The Unconscious without Freud

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Chapter One

Leibniz and the Unconscious

How far back in time must we travel to come upon the blossoming of the concept of unconscious mental functioning in the Western world? We must return to the early modern era, to the decades before and after 1700. In France, the Great "Sun King," Louis XIV, presided over the most powerful and glamorous court in the world. In England, the dour, German-speaking George I ruled reluctantly, angry at having had to leave his beloved Hanover. In the New World, Western civilization had achieved a bare toehold. New Amsterdam, with a population of around 3,000, had been forced to change its name to honor the Duke of York but it was still a Dutch town, with red-tiled, gabled roofs and windmills, huddled behind a wall.

In those years, the views of three great philosophers—one French, one English and another German—differed on a question that was fundamentally psychological: was thinking continuous? Was the mind engaged in uninterrupted conscious cogitation or was this activity sometimes suspended, for instance, during sleep? René Descartes believed that thought was continuous and conscious; John Locke insisted that it was conscious but discontinuous; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz suggested that it was continuous and *unconscious*.

Descartes (1596–1650) had assumed that all thinking must be conscious. Having asked himself whether there was anything at all of which he could be absolutely sure, anything which he could not doubt, he had decided that he could not doubt that he was thinking and, since he was thinking, he must necessarily exist: "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1911, Vol. I, 101). *Conscious* thinking was essential to the soul.

This formula created a problem, for if the soul is defined as a thing that thinks, what happens to it when it stops thinking, for instance, when it loses consciousness during sleep? If its very being consists of thinking, must we

then not suppose that it will cease to *be* when thinking stops? In that case we would have to imagine the soul as winking into and out of existence as we wake or sleep. Clearly this would not do.

Descartes was challenged on this point. He was asked how he could think during a deep, dreamless sleep or, for that matter, how the embryo in the womb could think? The embryo was assumed to be a soul, consequently, it must also be presumed to be engaged in continuous thought (Descartes, 1911, Vol. II, 141).

Descartes could have avoided at least the problem of thought during sleep if he had assumed that we dream continuously because dreaming is a form of consciousness. However, this option was not open to him because it was generally assumed that dreaming was not continuous. Therefore the question remained: does the soul think *between* dreams? Descartes' answer was ingenious: the soul always thinks but it does not *remember* what it thinks. Thought is continuous; it goes on even in a stupor, and in the embryo, but no memory traces of this thinking are "impressed on the brain" (1911, Vol. II, 211).

Descartes separated thought from the memory of thought. If you awaken and cannot remember what you were thinking a moment ago, this does not mean that you were not thinking a moment ago. You cannot remember what you were thinking last week either, but this does not signify that you were not thinking last week. Descartes pointed out that we do not remember most of the thoughts we have had, even those we entertained when we were grown up, in good health and awake (Descartes, 1911, Vol. II, 210).

England's John Locke (1632–1704) took a dim view of the proposition "that the soul thinks even in the soundest sleep, but the *memory* retains it not." He protested "That the soul in a sleeping man should be this moment busy a thinking, and the next moment in a waking man not remember nor be able to recollect one jot of all those thoughts, is very hard to be conceived" (1959, Vol. I, 132). He inveighed against the notion of unconscious thinking: Ideas "cease to be anything when there is no perception of them" but "the mind has a power . . . to revive perceptions." In the interim, although "our ideas are said to be in our memories . . . they are actually nowhere" (194). An idea that could not be perceived did not exist.

What did exist, according to Locke, were mental operations of which we were conscious: "*perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing*." These were acts which we could observe in ourselves (123). He noted that it is "hard to conceive that anything should think and not be conscious of it" (130). He pointed out an apparently insurmountable problem connected with the notion: if we assume that a person can think without being conscious of it, then we must suppose also that he or she can feel pleasure or pain, without being conscious of it, or be happy or miserable, without being conscious of it. This struck him as absurd and he remarked that

being "happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible" (130). With regard to thought occurring in sleep he asserted that "I do not say that there is no *soul* in a man, because he is not sensible of it in his sleep; but I do say, he cannot *think* at any time, waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Our being sensible of it is not necessary to anything but to our thoughts; and to them it is; and to them it always will be necessary, till we can think without being conscious of it" (129).

"Till we can think without being conscious of it"—Locke found it difficult to imagine such a thing. If the psychological "Copernican revolution" can be said to have had a beginning at any particular moment, then it occurred when Leibniz (1646–1716) framed his answer to Locke on this point, for he replied that "thought need not stop just because one is not aware of it" (1981, 113) and "there are hundreds of indications leading us to conclude that at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflections; that is, of alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware" (53). The soul is always thinking, according to Leibniz, and not thinking only, but also desiring and willing, even when we are asleep but this activity is going on outside of consciousness (192).

Leibniz's rejoinder to Locke did not consist of a mere assertion; he offered a scientific hypothesis, a theory supportable by evidence. Although the existence within us of thoughts "unaccompanied by awareness" could not be proven by observation, their presence could be inferred thanks to "hundreds of indications" (1981, 113) In the years to come, the postulate that the reality of unobservable mental states could be established by appropriate evidence would be a hallmark of Leibnizian psychological theory.

Appropriate evidence was available because unconscious thoughts could have effects; they could act as causes. To make this point, Leibniz turned to a dream whose unconscious source, a forgotten memory, could be identified with certainty. The dream was that of Julius Scaliger, an Italian savant of the previous century.

