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Introduction

Occasionally, a concept is expounded that captures the imagination and becomes the topic of many debates. The human unconscious is one such topic. It is often a point of controversy among Christian counselors. Therefore, it is necessary to unravel some of the mystery surrounding the unconscious, since in neglecting it we may be turning a blind eye to something vital to our work with broken people.

The purpose of this writing is to take a closer look at the unconscious and why it is important to the Christian counselor. First, I will examine why some Christians have a negative view of Freud and psychology, since this is often a basis for rejecting the concept of the unconscious. Next, I will survey some definitions of the unconscious to get a clearer picture of what it is thought to be. Third, I will look at why the unconscious is viewed negatively by some leading Christians. I will also peruse the Scriptures to determine if there are any references to the unconscious. Finally, I will offer some integrative applications from the perspective of a Christian psychologist-in-training. Although this writing is a only a brief review of the unconscious, I trust it will serve to stimulate intelligent discussion among Christian counselors.

Christianity, Freud, and Psychology

Some Christians pointedly reject all psychology and go so far as to call it “leaven” (Bobgan & Bobgan, 1987) and a “seductive influence” (Hunt & McMahon, 1985) foisted upon an unsuspecting Christian community. These opinions are likely due to the perception that psychology as a discipline has become "a science without a soul" (Vande Kemp, 1982, p. 205). Vande Kemp was referring to the position held by many secular psychologists that

psychology and the mind are simply functions of the brain, while any suggestion of an eternal aspect to the human person is scoffed at. Psychologists often ignore the possibility of spiritual forces outside the person that may be influencing thoughts and behaviors.

White (1953) believed there is a natural competitiveness between religion and psychology. He said it is risky business to admit “the psychotherapist into the holy precincts of religion” and to lure “the pastor of souls away from the security of his textbook lore to face the realities of the human psyche in the raw” (p. 63). This kind of dichotomy is explained in various ways. Carl Jung (1938), for example, said that religions teach of an immortal soul instead of a psyche because of the threat of eternal damnation. But it was Sigmund Freud who widened the rift between religion and psychology to the degree that some Christians consider them to be unbridgeable disciplines.

Freud viewed religion as a form of neurosis that afflicts humankind (Freud, 1961). He believed religious ceremonies are a way to reduce anxiety, and he considered religion to be a universal form of neurosis that also serves to protect civilization from the destructive forces that reside within all of us. Opinions like these have caused Freud to be viewed as anti-religious and anti-Christian. But contemporary psychology and its own anti-religious bias may have shaded this narrow opinion of the man who has tremendously altered the way we see ourselves. Vitz (1988) wondered if secular psychology has selectively quoted Freud to impose its views on the public. He claimed that "Freud was deeply ambivalent about Christianity... he had a strong, life-long, positive identification with and attraction to Christianity" (pp. 2-3). Freud struggled with his own Jewish roots and the anti-Semitic flavor of historic Christianity.

Definition

Since it was Freud who popularized the concept of the unconscious, it is only appropriate to begin with his conceptualization. "The concept of a memory that exists and does not exist at the same time presented the challenge to formal logic that led to Freud's ultimate formulation of the unconscious" (Foster, Moskowitz, & Javier, 1996, p. 48). Hypnosis, dreams, jokes, and so-called slips-of-the-tongue are all evidence of the unconscious at work. Repression, a concept essential to understanding the unconscious, occurs when desires and experiences that are incompatible with one's beliefs and personality are pushed out of conscious thought, but they are never lost. Psychic energy is required to keep unconscious material out of awareness. The release of this energy is known as "catharsis." Without catharsis, there remains a struggle within the psyche that manifests as physical symptoms, dreams, and psychological problems. Freud believed acknowledging that there is conscious as well as unconscious content within the psyche is the basic principle that makes it possible to understand and treat mental illness. This includes many of the problems brought into the counselor's office such as depression, anxiety, addictions, and relational problems.

There are many others who believe in the unconscious but who do not espouse Freud's ideas. Mangis (1994) said all of life's experiences are contained in the unconscious, not just unwanted negative information. Some cognitive theorists (Safran & Segal, 1990) believed the emotions that accompany a traumatic experience cause our brains to process information inefficiently, making them difficult to recall. Neurobiological scientists surmise that experiences occurring before we are able to talk are processed at a deep pre-verbal level (Marcus, 1997). Early childhood experiences provide the foundation for our self-concept and the filter through which we continue to see our world. Newer experiences are layered upon

older ones, burying them but never eradicating them or their influence (Joseph, 1992). Even medical doctors will listen carefully to a patient's description of their problems to get an indication of the underlying issues behind their symptoms (Gabbard, 1994).

What's the Big Deal?

One key issue that sets Christian critics like Jay Adams (1970) so strongly against the concept of the unconscious is the assumption that the presumed existence of such a domain automatically absolves people from acting as responsible agents of choice who are accountable before God and their fellow man. They fear that if we believe in the reality of the unconscious, we lower humans to a position less than bearers of God's image. Bobgan and Bobgan also had strong opinions on the matter: "The whole scheme of the unconscious is a fantasy within a fantasy and a lie within a lie" (1979, p.78). These authors viewed Freud's theories as a web of deception and Freud himself as the master weaver. However, Christians should be cautious not to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. Freud's insights into the human psyche can provide us with valuable information for ministering to hurting people even though some of his opinions may be offensive. For a more objective view of Freud's religious opinions, one would benefit from reading authors such as Paul Vitz and Thomas Szasz.

