

SOME ELEMENTARY LESSONS IN PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

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An author who sets out to introduce some branch of knowledge - or, to put it more modestly, some branch of research - to an uninstructed public must clearly make his choice between two methods or techniques.

It is possible to start off from what every reader knows (or thinks he knows) and regards as self-evident, without in the first instance contradicting him. An opportunity will soon occur for drawing his attention to facts in the same field, which, though they are known to him, he has so far neglected or insufficiently appreciated. Beginning from these, one can introduce further facts to him of which he has no knowledge and so prepare him for the necessity of going beyond his earlier judgements, of seeking new points of view and of taking new hypotheses into consideration. In this way one can get him to take a part in building up a new theory about the subject and one can deal with his objections to it during the actual course of the joint work. A method of this kind might well be called genetic. It follows the path along which the investigator himself has travelled earlier. In spite of all its advantages, it has the defect of not making a sufficiently striking effect upon the learner. He will not be nearly so much impressed by something which he has watched coming into existence and passing through a slow and difficult period of growth as he would be by something that is presented to him ready-made as an apparently self-contained whole.

It is precisely this last effect which is produced by the alternative method of presentation. This other method, the dogmatic one, begins straight away by stating its conclusions. Its premisses make demands upon the audience's attention and belief and very little is adduced in support of them. And there is then a danger that a critical hearer may shake his head and say: 'All this sounds most peculiar: where does the fellow get it from?'

In what follows I shall not rely exclusively upon either of the two methods of presentation: I shall make use now of one and now of the other. I am under no delusion about the difficulty of my task. Psycho-analysis has little prospect of becoming liked or popular. It is not merely that much of what it has to say offends people's feelings. Almost as much difficulty is created by the fact that our science involves a number of hypotheses - it is hard to say whether they should be regarded as postulates or as products of our researches - which are bound to seem very strange to ordinary modes of thought and which fundamentally contradict current views. But there is no help for it. We must begin our brief study with two of these hazardous hypotheses.

THE NATURE OF THE PSYCHICAL

Psycho-analysis is a part of the mental science of psychology. It is also described as 'depth psychology' - we shall later discover why. If someone asks what 'the psychical' really means, it is easy to reply by enumerating its constituents: our perceptions, ideas, memories, feelings and acts of volition - all these form part of

what is psychical. But if the questioner goes further and asks whether there is not some common quality possessed by all these processes which makes it possible to get nearer to the nature, or, as people sometimes say, the essence of the psychical, then it is harder to give an answer.

If an analogous question had been put to a physicist (as to the nature of electricity, for instance), his reply, until quite recently, would have been: 'For the purpose of explaining certain phenomena, we assume the existence of electrical forces which are present in things and which emanate from them. We study these phenomena, discover the laws that govern them and even put them to practical use. This satisfies us provisionally. We do not know the nature of electricity. Perhaps we may discover it later, as our work goes on. It must be admitted that what we are ignorant of is precisely the most important and interesting part of the whole business, but for the moment that does not worry us. It is simply how things happen in the natural sciences.'

Psychology, too, is a natural science. What else can it be? But its case is different. Not everyone is bold enough to make judgements about physical matters; but everyone - the philosopher and the man in the street alike - has his opinion on psychological questions and behaves as if he were at least an amateur psychologist. And now comes the remarkable thing. Everyone - or almost everyone - was agreed that what is psychical really has a common quality in which its essence is expressed: namely the quality of being conscious - unique, indescribable, but needing no description. All that is conscious, they said, is psychical, and conversely all that is psychical is conscious: that is self-evident and to contradict it is nonsense. It cannot be said that this decision threw much light upon the nature of the psychical, for consciousness is one of the fundamental facts of our life and our researches come up against it like a blank wall and can find no path beyond it. Moreover the equation of what is mental with what is conscious had the unwelcome result of divorcing psychical processes from the general context of events in the universe and of setting them in complete contrast to all others. But this would not do, since the fact could not long be overlooked that psychical phenomena are to a high degree dependent upon somatic influences and on their side have the most powerful effects upon somatic processes. If ever human thought found itself in an impasse it was here. To find a way out, the philosophers at least were obliged to assume that there were organic processes parallel to the conscious psychical ones, related to them in a manner that was hard to explain, which acted as intermediaries in the reciprocal relations between 'body and mind', and which served to re-insert the psychical into the texture of life. But this solution remained unsatisfactory.

Psycho-analysis escaped such difficulties as these by energetically denying the equation between what is psychical and what is conscious. No; being conscious cannot be the essence of what is psychical. It is only a quality of what is psychical, and an inconstant quality at that - one that is far oftener absent than present. The psychical, whatever its nature may be, is in itself unconscious and probably similar in kind to all the other natural processes of which we have obtained knowledge.

Psycho-analysis bases this assertion on a number of facts, of which I shall now proceed to give a selection.

We know what is meant by ideas 'occurring' to one - thoughts that suddenly come into consciousness without one's being aware of the steps that led up to them, though they, too, must have been psychical acts. It can even happen that one arrives in this way at the solution of some difficult intellectual problem which has previously for a time baffled one's efforts. All the complicated processes of selection, rejection and decision which occupied the interval were withdrawn from consciousness. We shall not be putting forward any new theory in saying that they were unconscious and perhaps, too, remained so.