Scaliger had written a poem praising the eminent men of Verona. Afterward he dreamed that he was approached by a man who, identifying himself as "Brugnolus," complained that he had been unjustly left out of the eulogy, since he had been eminent and had lived in Verona. Awake, Scaliger could remember no "Brugnolus" but, on the authority of the dream, wrote an elegy in his honor nevertheless. At a later date, Scaliger's son, traveling in Italy, learned that not only had a person named "Brugnolus" really existed, but as he had claimed in the dream, he had been an eminent Veronese and ought indeed to have been included among the worthies who were lauded in the poem.

The Scaliger story refuted Locke's premise that ideas that were not conscious were "nowhere." Consciously, Scaliger had not remembered Brugnolus; he could not recall him, even after the dream reminder. Yet, obviously,

an unconscious memory of Brugnolus had been lodged in Scaliger's mind and had been responsible for his appearance in the dream.

What makes Leibniz's evidence for the existence of an unconscious dream source so compelling? Clearly, it is the indubitable relationship between the historical Brugnolus and the Brugnolus who appeared in the dream. An unconscious memory of Brugnolus *must* have been responsible for the production of the Brugnolus dream image. It appears therefore, that in some circumstances, the existence of a specific unconscious mental content can be established with certainty.

Leibniz commented that "it is very likely that Julius Scaliger had had some knowledge of Brugnol [*sic*] and no longer remembered it, and that his dream had in part consisted in reviving a former idea—although there had not occurred that 'remembering,' strictly so-called, which makes us know that we have had that same idea before. He commented "I think that dreams often revive former thoughts for us in this way" (106–7).

Another piece of evidence that Leibniz offered for the continued efficacy of unconscious memories was the case of a person who had written verses which he believed were original but which, it was discovered later, he had actually read "word for word, long before, in some ancient poet" (106). He had assumed that he was creating something new but, without being aware of it, he had been guided by a recollection.

Leibniz proposed that not only memories, but mental contents of all kinds—thoughts, emotions and desires—could continue to exert power outside of consciousness.

More than 200 years later, Freud described this hypothesis as an achievement of psychoanalysis. Depicting the philosophers of his day as tethered to the Lockean view, he maintained that they regarded an unconscious idea as "latent," and held that "so long as the idea was in a state of latency it was not anything psychical at all." Psychoanalysis, however, had been forced to recognize that ideas could be unconscious and yet could "produce all the effects" of conscious ideas (*S.E.*, XIX: 14).

Trusting in Freud, his followers believed that he had introduced a momentous concept: the active unconscious. Following his lead, they accepted that, before Freud, the unconscious had been regarded as purely inert, as *static.* The psychoanalytic dictionary, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, by J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, useful when it comes to exegesis of Freud's concepts, but routinely failing to take proper note of history, proclaimed simply that "psychoanalysis replaces a conception of the unconscious described as static with one which is dynamic" (126). Thus the unsuspecting reader is introduced to a fundamental untruth.

Because Leibniz had to work with concepts for which no generally accepted expressions existed, he invented his own terminology. Some of his language was quickly dropped by his followers; some of it lasted until the

twentieth century. Most of it will seem strange to a modern reader. However, acquaintance with a few of his expressions will enable the reader to understand and appreciate Leibniz's magnificent contribution to psychology.

Writing in French, then the language of intellectual discourse, Leibniz called the things in the soul of which we are unaware "perceptions," meaning by this mental states of all kinds, not merely the mental acts that we call "perception" today. Sometimes he used the word "representation." For the coming-to-consciousness of perceptions, he coined the word "apperception," from the French "apercevoir" or "to become aware of." Later, the terminology having taken root, "perceived" and "apperceived" were used routinely by many philosophers and psychologists in place of the words "unconscious" and "conscious." So, for instance, in the *Studies on Hysteria,* Freud's co-author, Josef Breuer, remarked that "sensory stimuli are perhaps perceived . . . but they are not apperceived, i.e. do not become conscious perceptions" (*S.E.,* II: 192–193).

Leibniz sometimes emphasized the unconscious quality of perceptions by referring to them as "insensible," "imperceptible" or "not noticeable." His best-known expression, however, is "minute perception," often untranslated and used in the original French: *petite perception*. Conscious perceptions were accordingly called "great" or "large" (Leibniz, 1951, 554). Describing perceptions as "minute" did not signify that they were weak. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding,* Leibniz had in mind the atomic theory of the time, according to which matter was composed of exceedingly small particles. These, like his minute perceptions were invisible, but they were not negligible on that account. [1]

Philosophy was only one of Leibniz's interests. He was a multifaceted genius who seems to have pioneered in every field that he entered. "One of the supreme intellects of all time," according to Bertrand Russell, he was far in advance of his century in his exploration of mathematical logic (Russell, 604). He discovered the infinitesimal calculus independently of Newton and designed a computing machine. Participating in the creation of modern science of physics, he was the major contributor to what are now known as the concepts of kinetic and potential energies.

His curiosity was indefatigable; he examined the mysteries of the Rosicrucians and delved into alchemy to discover whether there was anything in it. (He decided there was not.) His imagination carried him far into the future; he foresaw interplanetary travel and playfully speculated about the arrival of extraterrestrials on earth.

He marveled at the mind's unconscious creative power as manifested in dreams—"the formation of visions by a spontaneous organization carried out in a moment—a formation more elegant than any which we can attain by much thought while awake. To the sleeper there often occur visions of great buildings which he has never seen, while it would be difficult for me, while

awake, to form an idea of even the smallest house different from those I have seen, without a great amount of thought. I wish I could remember what marvelous discourses, what books and letters, what poems beautiful beyond all doubt, but never previously read, I have read in dreams without my shaping them at all, just as if they had just been composed and offered to my sight. . . . I do not believe that there is a mortal man who would not confess to me that there have often occurred to him while he dreamed, spontaneously and as if made in a moment, elegant visions and skillfully fashioned songs, verses, books, melodies, houses, gardens, depending upon his interests—visions which he could not have formed without effort while awake. Even such unnatural things as flying men and innumerable other monstrosities can be pictured more skillfully than a waking person can do, except with much thought. They are sought by the waker; they offer themselves to the sleeper" (Leibniz, 1956, 177).

