

A Phenomenological Approach to Conscious and Unconscious Mental Life

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Reception date: 14-10-2024

Acceptance date: 19-12-2024

Abstract: This article deals with the conscious and unconscious dimensions of mental life. I distinguish the transitive sense of consciousness, being conscious of something, intentionality, from the adjectival or adverbial sense, being conscious or consciously directed towards something. I show that an intentional act can be conscious or unconscious in the second sense and argue that, from this position, we can ask good questions about what consciousness is and its function in mental life. To achieve this result, I begin by framing the topic in the tradition of psychology before Husserl, namely Lipps, and Brentano, and then describe the unconscious dimension from the conceptual apparatus of phenomenology.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Consciousness; Unconscious; Intentionality; Mental Life

1. Conscious and unconscious in retrospect

I will start with this simple question: Does a satisfactory theory of mental life also need to incorporate an unconscious dimension?

This question leads to another and can only be answered in its light: What is it, then, to be conscious? A theory of the unconscious presupposes a delimitation of conscious mental life and vice versa. These are questions that go hand in hand and can only be addressed together.

The concept of the unconscious is not foreign to psychologists. I am not referring to the psychoanalytic concept of the “unconscious” but to a more trivial incorporation of the analytical principle of a non-conscious mental life into psychological research.

As early as 1896, Theodor Lipps, before Freud published his first work on the interpretation of dreams (in which, incidentally, he refers to him with praise), had given a famous closing lecture at the International Congress of Psychology in Munich titled “The Concept of the Unconscious in Psychology.” There, he began with the firm statement that the question of the unconscious is not so much a psychological question as *the* question of

psychology (Lipps, 1896: 1).¹ In the same assertive tone, the conference ended with these words: “The concept of the unconscious in Psychology [...] is neither hypothetical nor mystical, but rather the expression for proven facts,” and then he went on to add that such a concept “includes, at the same time, the explicit renunciation of metaphysical assumptions in psychology, the consistent adherence to the psychological point of view of observation, the modest confession of not being able to do everything and, finally, the conviction of the necessary leading position of pure psychology in the questions of psychophysiology” (Lipps, 1896: 18).² Lipps had in mind here his decisive work of 1883, *Fundamental Facts of Soul Life*, where precisely such a positive concept had been introduced into the analytical-descriptive work of psychological observation, in abstraction from any metaphysical presuppositions, that is, for him, without reducing the psychic, both its conscious and unconscious processes, to the physiological substratum of mental life, in the manner, well known to him, of Wundt and Fechner (Lipps, 1896: 4-6).

With the thesis of the unconscious in *mental life*, Lipps is not affirming the existence of any unconscious content of consciousness (*Bewusstseinsinhalt*), which would be a contradiction in terms. Rather, he is putting himself from a dynamic point of view and stating that the emerging conscious contents often have their genesis in processes that are not conscious but still belong to the field of mental life. As he states in this work, “The activities that generate the content of consciousness are also unconscious.” (Lipps, 1883: 33). A notable example for Lipps is the outright rejection of an opinion we have heard, without being aware of the chain of representations that underlie this spontaneous current rejection (Lipps, 1896: 10).³ He calls them “potential representations” (*potentielle Vorstellungen*, Lipps, 1896: 11). However, the term is perhaps inappropriate because such representations are active and motivate the actual act of rejection, whereas the potential is simply something virtual and therefore ineffective. To

¹ “Die Frage, mit der es dieser Vortrag zu thun hat [die der Begriff des Unbewussten], ist weniger eine psychologische Frage, als die Frage der Psychologie.“ On this, see Holanda (2010: 48-50).

Regarding German and French texts quoted in this paper, all translations into English are mine.

² “Der Begriff des Unbewussten in der Psychologie, so sagte ich oben, sei weder hypothetisch noch mystisch, sondern Ausdruck für feststehende Tatsachen. Er zugleich in sich schließt den ausdrücklichen Verzicht auf metaphysische Annahmen in der Psychologie, die konsequente Festhaltung des psychologischen Standpunktes der Betrachtung, das bescheidene Bekenntnis des Nicht-alles-Könnens, endlich die Ueberzeugung von der nothwendigen Führerschaft der reinen Psychologie in den Fragen der Psychophysologie.“

³ “Ich höre einen Satz aussprechen. [...] Nehmen wir an, ich verhalte mich ablehnende. Frage ich mich nun nachträglich, was diese Ablehnung oder Verneinung stammt ihrem besonderen affektiven oder Stimmungscharakter bedingte, so finde ich: das Bedingende war nicht ein einzelner Gedanke, der meinem Bewusstsein in Augenblick der Ablehnung vorgeschwebt hätte, sondern eine unabsehbare Fülle von Erfahrungen und Erlebnissen, von belehrenden und erzieherischen Einflüssen; kurz ein Tausenderlei von Vorstellungen, die mir im Laufe meines Lebens zu Teil geworden sind.“

put it in a way that Lipps would probably reject but which comes close to what I want to defend here, the question is about *actual* but *unconscious* processes, in such a way that mental life is, as Lipps said about the “real I,” the unity of conscious and unconscious contents.