Searching the Scriptures

A Christian appraisal of the unconscious would be incomplete without an examination of the Bible to determine if the existence of the unconscious is congruent with the teachings of Scripture. The following are observations from some choice passages to whet the appetite.

The words "conscious" and "unconscious" are not recorded in the King James Version. But the Bible does have much to say about the "heart" of man. Vine (1952) said the heart

stands "for man's entire mental and moral activity...the heart is used figuratively for the hidden springs of the personal life" (pp. 206-207). Jesus declared that numerous evil thoughts and behaviors originated in the heart (Mark 7:20-23). Jeremiah 17:9 spoke of the heart as "deceitful and desperately wicked" (one can only ponder where this source of deceit comes from). Psalm 64:6 declares: "Both the inward thought and the heart of man are deep." This would suggest that there is more to a person's mental life than that which appears on the surface. David cried out to God for Him search his heart (Psalm 139) and then to lead him in the way of righteousness. There is an implicit suggestion here that David himself was not capable of knowing all that was in his heart, so he needed God to reveal it to him. The Apostle Paul looked forward to his eternal existence when, with perfect understanding, he would know himself in the same way God knows him (I Cor. 13:12). Obviously, God has knowledge about us that we do not currently possess.

There is an interesting passage in the Book of Acts where Paul approached the Grecian Areopagus and noticed they had an inscription "to the unknown god" (17:23). These philosophers had knowledge of which they were not consciously aware. An explanation for how this could occur is found in Romans chapter 1, where we are told that those who once had knowledge of God made a decision not to acknowledge Him. They practiced their evil deeds and chose to "suppress the truth." Maier (1996) noted that this act of suppression, or holding down, was a process that occurs inside the person. He correlated biblical suppression with Freud's concept of repression.

The most revealing passage of Scripture where it is evident that there lurks within the human person a struggle of forces vying for control is found in Romans 7:15-20:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I

do...As it is, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it but sin living in me that does it.

This is a classic example of the battle between the old nature and the new nature. But where does this evil force called "sin" reside? Could it not be that which makes up part of the unconscious within the human psyche? Paul was obviously frustrated over his inability to conquer the power of the controlling force of evil within. This could be akin to unconscious processes influencing one to behave in ways he does not understand nor desires. Paul was not expounding a doctrine of the unconscious, but rather he exposed the struggle between the opposing forces of God and the power of indwelling sin. The unconscious very well may be one element of the bastard of sin that infests the whole human race.

Application

It has been my intention to present Christian counselors with information to facilitate faith-based and intelligent decisions regarding the unconscious. It is true, as Frankl suggested, that Freud "denigrated the unconscious in that he saw in it only the instinctual and overlooked the spiritual" (1975, p.27). But this is not justification for denying the existence of the unconscious. To simply withdraw from any acknowledgment of the unconscious has the potential of spiritual suicide (Ulanov & Ulanov, 1975). Man is not only threatened by external forces, but also by an onslaught from within. We would do well to hear Tillich's chastisement of Protestant Christianity for its disregard of the unconscious in putting forth a theology of the human personality, because our theology could benefit greatly from a deeper psychology that considers motivations beyond the obvious (Walters, 1973).

Freud's view of the unconscious is not unlike the doctrine of human depravity espoused by many Christians worldwide. Instead of the unconscious giving us a license to do as we please, its manifestations drive us to seek assistance. We are naïve to think that people are always aware of their motivations or can remember everything from the past. Insight requires some objectivity facilitated by a trained outsider. The process by which we attempt to bring to light the hidden parts of the psyche includes getting beyond appearances. unconscious material surfaces in the context of a trusting therapeutic relationship where clients feel comfortable to talk freely about their lives and their problems. The things they say often surprise clients, and the insights they glean through such experiences can be therapeutic.

If the unconscious does exist, both the Christian and the unbeliever are greatly influenced by its presence. This has tremendous implications for Christian counselors. The Christian's unconscious influences his vital life processes, as does the Holy Spirit. The Spirit acting at the conscious level is an intellectual endeavor, but His workings at the unconscious level can be a truly spiritual experience, guiding him in ways he cannot explain. For the non-Christian, deliverance from the destructive forces of personal sin begins with an acknowledgement of the depravity within. Although we are certainly influenced by our environment and the people in our lives, we also bring into this world a predisposition for deceit. We are responsible agents created in God's image, but we are also sinners for whom only the truth will free from the bondage of sin.

As counselors, we journey with clients into the hidden places of their lives where painful life experiences and intense emotions often emerge. Allowing the unconscious to become conscious can be traumatic, and counselors are advised to be prepared beforehand how they

will deal with things never before acknowledged or realized by their clients. Overwhelming guilt can be the result, and it is often guilt that motivates repression in the first place. Even the most respected Christian is capable of the most dastardly thoughts and desires. This should not be surprising given the Bible's descriptions of the seething cauldron of depravity that resides within all of us. The truth about ourselves can drive us into the loving arms of the Savior. The Apostle Paul said we suppress the good and exchange it for falsehood. Freud said we repress the bad to our own detriment. Jesus spoke of the liberating effect of the truth. In the end, exposing the unconscious can be a vital first step on the journey toward wholeness.

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