Leibniz's bread-and-butter profession, meanwhile, was diplomacy. In the service of the Duke of Brunswick he traveled through Europe. His conciliatory personality sustained him in his attempts to bring harmony between the states. Doubtless it was his fundamental optimism that induced him to attempt to bring about the reconciliation of the Catholic and Protestant churches. Unfortunately, from the point of view of posterity, the Duke put him to work writing a history of Brunswick, thus diverting him from his own interests. Torn between his diplomatic and historical enterprises and his scientific and philosophical concerns, he wrote "it is incredible how scattered and divided are my occupations. . . . I have so much that is new in mathematics, so many thoughts in philosophy, so many literary observations which I cannot get into shape . . . . I should like to give a description of my calculating machine, but time fails. Above all else I desire to complete my Dynamics . . . but all these works, the historical excepted, have to be done at odd moments" (Dewey, 1888, 263).

As a result of these pressures, much of what he wrote was in response to some specific occasion. We owe his *New Essays on Human Understanding* to the interest Leibniz took in John Locke's 1690 *Essay on Human Understanding* which he had attempted to read in English before a translation became available in 1700. He decided to write a response in the form of a dialogue between himself and Locke. Thus his own volume which echoes Locke's title came into being. It contained, in addition to his argument that the mind had to be assumed to be endowed with innate capacities, his stunning contribution to psychology, the hypothesis of unconscious mental activity. The book was finished in 1704 but when Locke died, Leibniz did not want to publish an argument against him. Therefore the book did not see the light of day until 1765. Followers who promulgated the theory of unconscious mind in the interim did so on the basis of Leibniz's earlier, less complete formulations of his thought.

As a physicist, Leibniz was naturally interested in the new "corpuscular theory" introduced at that time by the English chemist, Robert Boyle. Boyle was hypothesizing that matter consisted of tiny invisible corpuscles. Leibniz, who admired Boyle, and had visited him and had observed his experiments, suggested that the mind might similarly be composed of elements that could not be seen.

Physics at that time had progressed from a reliance on the observation of visible phenomena to an acceptance of the need for theories dealing with entities and activities that could not be observed. A historian has commented on the difficulty of this shift: "There is one particular form of induction that causes special distress to the empiricist: where one moves from particular instances which are observable to instances which are *in principle* unobservable. If the only legitimate ground of knowledge is sense experience, how can one justify a claim which cannot, *in principle,* be tested directly against experience? Yet the most striking feature of seventeenth-century science was its move into the 'invisible realm'" (McMullin, 15).

Leibniz moved much of psychology into the "invisible realm" when he introduced two concepts—the principle of unobservable mental contents and the principle of unobservable mental activity. He elucidated both of these premises by comparing them with contemporary physical theories.

The atomic theory proposed in ancient times by the Greek philosopher Democritus had been revived in the seventeenth century. Democritus had maintained that all matter was composed of innumerable tiny particles which, combined, formed the visible material world. According to Boyle's far more sophisticated "corpuscular theory," matter was made of up "corpuscles" whose differing attributes were responsible for the qualities of different substances. Of this hypothesis, it has been said that it "foreshadowed to a remarkable extent the physics and chemistry of our own day" (Pilkington, 159).

Leibniz compared his invisible perceptions with Boyles' invisible corpuscles and insisted on the reality of both; it would be a mistake to assume "that things of which we are unaware exist neither in the soul nor in the body" (Leibniz, 1981, 57). Leibniz likened the role of minute perceptions in psychology to the part played by invisible corpuscles in physical science: "insensible perceptions are as necessary to pneumatology [theory of the soul] as insensible corpuscles are to natural science, and it is just as unreasonable to reject the one as the other on the pretext that they are beyond the reach of our senses" (56). The mind was never devoid of content. "I believe that we are never without ideas, never without thoughts and never without sensations either" (119).[2]

Minute perceptions resembled corpuscles in another way; both were conceptualized as being in constant, unobservable motion. Boyle was suggesting that some of the properties of bodies could best be explained on the hypothe-

sis that they were made up of moving particles. He supposed that matter was never inert, that "absolute rest" was to be found nowhere. Even in substances as hard as diamonds, there was invisible internal movement.

Leibniz suggested that the mind was as ceaselessly active as matter: "there is never a body without movement; experience is already on my side, and to be convinced one need only consult the distinguished Mr. Boyle's book attacking absolute rest." It was reasonable to conclude that "since the body is never without movement, the soul which corresponds to it will never be without perception either" (Leibniz, 1981, 112). Moreover, just as the endless invisible movements of corpuscles explained the nature of physical substances, so did the ceaseless flow of imperceptible perceptions account for the phenomena of consciousness; "it is in the insensible perceptions that the reason is found for what occurs in us; as the reason for what takes place in sensible bodies consists in insensible movements" (Leibniz, 1951, 554).

"The soul always thinks and feels," Leibniz insisted, but most of this mental activity was imperceptible; consciousness was intermittent: consciousness is not given "to any soul all the time" (Leibniz, 1956, 1036).