In the second place, I shall pick a single instance to represent an immensely large class of phenomena.¹ The President of a public body (the Lower House of the Austrian Parliament) on one occasion opened a sitting with the following words: 'I take notice that a full quorum of members is present and herewith declare the sitting closed.' It was a slip of the tongue - for there can be no doubt that what the President intended to say was 'opened'. Why, then, did he say the opposite? We shall expect to be told it was an accidental mistake, a failure in carrying out an intention such as may easily happen for various reasons: it had no meaning - and in any case contraries are particularly easily substituted for each other. If, however, we bear in mind the situation in which the slip of the tongue occurred, we shall be inclined to prefer another explanation. Many of the previous sittings of the House had been disagreeably stormy and had accomplished nothing, so that it would be only too natural for the President to think at the moment of making his opening statement: 'If only the sitting that's just beginning were finished! I would much rather be closing than opening it!' When he began to speak he was probably not aware of this wish - it was not conscious to him - but it was certainly present and it succeeded in making itself effective, against the speaker's will, in his apparent mistake. A single instance can scarcely enable us to decide between two such different explanations. But what if every other instance of a slip of the tongue could be explained in the same way, and similarly every slip of the pen, every case of mis-reading or mis-hearing, and every faulty action? What if in all those instances (one might actually say, without a single exception) it was possible to demonstrate the presence of a psychical act - a thought, a wish or an intention - which would account for the apparent mistake and which was unconscious at the moment at which it became effective, even though it may have been conscious previously? If that were so, it would really no longer be possible to dispute the fact that psychical acts which are unconscious do exist and that they are even sometimes active while they are unconscious and that in that case they can even sometimes get the better of conscious intentions. The person concerned in a mistake of this kind can react to it in various ways. He may overlook it completely or he may notice it himself and become embarrassed and ashamed. He cannot as a rule find the explanation of it himself without outside help; and he often refuses to accept the solution when it is put before him - for a time, at all events.

¹ Cf. The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901b)0

In the third place, finally, it is possible in the case of persons in a state of hypnosis to prove experimentally that there are such things as unconscious psychical acts and that consciousness is not an indispensable condition of activity. Anyone who has witnessed such an experiment will receive an unforgettable impression and a conviction that can never be shaken. Here is more or less what happens. The doctor enters the hospital ward, puts his umbrella in the corner, hypnotizes one of the patients and says to him: 'I'm going out now. When I come in again, you will come to meet me with my umbrella open and hold it over my head.' The doctor and his assistants then leave the ward. As soon as they come back, the patient, who is no longer under hypnosis, carries out exactly the instructions that were given him while he was hypnotized. The doctor questions him: 'What's this you're doing? What's the meaning of all this?' The patient is clearly embarrassed. He makes some lame remark such as 'I only thought, doctor, as it's raining outside you'd open your umbrella in the room before you went out.' The explanation is obviously quite inadequate and made up on the spur of the moment to offer some sort of motive for his senseless behaviour. It is clear to us spectators that he is in ignorance of his real motive. We, however, know what it is, for we were present when the suggestion was made to him which he is now carrying out, while he himself knows nothing of the fact that it is at work in him.¹

¹ I am describing experiments made by Bernheim at Nancy in 1889 at which I myself assisted. In these days there is no need for me to discuss any doubts as to the genuineness of hypnotic phenomena of this kind.¹

The question of the relation of the conscious to the psychical may now be regarded as settled: consciousness is only a quality or attribute of what is psychical, and moreover an inconstant one. But there is one further objection with which we have to deal. We are told that, in spite of the facts that have been mentioned, there is no necessity to abandon the identity between what is conscious and what is psychical: the so-called unconscious psychical processes are the organic processes which have long been recognized as running parallel to the mental ones. This, of course, would reduce our problem to an apparently indifferent matter of definition. Our reply is that it would be unjustifiable and inexpedient to make a breach in the unity of mental life for the sake of propping up a definition, since it is clear in any case that consciousness can only offer us an incomplete and broken chain of phenomena. And it can scarcely be a matter of chance that it was not until the change had been made in the definition of the psychical that it became possible to construct a comprehensive and coherent theory of mental life.

Nor need it be supposed that this alternative view of the psychical is an innovation due to psycho-analysis. A German philosopher, Theodor Lipps, asserted with the greatest explicitness that the psychical is in itself unconscious and that the unconscious is the truly psychical. The concept of the unconscious has long been knocking at the gates of psychology and asking to be let in. Philosophy and literature have often toyed with it, but science could find no use for it. Psycho-analysis has seized upon the concept, has taken it seriously and has given it a

fresh content. By its researches it has led to a knowledge of characteristics of the unconscious psychical which have hitherto been unsuspected, and it has discovered some of the laws which govern it. But none of this implies that the quality of being conscious has lost its importance for us. It remains the one light which illuminates our path and leads us through the darkness of mental life. In consequence of the special character of our discoveries, our scientific work in psychology will consist in translating unconscious processes into conscious ones, and thus filling in the gaps in conscious perception. . . * * * * *