Looking at the other side of the contemporary psychological scene, we find Brentano's descriptive psychology and an opposed position on the unconscious in psychology. As is well known, Brentano examines *ex professo* the problem of the admissibility or otherwise of the concept of the unconscious in a long chapter of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, published in 1874. His basic position can be clearly understood in the following three assertions:

1. The distinctive mark of the psychic is *intentionality* (the consciousness of...).
2. Every intentional act is *conscious*.
3. This consciousness is *self-consciousness*.

The very word commonly used by Brentano for intentionality, *Bewusstsein von...*, consciousness-of..., suggests the idea that every transitive consciousness of something must itself be conscious, *bewusst sein*. These are two different things, however. One is the intentional direction towards an object or content, therefore, consciousness-of in the transitive sense; the other is the adjectival sense, being-conscious, or what we could also call the adverbial sense: being consciously directed towards an object. In the first sense, the negation of consciousness would obviously be a suppression of intentionality itself: a consciousness-of that is not consciousness is nothing. However, the adverbial sense allows for its negation. Indeed, whether the intentional act, as directness to something, is consciously or unconsciously performed makes sense. For example, particularizing the term “consciousness-of,” in the *perception* of *X*, it makes no sense to speak of a non-perception (non-consciousness) of *X*. Still, it makes perfect sense to know whether the perception of *X* is consciously or unconsciously performed.

Brentano's answer is subtle and nuanced. On the one hand, he recognizes that an unconscious awareness (of) is not a plain *contradictio in adjecto*. He writes:

Many people shake their heads at this question. To assume an unconscious consciousness [*ein unbewusstes Bewusstsein*] seems absurd to them. And even eminent psychologists, such as Locke and John Stuart Mill, want to see an immediate contradiction here. Only those paying attention to the previous determinations will likely judge this. They will recognize that anyone who raises the question of whether there is an unconscious consciousness is not being ridiculous in the same way

as someone who wants to know whether there is a non-red red. An unconscious consciousness is no more a *contradictio in adjecto* than an unseen seeing. (Brentano, 1874: 133)⁴

On the other hand, though, he takes the decisive step of interpreting this consciousness in an adverbial sense intentionally, that is, as a second form of intentionality or consciousness in a transitive sense. In this way, this being-conscious takes on the meaning of being directed towards a second object. Which object? The intentional act itself, he answers. Thus, for him, every act directed primarily towards an object or content is secondarily directed towards itself: the *intentio recta* is, therefore, combined with an *intentio obliqua*, and thus emerges this fundamental Brentanian thesis that every consciousness-of is not only conscious, but also that this second consciousness is a *self*-consciousness. As we all know, to the obvious objection that the second act should also be conscious and so on, in a regression to infinity, Brentano develops a mereology that distinguishes the separable parts (*die ablösbaren Teile*) and the purely distinctive parts (*die bloss distinktionellen Teile*), non-separable, of a whole. For him, the unity of the *intentiones recta* and *obliqua* in the same act is precisely a case of purely distinctive parts.

Thus, Brentano can answer the question about the unconscious with a peremptory “No.” Although conceptually possible, all psychic life is conscious. It is transparent to itself, self-delimited, and immediately given in an internal perception, which is indubitable, that is, as we usually say, from the perspective of the “first person.” In doing so, he takes up the Cartesian dualist tradition, which defines the mental by self-consciousness, while at the same time doing away with other modern conceptualizations of the unconscious, such as Leibniz's famous “small perceptions” and “unperceived perceptions.” Surprisingly only to some, Kant is also a subscriber to this thesis, which Brentano excludes.

2. Can there be a phenomenological theory of the unconscious?

Husserl's phenomenology followed the path of Brentano's descriptive psychology before reformulating itself as a transcendental philosophy. Does this mean it must share the same

⁴ “Mancher wird über eine solche Frage den Kopf schütteln. Ein unbewusstes Bewusstsein anzunehmen, scheint ihm absurd. Und auch bedeutende Psychologen, wie z. B. Locke und J. S. Mill, wollten darin einen unmittelbaren Widerspruch erblicken. Allein wer auf die vorangehenden Bestimmungen achtet, wird kaum mehr so urtheilen. Er wird erkennen, dass, wer die Frage erhebt, ob es ein unbewusstes Bewusstsein gebe, nicht in ähnlicher Weise lächerlich fragt, wie einer, der wissen möchte, ob es eine nicht-rothe Röthe gebe. Ein unbewusstes Bewusstsein ist so wenig als ein ungesehenes Sehen ein *Contradictio in adjecto*.”