The emphasis on the activity of the mind would remain a hallmark of the Leibnizian orientation, one that distinguished it from the tradition that began with Locke. In British empiricism, the mind tended to be regarded as passive, as a receptor rather than an agent. The American psychologist, Gordon Allport, commented on these contrasting characteristics: "virtually all modern psychological theories seem oriented toward one of two polar conceptions"—the Lockean and the Leibnizian traditions. The Lockean point of view, that was said to "predominate in Anglo-American psychology" views man's mind as "passive." The Leibnizian, "predominant in Continental European psychology, conceives of its nature as essentially active" (Allport, quoted in Misiak and Sexton, 28).

Locke set the stage for inactivity by comparing the mind to a blank sheet of paper upon which experience engraved impressions: "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—How comes it to be furnished?" (1959, 121) Answering his own question, he suggested that ideas were acquired by "observation." The senses delivered data of the external world; an analogous "internal sense" provided information about the inner realm (123).

In Locke's scheme, the acquisition of an idea can be pictured as a one-step operation: a sensation gives rise to a conscious idea. Leibniz's theory, with its distinction between the unconscious and the conscious, demanded two. The first step was the formation of a perception; all of the contents of the mind were unconscious to begin with. Then apperception took place; this was regarded as a process in which the conscious element of the mind recognized, accepted and assimilated unconscious contents. Leibniz said of it that "noticeable [conscious] perceptions arise by degrees from ones which are too

minute to be noticed" (Leibniz, 1981, 57). If this second step was not taken, the perception remained unconscious: "the soul itself does not know the things which it perceives until it has perceptions which are distinct and heightened" (Leibniz, 1952, 1040).

"Perception . . . must be distinguished from apperception or from consciousness," Leibniz insisted (1956, *Monadology*, 1046). "We are never without perceptions, but necessarily we are often without awareness" (Leibniz, 1981, 162) "It is for lack of this distinction that the Cartesians have made the mistake of disregarding perceptions which are not themselves perceived, just as people commonly disregard imperceptible bodies" (Leibniz, 1956, 1036). It is important to distinguish between "thoughts in general" and the small subset of these, the "noticeable thoughts" (Leibniz, 1981, 118). By the end of the nineteenth century, Leibniz's "minute perceptions" would be called "unconscious mental states," "unconscious representations" or "unconscious ideas" (*unbewusste Vorstellungen*).

At that time, a noted philosopher, Wilhelm Windelband, explaining that "in the language of today the *petites perceptions* would be *unconscious mental states,"* asserted that Leibniz's recognition "that the life of the soul transcends all that is clear and distinctly conscious" is "an insight of the highest value" (Windelband, 1958, 424 and 464). Leibniz "introduced an extremely significant conception into psychology and epistemology. He distinguished between the states in which the soul merely *has* ideas, and those in which it is *conscious* of them. The former he designated as perceptions, the latter as *apperception*. By apperception, therefore, he understood the process by which unconscious, obscure and confused representations are raised into clear and distinct consciousness, and thereby recognized by the soul as its own and *appropriated by self-consciousness*" (463).

Leibniz's philosophical descendants stressed that all of the contents of the mind, beliefs, attitudes and motives of every sort, germinated and developed unconsciously and remained unconscious, perhaps forever, unless and until they were apperceived.

For some of Leibniz's later followers, the coming to consciousness of unconscious mental states became a process of intellectual, psychological and spiritual growth. The domain of consciousness expanded with each elevation to consciousness of a previously unrecognized mental state. From a beginning stage in which it was blind to many of its own assumptions and predilections, the mind progressed by stages to a higher level of self-understanding. Where once it had been helplessly driven by unrecognized urges, it now could control and channel them; thereby it had achieved a new freedom. Windelband credited Leibniz with the realization that "the genetic process of the psychical life consists in the changing of unconscious into conscious representations or ideas, in taking up perceptions into the clearness and distinctness of self-consciousness" (463). Raising the unconscious to conscious-

ness was thus an ideal long before Freud recommended it: "Where id was, there ego shall be" (*S.E.,* XXII: 80).

In Leibniz's psychology are found most of the elements that, once they coalesced, gave rise to a nineteenth-century theory of personality and personality development centered around the concept of the "self." Locke, taking up the question of personal identity, had asked what it was that constituted "the self." He proposed that since, as he believed, consciousness always accompanied thinking; it was consciousness "which makes every one to be what he calls self." Locke proposed that the self included, not only present consciousness, but also the states of consciousness that could be recalled: "as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person." The self includes whatever can be consciously remembered (Locke, 1959, 449).

Leibniz took a different view; not only the feeling of identity, but the whole of a person's character, were products of assimilated experiences most of which could not be recalled. Nothing was ever totally forgotten, traces were preserved unconsciously: "something remains of all our past thoughts, none of which can ever be entirely wiped out" (1981, 113). The soul "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" (239). "Previous states" did not cease to be effective even "when the individual himself has no sense" of them, i.e., "no longer has any explicit memory of them" (55). The feeling of personal identity, the sense of "self" (*sentiment du moi*) (236), was based upon such unconscious memory traces: "It is this continuity and interconnection of perceptions which make someone really the same individual" (239).

Dispositions, enduring attitudes and expectations were composed in the same way: "our customs and passions, which have so much influence when we do deliberate" come from "a conjunction of minute perceptions." Without them, "we would not have acquired these noticeable dispositions" (116). But not only the memories that went into the formation of dispositions were forgotten, the resulting dispositions themselves could be unconscious: "we are not always aware of our acquired dispositions" (52). Much of our character may lie beyond our ken: therefore we are often at the mercy of "insensible inclinations of which we are not aware" (194).

EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Leibniz supposed that a continuum of degrees of consciousness existed in the animal world, a progression of shades of awareness that ranged from a low in primitive invertebrates that were perpetually unconscious to a high in human beings, who were conscious intermittently. This observation was supported

by Leibniz's "law of continuity," according to which "nothing takes place suddenly, and it is one of my great and best confirmed maxims that *nature never makes leaps"* (1981, 56). In the human being, mental contents ranged from states of deepest unconsciousness upward by degrees without interruption.[3] Freud's coauthor, Breuer, echoed this postulate of Leibnizian theory when he said of ideas in *Studies on Hysteria* that "they form an almost unbroken scale, passing through every gradation of vagueness and obscurity, between perfectly conscious ideas . . . and those which never enter consciousness in waking life but only in hypnosis" (*S.E.,* II: 229).

Given such a continuum, there must be a particular point, a threshold, at which the transition from the unconscious to consciousness takes place. Leibniz used sensation as an example: a small amplification of a sound that had been too weak to be heard resulted in its coming to consciousness: "a noise which we perceive but do not attend to is brought within reach of our awareness by a tiny increase or addition" (1981, 134). The radical innovation in Leibniz's approach was his assumption that the noise of which we are not conscious may nevertheless be *perceived;* in the language of a modern hypothesis, it may be "unconsciously registered" or "subliminally sensed."

Leibniz explained his reasoning: when we stand by the seashore and are conscious of the roar of the surf, we are actually hearing an aggregate of sounds, each of the countless waves contributing to the sum. We would not be aware of the sound of *one* of these waves, or even of several but, at a certain point; enough sound accumulates for us to be able to hear it. Leibniz supposed that, before this point was reached, the sound, although not consciously heard, was nevertheless being registered; in Leibniz's words we "must be affected slightly"; we must "have some perception" of these noises; they must "touch the soul" outside of our awareness (54). Then a small increment makes possible the transition from perception to apperception: "a noise which we perceive but do not attend to is brought within reach of our awareness by a tiny increase or addition" (135); "the soul itself does not know the things which it perceives until it has perceptions which are distinct and heightened" (Leibniz, 1956, 1040).[4]

In this speculation were three ideas that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, were put to work by Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), progenitor of modern experimental psychology: the hypothesis of subliminal sensation, the concept of quantity, or magnitude of a stimulus, and the concept of threshold.

In a different situation, unawareness of a stimulus required a different explanation: a stimulus might be powerful enough but might nevertheless remain unconscious because it failed to capture *attention.* The roar of a waterfall, for example, could hardly be described as "minute" and yet it could disappear from consciousness if it was heard continuously. Leibniz pointed out that we become so accustomed to the clatter of a mill or the rush

of water, after living beside them for a while, that we pay no heed to them. The sounds still strike the ear but "lacking the appeal of novelty, are not forceful enough to attract our attention and our memory, which are applied only to more compelling objects" (1981, 54).

The roar of the waterfall did not fail to reach consciousness because it was too feeble but because it had to give way to a more powerful rival for attention. With Leibniz's emphasis on the concept of *competition* between different elements of the mind, what would later become the theory of inhibition or repression put in an appearance. The sound of the waterfall does not cease "to strike on our sense-organs"; nevertheless, we are not aware of it because our attention is applied "to more compelling objects" (54). Along the same lines, Leibniz noted that sometimes we seem to be "selectively asleep" with regard to an object (115). He stated that "there are always objects which strike our eyes and ears, and therefore touch our souls as well, without our paying heed to them. For our attention is held by other objects, until a given object becomes powerful enough to attract it, either by acting more strongly upon us or in some other way" (115).

The concept of the competition between sensations and other mental states, leading to the repression of the weaker, had ancient origins, as did many of the theories of eighteenth-century philosophers. These scholars were steeped in the literature of the remote past, which they had often read in the original Greek. In this instance, Aristotle had observed that of two stimuli "the stronger always tends to override the weaker." This is why "persons do not perceive what is brought before their eyes, if they are at the time deep in thought, or in a fright, or listening to some loud noise. "Although a visual impression directly meets the eyes, i.e. presumably produces a sensation, because of a competing element, either a mental state or a physical stimulus, nothing is seen. It is effectively kept out of consciousness—"inhibited" or "repressed" in nineteenth-century language (Aristotle, 1984, 447a).

Leibnizian psychology typically stressed conflict in the mind. Even the simple failure to consciously hear a sound was pictured as the outcome of a rivalry; consciousness was the prize for which mental elements of all kinds competed. We have "perceptions of which we are not aware in our present state. We could in fact become thoroughly aware of them and reflect on them . . . if bigger ones [*le plus grande*] did not, obliterate them or rather put them in the shade" (134). The winner had to be "powerful enough" to deny consciousness to opponents.

In Leibniz's theory of motivation, the "minute perceptions" became "imperceptible little urges" and Leibniz imagined warfare between urges as they struggled for dominance. He supposed that numerous motives might be involved in such a conflict, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, and he compared a collision of this kind with a clash of physical forces with different directions and strengths. The final outcome of the struggle, the

prevailing motive, would be arrived at by vector addition, a compromise between all of them.

UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATION

Leibniz compared these imperceptible urges to the hidden springs that drive a watch. "These impulses are like so many little springs trying to unwind and so driving our machine along" (166). Because the imperceptible urges were constantly at work, no action, however trifling, was ever performed without an unconscious determinant. This dictum was related to Leibniz's general "principle of sufficient reason," which asserted that nothing whatever occurs without a reason. If no reason is evident, this does not signify that it does not exist; it is merely unknown, its absence being due to lack of information. A person with adequate knowledge would always be able to explain "why the thing is as it is and not otherwise" (Leibniz, 1956, 1038). Applied to the mind, the principle entailed that every mental event was explicable, in principle, if not in practice. If, as often happens, the reason eludes us, Leibniz observed, then this is because "what usually drives us are those minute insensible perceptions . . . that we cannot become aware of" (1981, 188).

