good proofs of this are known to all; among these one only needs to consider the actions which take place unnoticed within us when we read.⁵ (2. 191)⁶

Condillac's countryman, the naturalist Charles Bonnet, argued for a different view in the *Essai de Psychologie* (1755/1978). Bonnet starts with scientific assumption that the mind or brain is barraged by sensory information. It is an assumption also made by Hume when he noted that all we need to do is turn our heads to be confronted with an "inconceivably rapid" succession of perceptions (1739/1978, 252–53). Since the brain can only be in one state at a time, Bonnet thought it more reasonable

5 Kant's view seems to be somewhat different from Condillac's, since he focuses on the unconscious acts of perceiving the letters, rather than on the unconscious perceptions of the letters.

6 References to Kant's works, other than the *Critique of Pure Reason*, will be to Kant 1900—and will be cited in the text by giving volume and page numbers from that edition. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be in the text, with the usual 'A' and 'B' indications of editions. In providing English translations, I usually rely on Pluhar (Kant 1996), but I also use Kemp Smith (Kant 1968), and Guyer and Wood (Kant 1998) at points. I do not, however, follow Pluhar rendering '*Vorstellung*' as 'presentation,' but use the more standard 'representation.' When I alter a translation beyond rendering '*Vorstellung*' as 'representation,' I indicate that the translation is amended. In all citations I follow the suggestion of Guyer and Wood and indicate Kant's emphasis with bold-face type. When citing Kant's literary remains, I follow standard practice and cite the R (for *Reflexion*) number assigned by the editors of the Academy edition.

to assume that, when many stimuli come at once, the result is an impression that is a composite in which the different stimuli are weighted according to their intensity. That is, it is not that each perception is conscious for a flash, but then unrecalable. Rather, under these circumstances, the brain cannot represent the perceptions as distinct from one another (1755/1978, 113).

Christian Wolff, who is often taken to be a follower or even a systematizer of Leibniz's philosophy, tacitly invoked unconscious perceptions in a somewhat different epistemological debate. He began *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, Der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen Überhaupt* (1751/1983), the so-called 'German Metaphysics', with an apparent endorsement of Descartes' claim for the epistemological priority of the *cogito*:

No one can doubt that he is conscious of himself and other things; For, how can he deny to me or bring into doubt if he is not conscious of himself or other things? ... Whoever is conscious of the one, which he denies or brings into doubt, is the same as that one (1751/1983, 1).

In fact, he is criticizing Descartes' priority claim, as a later passage makes clear:

This difference [between ourselves and other things] appears directly as we are conscious of other things. For should we be conscious of that which we cognize through the senses, we must recognize the difference between that thing and others ... This differentiation is an effect of the soul, and we cognize therefore through it the difference between the soul and the things that are represented (1751/1983, 455–56).

That is, cognitive subjects can be conscious of themselves as such only through differentiating objects of consciousness. On Leibniz's view, not all perceptions were conscious or apperceived. Apperceiving takes some effort, perhaps like the effort of attending. In that case, however, self-consciousness could not precede consciousness of some object of consciousness, because the self as differentiator, must itself be differentiated from the things it differentiates.

Besides this indirect argument for unconscious perceptions, perceptions that must be present to be differentiated, thus allowing object and self consciousness, Wolff also provides a telling example in support of assuming them. A person might see something white in a far-off field without knowing what he is seeing, because he cannot separate one part from another [even though he must see the parts to see the white patch].