

**WEEK 3 ANSWER TO QUESTION 3**  
**STEP 4.2 ASK MARK**

The third question this week is: “What is the difference between the unconscious mind and instinct?”

Now, this is an interesting question, and I hope I can answer it relatively briefly. This question certainly relates to psychoanalytical theory, but I'm going to start by addressing it in broader terms.

The unconscious mind, as defined in cognitive science broadly, is merely unconscious cognition. I've said already in regard to questions one and two this week that unconscious cognition is going on all the time. Unconscious cognition is automatised cognition, it's information processing that doesn't require attention. It's not salient. It doesn't matter enough to need the affective arousal that, as I say, gives rise to consciousness in general.

So the unconscious mind, in the general sense, is just ongoing cognition. Now, of course, that's something very different from instinct. Instinct is not cognition. Instinct is built-in action programmes for dealing with biological matters of universal significance in relation to survival and reproductive success. There's a fear instinct, an attachment instinct, a rage instinct, a sexual instinct, and so on. Clearly, these things are different from cognition.

So, that's a general answer. A more specifically psychoanalytical answer goes like this. The psychoanalysts don't believe that the unconscious is just cognitive information processing. They think that there's another part of the unconscious – they call it the ‘dynamic’ unconscious as opposed to the ‘descriptive’ unconscious – and this dynamic unconscious concerns matters of heartfelt significance which, nevertheless, are unconscious. And the word that they use for this part of the unconscious is also “the repressed”.

The repressed part of the unconscious, that is to say this dynamic unconscious, merges in psychoanalytical theory with the instincts. So the instincts are these deep, primitive, animalistic urges and inclinations within the depths of our minds to which we add our own heartfelt, pressing, psycho-dynamic concerns – the repressed. And then above that is ordinary, unconscious information processing which the psychoanalysts call descriptive unconscious. And above that is consciousness.

That's the standard view, but I actually don't think that this does justice. The Freudian view, I don't think, adequately describes how it really works. When you look at it from the point of view of what we know in neuroscience today about instinct, I think a very different picture emerges than the one that Freud described.

The picture is like this. The part of the brain that performs instinctual functions – I've already enumerated some of them: fear, rage, sexuality, attachment bonding, these heartfelt things – the parts of the brain that perform those functions start in the upper brain stem and then have circuits ascending into the fore brain, which we call limbic circuits. Now, the upper brain stem and these limbic circuits – which arise from the upper brain stem – are not unconscious, they're conscious. They're as conscious as can be. They are where consciousness comes from. They are the raw ingredients of consciousness, as I keep on saying.

So, unlike Freud, I do not believe that instincts are unconscious – I think that instincts are profoundly conscious. Think of them: fear, rage, sexuality, attachment bonding – in other words love – these things are made of feelings. And what are feelings if they're not felt? Consciousness is feeling. Affect is feeling. Instinct is feeling – felt, affective, charged. That's not unconscious. It's got nothing to do with the unconscious.

The unconscious is the attempt to manage these feelings. Remember, cognition is intrinsically unconscious, so cognition binds these affects. You learn in relation to the outside world, in relation to experience. You learn how to manage these instincts, how to tame them, and the cognition renders them less and less conscious.

So a little baby is a ball of instinctual feeling, felt consciousness. And then gradually as it learns how to manage its feelings, how to meet its needs in the world – in other words, as the fore brain cognitive mechanisms mature – so the instincts are less felt, and they're replaced by cognition.

So please be aware that what I'm telling you is how I see it and where I think Freud was wrong. Freud was wrong to think that instinct and the unconscious are the same thing. That's not to say there isn't an unconscious. There is an unconscious – and I'm going to come in question four to talk about this a little more – very much along the lines of what both Freud and cognitive science talk about. But this has got to do with cognition, with representations, with the “movie in your head” that Chalmers spoke of in question one.

Instinct has to do with feeling, and its conscious not unconscious. Now, I wrote a paper\* – again, I'm going to give you a reference which you can just Google, it's an open access paper. Again, Google my name, “Mark Solms conscious Id”, and the paper will come up. It's on exactly this question.

\*Solms M (2013) The Conscious Id. *Neuropsychoanalysis* 15(1):5-19. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15294145.2013.10773711> or: <http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/~karl/The%20Conscious%20Id.pdf>



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