When Leibniz put such thoughts on paper, he was playing with fire; he was denying "the freedom of the will" and thereby contradicting a sacrosanct doctrine of the church.

The very old problem of free will rose from the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the powerful, subjective feeling that acts of the will are not caused, and, on the other, the powerful, rational, conviction that every event has a cause. The argument that the will is free has sometimes been buttressed by appeals to personal experience; for instance, picture yourself, being under no constraint, deciding to move your finger to the right or to the left. You make a choice; the finger obeys. You feel certain that you could just as soon have made the opposite choice. You willed the decision, but nothing caused your will to make this decision. The act of your will was therefore an uncaused event.

The law of universal causation is thereby breached; the law to which the rest of the universe is subject does not hold for your mind. For many centuries, this was exactly the position defended by the church: the soul was immortal; an "immaterial substance," it stood apart from the rest of the created universe. When it freely exercised its will, then the will was not being determined by any condition: physiological, psychological or environmental.

In the seventeenth century, René Descartes was comfortably in agreement with ecclesiastical opinion when he defended the doctrine. We could *perceive* our freedom of choice; it was "self-evident," so clear that it could not

be doubted. (1973, Vol. 1, 234–235). John Locke, in the following century, concurred. If he could, by a thought, direct the motion of his finger, "make it move when it was at rest, or *vice versa,* it is evident, that in respect of that I am free: and if I can, by a like thought of my mind, preferring one to the other, produce either words or silence, I am at liberty to speak or hold my peace: and as far as this power reaches, of acting or not acting, by the determination of his own thought preferring either, so far is a man free. For how can we think any one freer, than to have the power to do what he will?" (Locke, Vol. 2, 1959, 324)

Descartes and Locke were echoing the wisdom of centuries; Leibniz disagreed; his predecessors were mistaken, he declared. The absence of an unconscious motive could not be *sensed*. The *feeling* that one was making a free choice could *not* be trusted. However trivial the episode, we can never be sure that we are not under the influence of the minute perceptions which determine "our behavior in many situations without our thinking of them, and which deceive the unsophisticated with an appearance of *indifference of equilibrium*—as if it made no difference to us, for instance, whether we turned left or right" (Leibniz, 1981, 56).

Leibniz maintained that "when I turn one way rather than another, it is often because of a series of tiny impressions of which I am not aware but which make one movement slightly harder than the other" (1981, 116). He insisted that "the reason M. Descartes has advanced to prove the independence of our free actions, by what he terms an intense inward sensation, has no force. We cannot properly speaking be sensible of our independence, and we are not aware always of the causes, often imperceptible, whereon our resolution depends" (1985, 150). Leibniz drove the point home with an imaginative metaphor comparing the controlling power of an unconscious determinant with the magnetic force that governed the movement of a compass needle—which needle believed that it was moving of its own free will. "It is as though the magnetic needle took pleasure in turning towards the north: for it would think that it was turning independently of any other cause, not being aware of the imperceptible movements of the magnetic matter" (1985, 150).

Leibniz concluded with a reference to the new physical science, likening the actions of imperceptible thoughts with the invisible activities of matter. "If we do not always notice the reason which determines us, or rather by which we determine ourselves, it is because we are as little able to be aware of all the workings of our mind and of its usually confused and imperceptible thoughts as we are to sort out all the mechanisms which nature puts to work in bodies" (1981, 178).

Leibniz took pains to make clear that even the most trivial behaviors, the apparently unmotivated, seemingly accidental actions, were strictly determined. The "insensible perceptions" accounted for what seemed to be "involuntary": "all our undeliberated actions result from a conjunction of minute

perceptions" (115). "Often it is an insensible perception which we can neither discern nor single out . . . which makes us lean one way rather than the other without being able to say why" (183). At all times "an infinite number of great and small motions internal and external concur within us, which generally we are not sensible of. And I have already said, that, when a man walks out of a room, there are such reasons which determine him to set one foot forward rather than the other, though he observes it not" (Leibniz et. al. 1956, 139).[5]

An experiment carried out a few decades ago might have been designed expressly to test Leibniz's dictum that even trivial behavior is governed by imperceptible inclinations. Subjects in this procedure were confronted with four pairs of nylon stockings lined up in a row from left to right and were asked to decide which pair was of the "best quality." In actuality the stockings were identical, the only difference between the pairs was their position in the row. Overwhelmingly, subjects picked the stockings which were farthest to the right, preferring these to those on the left by a factor of almost four to one. Obviously, they had been strongly influenced by the position of the stockings, but none of them was aware that an "imperceptible" inclination had given them a push (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977, 243–244).

Freud may have taken over Leibnizian postulates about unconscious mental functioning without giving them a thought; they were current in his day. It was only later that, woven into presentations of his own theories, they came to be regarded as his own inventions by those unfamiliar with their history. Thereafter, just these principles were often selected for special acclaim and hailed as Freud's greatest discoveries, the jewels in his theoretical crown. In his influential primer, psychoanalyst Charles Brenner, maintaining that psychoanalytic theory "comprises what are by far the most important contributions that have been made to human psychology to date," picked two of these as basic. Unaware that this was one of Leibniz's fundamental principles, he chose as the first "the principle of psychic determinism," the premise that "nothing happens by chance, or in a random way. Each psychic event is determined by the ones which preceded it. Events in our mental lives that may seem to be random and unrelated to what went on before are only apparently so." The second proposition was that "consciousness is an exceptional rather than a regular attribute of psychic processes" (Brenner, 1955, 11–12). Freud's studies had convinced him that "in fact the majority of mental functioning goes on without consciousness and that consciousness is an unusual rather than a usual quality or attribute of mental functioning." Brenner concluded that "this is of course, in sharp contrast to the view that prevailed before Freud's time that consciousness and mental functioning were synonymous" (Brenner, 1955, 24). However, Freud's supposedly radical insight did *not* contrast sharply with the previous view; it simply *was* the previous view.

