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The Contemporaneity of the Unconscious: Interview with John Gale

John Gale is the president of the International Network of Psychoanalytic Practices (INPP) and an editor of the online journal *Vestigia*. A former Benedictine monk, he taught philosophy and patristics before leaving the priesthood. He was the director of a number of organisations in the field of therapeutic communities specializing in the treatment of psychosis, and of traumatized ex-soldiers who had become homeless. He was a board member of ISPS (UK). He has edited several books and is the author of many scholarly articles at the interface of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and spirituality.

Can you describe the idea of unconscious which is closest to your theoretical conception?

In thinking about the unconscious, Freud remapped old terrain. He was, however, notoriously inattentive to what is meant by the term conscious (Ernst Turgendhat discusses this in some detail) with which it is bound up. Freud's formulations have often been interpreted in reductionist terms and Lacan saw a way forward by noticing that Freud was doing his work within language: both in speech (in the clinic) and in writing. He came to understanding the unconscious itself linguistically, describing it as a discourse. I regard this as essentially correct. And I would call the idea of the unconscious a necessarily inadequate yet important metaphor aimed at trying to grasp something fundamental regarding the ambiguity of man; his complexity and inconsistencies. In other words, it is primarily concerned with the tension inherent in being-in-the-world, to use Heidegger's idiom, in which forms of exteriority (to which asceticism belongs) and inwardness (*the?ria* being its most extreme expression perhaps) are simultaneously present. As such, it is partly concerned with self-understanding and, in fact, with the way in which we come to understand in general (epistemology). With this in mind, I use the term rather loosely in a number of overlapping ways to describe: (1) That which is fully present in the subject's way of life, thought and feelings yet concealed from his current self-understanding. (2) All experience that is forgotten, hidden, not integrated or excluded (repressed). However, here it is important to say that the notion of repression is itself is a figure of speech, as the unconscious is not in a literal sense a 'place' into which experiences, ideas or representations can be despatched. (3) That which is not made explicit in speech. (4) As the subject's memory, not in the sense of a storeroom but more like the dynamic sense in which Augustine describes *memoria* as a radical reflexivity that characterises inwardness. This introduces the question of time into the topic and here I find Heidegger's notion of the ecstatic, which is not so dissimilar from Augustine's view, more helpful than Freud. (5) Thinking historically in the sense that the subject's history always unfolds within the limits and restrictions of the world in which he finds himself and in relation to those others with whom his life is inextricably entwined. This means that it is grounded in the other. That is to say, the *unconscious* is a kind of absence which is inescapably bound up with historical events and other people. History being not just what happened but how the subject understands what happened; his present way of looking back and making sense of the past. The meaning of the past never being entirely stable or 'finished'. (6) As a principle that discloses the

uniquely singular nature of the subject (*haecceitas*). (7) As a way of describing an otherness at the core of the sphere of interiority.

On the other hand, what is the theoretical conception of the unconscious which is farthest from it? And why?

The theoretical conception of the unconscious which is farthest from my view would be one that objectifies and reifies the unconscious by considering: (1) That the unconscious is a pre-established or self-enclosed interiority or inner human nature “inside” the subject. (2) That it is a “thing” belonging to an individual, inside of which compulsive libidinal drives or impulses operate. (3) That it is an individual’s biological self or a set of instincts. Aligned to this is the idea that repression is a semi-hydraulic process inside a pseudo-material machine called the mind or psyche. Underlying these misconceptions is the notion that behaviour is an outward appearance of an inner reality; a sign of something else. These simple ways of understanding Freud’s topographical picture seem to me inadequate and unacceptably mechanistic and reductive.

What do you think is the relation between the unconscious processes or the unconscious *tout court* and the conscious? Can you describe it?

This is a highly complex question I think. But I would say that consciousness is consciousness of something. In this sense, it is a kind of knowledge. Talk of the unconscious easily falls prey to dualism between inner and outer, depth and surface. Rather than being distinct, consciousness and unconsciousness must, in my view, be seen as different views of the subject. The inexplicit is always resistant to illumination or interpretation (Augustine) but we always ‘say’ more than we intend. For example, in the way we speak as much as in what we say, in the way we live, in how we feel, in jokes and so on. The unconscious is always being articulated. In this way the unconscious is present.

In the last years of your career have you modified and/or integrated your idea of the unconscious? And through which specific contributions?

I think I have gradually changed my view through my reading of the philosophical background on consciousness (particularly Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein) and the psychoanalytic literature on the unconscious (Freud, Klein, Ricoeur, Lacan). At different times I have felt influenced by a particular author or school of thought. Recent authors I found especially illuminating were Dany Nobus, Sergio Benvenuto, Vered Lev Kanaan, and Don Carveth. But also, I think my view has changed through reflection on the course of my own life and through my reading in general including, importantly, reading novels and wider philosophy (Pierre Hadot, Michel de Certeau, Foucault, Derrida). In terms of psychoanalysis Lacan has interested me greatly, though I cannot claim to fully understand his thought. I have become more and more aware that psychoanalytic thinking reveals what is uncertain, ambiguous and unresolved in one’s life.

Thinking from a clinical perspective, what does it mean having to deal with the unconscious of the patient in the psychotherapeutic process?

I should preface this by saying it is many years since I worked clinically and even then it was with very specific types of patients. But very generally, I think it means being aware of a certain absence. Not so much as something entirely not there. But as something out of reach in the way subject lives, in his life choices and in the things that happen to him that he does not seem to choose. Or not fully choose. In the way his life

seems to have gone, particularly repetitive patterns. And in what he says. The things he has forgotten happened or were thought.

And finally, do you think that there are some conceptions of the unconscious that, even if you do not agree with, are however useful from a clinical perspective? And why?

Yes, I think any notion of the unconscious is probably better than none at all. Because without some sense of the unconscious, the clinician would have to take the subject at face value (whether truthful or deceitful), rather than at odds with who they think they are. Without some sense that the subject is more than his/her ego, the clinician might struggle to hang on to the subject's inconsistencies.

Bios:

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