As we will see, Leibniz's psychology endured. The principles of psychic determinism and the proposition that consciousness is an exceptional rather than a regular attribute of psychic processes—which the psychoanalytic writer regarded as Freud's and as "revolutionary"—would probably not have come as a surprise to any educated Austrian in 1900. Moreover, the conjecture had considerable currency elsewhere in Europe and in America as well. The general ideas which Freud claimed for psychoanalysis, the concepts that the unconscious is the fundamental part of the mind and that mental processes are largely unconscious, came as no shock to Freud's literate contemporaries. In fact, if you had asked them who had "discovered the unconscious," they likely would have told you that this had been Leibniz, in whose writings the principles which Freud and his followers have attributed to "psychoanalysis" are to be found. The voices of Freud's contemporaries attest to the recognition which was accorded this seventeenth-century philosopher: "Leibniz retains the glory of having been the first to affirm the existence of ideas of which we are not conscious and to recognize their vast importance" (Hartmann, Vol. I, 1893, 19) and he "deserves immense credit for instantly perceiving with the eye of genius the range of his discovery, for penetrating into the dark inner laboratory of human feelings, passions, and actions, and for recognizing habit and much else as effects of an important principle only too briefly expounded (Vol. l, 1893, 17). Strümpell said, "It was he [Leibniz] who first, with clear insight into the matter, pointed to the importance of the unconscious emotional life for the physical and mental economy of the conscious person" (1874, 121–122).

Friedrich Nietzsche, himself often erroneously identified as a "discoverer" of the unconscious, referred to "*Leibnitz's* [*sic*] incomparable insight—with which he obtained the advantage not only over Descartes, but over all who had philosophised up to his time,—that consciousness is only an accident of mental representation, and *not* its necessary and essential attribute; that consequently what we call consciousness only constitutes a state of our spiritual and psychical world . . . and is *far from being that world itself*" (Nietzsche, 1987, #357).

In 1892, Wilhelm Wundt, having launched the new science of experimental psychology, worried that his contemporaries were too much concerned with the unconscious and lamented that "the notion has become so popular that many philosophers and psychologists consider it much more interesting to learn what takes place behind the scenes, in unconsciousness, than what occurs in consciousness" (1892, 235).

Some remarks, such as the above by Wundt, reveal the extent to which the concept of the unconscious was taken for granted in the fields of psychology and philosophy in the pre-Freudian decades. In the following selections, italics have been added to passages which manifest this *general* recognition.

In England, George Henry Lewes noted this:

> Leibnitz [*sic*] pointed out that we have many psychical states which are unconscious states—to have an idea and be conscious of it, are, he said, not one but two states. The Consciousness by Descartes created into an essential condition of Thought, was by Leibnitz reduced to an accompaniment which not only may be absent, but in the vast majority of cases is absent. *The teaching of most modern psychologists is that Consciousness forms but a small item in the total of psychical processes. Unconscious sensations, ideas, and judgments are made to play a great part in their explanations.* It is very certain that in every conscious volition—every act that is so characterized—the larger part of it is quite unconscious (1877, 165–166).

In the United States, Oliver Wendell Holmes called Leibniz's insistence on the existence of unconscious thought "audacious":

> Do we ever think without knowing that we are thinking? . . . Are there any mental processes of which we are unconscious at the time, but which we recognize as having taken place by finding certain results in our minds? That there are such unconscious mental actions is laid down in the strongest terms by Leibnitz [*sic*], whose doctrine reverses the axiom of Descartes into *sum, ergo cogito* (I am, therefore I think). The existence of unconscious thought is maintained by him in terms we might fairly call audacious, and illustrated by some of the most striking facts bearing upon it. . . . It does not follow, he says again, that, because we do not perceive thought, it does not exist. . . . In one word, it is a great source of error to believe that there is no perception in the mind but those of which it is conscious. This is surely a sufficiently explicit and peremptory statement of the doctrine, which, under the names of `latent consciousness,' `obscure perceptions,' `the hidden soul,' `unconscious cerebration,' `reflex action of the brain,*' has been of late years emerging into general recognition in treatises of psychology and physiology* (1892, 276–277).

Holmes adds:

> The doctrine of Leibnitz*, that the brain may sometimes act without our taking cognizance of it, as the heart commonly does, as many internal organs always do, seems almost to belong to our time.* The readers of Hamilton and Mill, of Abercrombie, Laycock, and Maudsley, of Sir John Herschel, of Carpenter, of Lecky, of Dallas, will find many variations on the text of Leibnitz, some new illustrations, a new classification and nomenclature of the facts; but the root of the matter is all to be found in his writings (Holmes, 1892, 278).

Another American, writing about Leibniz at the end of the century, noted that he "was the first to recognize the importance of the unconscious" and commented that "apart from their metaphysical garb*, the unconscious perceptions in Leibniz's system are virtually the same thing as the unconscious soul-elements in modern psychology and philosophy*" (Carlson, 1899, 72).

When Freud was already on his way to fame, a German editor of his acquaintance commented that "the theory [of unconscious mind] has found more and more disciples" and *"at the present time is probably supported by the overwhelming majority of writers* . . . an assumption of this kind can already be found in the works of individual writers in antiquity. However, only the presentation of the great thinker Leibniz is responsible for the fact that *the psychic unconscious never again disappeared from the purview of philosophers and psychologists"* (Löwenfeld, 1913, 1–2).

Leibniz was not an isolated thinker, a luminary who "anticipated" Freud but whose thoughts about the unconscious were then forgotten. He was the founder of a school of psychological thought; his principles were accepted, clarified and developed by followers. In Freud's youth, the psychology most widely recognized in his milieu was Leibnizian. He could not have avoided coming across the idea that he later claimed for "psychoanalysis," namely that "mental processes are in themselves unconscious and that of all mental life it is only certain individual acts and portions that are conscious" (*S.E.,* XV: 21). In the intellectual milieu in which he grew up, such Leibnizian concepts were taken in stride.

The unconscious mind was not, in fact, the conception of any one identifiable individual; Leibniz did not "discover the unconscious" either. Lancelot Law Whyte, who examined some of the origins of the idea in his *The Unconscious before Freud,* noted that an inkling of the concept seems to have existed almost from the dawn of history and, focusing upon western European writers, pointed out several who, around 1700, were publishing ideas which closely resembled modern conceptions. Leibniz was only one of a list which included Pascal, Spinoza, Cudworth, Malebranche, Norris, Vico, Shaftesbury, Wolff and Kames (Whyte, 1962, 97). Whyte also issued a warning which is too little heeded: we ought not to forget that, in addition to these relatively well-known individuals, who had published this: "there must have been a vastly greater number who shared this realization without recording their thoughts" (1962, 71).

We do not have to suppose that the idea of unconscious mentation, and every other psychological concept found in Leibniz's works, was newborn, a child of his brain. However, no one before Leibniz had so clearly recognized the importance of the concept of the unconscious mind. His contribution has been grossly underestimated because the whole pre-Freudian development of the theory has been largely ignored. Leibniz laid out the vineyard in which his successors labored during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, working out his theory of mental functioning. The paradigm which Leibniz bequeathed to his immediate follower, Christian Wolff, and through Wolff to Wolff's disciples, was based on the premise that unconscious mental activities are primary in that they precede and generate conscious activities. Thus, every conscious experience rises out of a previous unconscious state. Human

beings are at the mercy of unconscious motives; believing that they are acting of their own free will, they are often caught in the sweep of purposes and passions of which they know nothing.

NOTES

1. Leibniz's "minute perceptions" have sometimes mistakenly been equated with the "monads" of his metaphysical speculation. The "minute perceptions," which Leibniz likened to Boyle's "corpuscles," were hypothesized as the real causes of psychological phenomena. "Monads," on the other hand, were immaterial substances, "souls" or metaphysical atoms. If Leibniz had intended to equate these concepts, he would have done so; he would not have had to invent the new expression "minute perception" to designate the psychological concept. The conflation of Leibniz's psychology with his metaphysics has often confused and obscured presentations of the psychology.

2. Leibniz, accepted "corpuscles," but often inveighed against "atoms." Although he espoused the theory that matter was composed of tiny particles, he disagreed with features attributed to "atoms" by Democritus and avoided use of the Greek expression for this reason.

3. It has sometimes erroneously been asserted that Leibniz did not have a theory of the unconscious at all; he supposedly had in mind only very low degrees of consciousness. His "minute perceptions," according to this view, were faintly conscious, not unconscious. This misjudgment rises from the role which consciousness played in Leibniz's metaphysical speculation. Leibniz supposed that infinitesimally small degrees of "consciousness" existed throughout the cosmos, not only in the organic, but also in the inorganic world. This did not mean that Leibniz supposed that *rocks,* for instance, were aware; the degree of "consciousness" they possessed was far too "minute" for this. Only when consciousness accumulated to a certain point, did awareness ensue. Therefore, a thing could be said to possess minute amounts of "consciousness" but not be capable of conscious awareness. This puzzling formulation must now strike us as peculiar, but it was an element in a metaphysical system which is still attractive to some because of its logical construction and to others because it is a dream of a world in which everything is related.

4. There is a fallacy in this argument that has been pointed out by such notables as John Stuart Mill, Franz Brentano and William James. Leibniz suggested that because the cumulative sound of all of the waves can be heard, we must be hearing each individual wave unconsciously. He reasoned that, if an individual sound made no impression at all, if its value was zero, then no accumulation of these sounds could ever be heard because adding zeros would never result in anything more than zero. His critics pointed out that this does not follow; it might be that nothing at all is registered, even unconsciously, until a certain volume is reached.

5. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz was a consistent spokesman for psychic determinism. His introduction of unconscious motives into the old argument strengthened the position of the opponents of free will. However, on occasions he wavered. In the only book published during his lifetime, the *Theodicy,* he pulled back and offered a dubious defense of free will. Thereby he brought down on himself the scorn of at least two philosophers who condemned his inconstancy in no uncertain terms. Schopenhauer called him a "middle-of-the-roader" who "tacks back and forth" and "hides behind words" (Schopenhauer, 1985, 61). Bertrand Russell, although allowing that Leibniz was a genius, decided that he was not an "admirable" human being because what he published was "designed to win the approbation of princes and princesses" (Russell, 1948, 604). This may be true; the kindly Leibniz may well have wanted to reassure his good friend Princess Sophie of Brunswick and other readers about the freedom of the will. In the same book, Leibniz attempted to offer a comforting answer to the question as to how it was that God, supposedly good and omnipotent, could have created a world so full of pain. God did what he could, according to Leibniz. Given the logical constraint that he was under, he assembled "the best of all possible worlds." This notion evoked the amused contempt of Voltaire who proceeded to write *Candide.*