“horror of the unconscious”? The most traditional view of Husserlian phenomenology goes in this direction: Phenomenology is a reflective study of experiences (*Erlebnisse*), as they occur in the apodictic certainty of the ego acquired by the transcendental reduction, which is the basis for a variation aimed at obtaining pure eidetic laws relating to a life of consciousness in general and its intentional correlates. As Husserl recognized in the *Cartesian Meditations*, the apodictic certainty of “I am” and adequate certainty do not overlap (Husserl, 1950: 62-63). This means that the life of consciousness is never wholly present to itself. Still, at least *prima facie*, this is not tantamount to opening the door to a subterranean, unconscious dimension of subjective life. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, would take this Cartesian-Brentanian fascination to an extreme in his essay on *The Transcendence of the Ego* by maintaining the idea of total transparency of consciousness to itself, to the point of making the ego, as the pole of acts (“*Je*”), states and qualities (“*Moi*”), a unity constituted *by* and *for* consciousness in what he calls “impure” reflection, rather than the subject of consciousness. Because of its total transparency, consciousness does not even say “I” because “everything is clear and lucid in consciousness.” The “I,” with its “opacity,” is not an “inhabitant” of consciousness since the latter “[...] is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness [of an] object” and nothing more (Sartre, 2003: 98).⁵ No wonder Sartre was a strenuous opponent of the idea of the unconscious.

There are headwinds within phenomenology itself, however. I will only refer to three notable cases because they touch on aspects I intend to develop later.

The first is a phenomenologist who, not by chance, came from the circle formed by Lipps' former students in Munich: Moritz Geiger. In a long essay titled “*Fragment on the Concept of the Unconscious and Psychic Reality*,” published in 1921 in the *Jahrbuch*, of which he was co-editor, Geiger incisively points out the fundamental limitation of the Brentanian “psychology of experiences” (*Erlebnispsychologie*). In the very first pages, he states: “There has been no lack of voices pointing out the contradiction between the richness of mental life [or ‘soul’s life’: *seelisches Leben*] and the poor and schematic results of the systematic psychology of experiences” (Geiger, 1921: 3). Later in his essay, he explains where lies the poverty of the psychology of experiences. In his opinion, it has to do with how the thematic field of the study of the mind is delimited. In short, it is a question of confusing the *starting point* of psychology

⁵ “Le Je transcendantal c'est la mort de la conscience. En effet, l'existence de la conscience est un absolu parce que la conscience est conscience d'elle-même. C'est-à-dire que le type d'existence de la conscience c'est d'être conscience de soi. Et elle prend conscience de soi en tant qu'elle est conscience d'un objet transcendant. Tout est donc claire et lucide dans la conscience : l'objet est en face d'elle avec son opacité caractéristique, mais elle, elle est purement et simplement conscience d'être conscience de cet objet, c'est la loi de son existence.”

with the very *object* of it. He writes, “The trivial proposition that research begins with the experience of consciousness is transformed into the [...] doctrinaire proposition that the experience of consciousness constitutes the domain of positivity of psychology.” (Geiger, 2021: 12). And so, as he points out,

If this psychological direction comes to recognize a psychic that is not an experience – an unconscious, therefore – it is only to fill in the gaps in the connection of consciousness: only the succession of experiences, even if it presupposes an unconscious, remains important to it – the experiences must be described and systematized. This psychology of experiences is comparable to a natural science that does not describe the actual events of an objective nature but only the contingent succession of fields of perception that present themselves to a person. (Geiger, 2021: 5)⁶

The second notable case is Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant in the last phase of his career. In the Husserliana edition of *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, the editor, Walter Biemel, inserted an appendix to §46, whose title is, precisely, “Fink's Supplement on the Problem of the Unconscious.” The basic idea is remarkable. The opposition between conscious and unconscious life, namely that of the “psychology of the depths” (*Tiefenpsychologie* – an allusion perhaps to Freud and Adler), is based on a naïve understanding of both these concepts. In this context, the debate about whether conscious life is the core of mental life or just a founded dimension of it (*eine fundierte Dimension*) only appeals to phenomena available in the natural attitude – such as wakefulness, experience, deliberate action, or the opposite cases of sleep, fainting, or being dragged along by obscure impulses, etc. – which, however, need to be elucidated in principle within the framework of transcendental phenomenology. Such naivety is, therefore, based on a gap or omission (*Unterlassen*) of intentional analysis, and this omission turns into the illusion that conscious life is immediately given in natural experience, just as the evidence of so-called unconscious life would be. Here, then, is Fink's basic idea: If we consider in a phenomenological-transcendental analysis the endless tangle of intentional implications, the horizons, the sedimentations of meaning that surround every conscious, intentional act, we

⁶ “Wenn diese psychologische Richtung überhaupt noch ein Psychisches anerkennt, das nicht Erlebnis ist - ein Unbewusstes, also - so geschieht es doch nur, um die Lücken, im Bewusstseinszusammenhang auszufüllen: allein die Aufeinanderfolge der Erlebnisse bleibt ihr, auch wenn sie ein Unbewusstes annimmt, als Wichtige -, die Erlebnisse solle beschreiben werden und systematisiert. Diese Erlebnispsychologie ist einer Naturwissenschaft vergleichbar, die nicht das reale Geschehen in der objektiven Natur beschreibt, sondern nur die Aufeinanderfolge der zufälligen Wahrnehmungsfelder, die sich einem Menschen darbieten.“

will see how illusory and naïve will be the idea that the life of consciousness is immediately given and patent to the very subjects who live in it. The myth of immediacy and complete transparency to oneself thus falls apart. As he says, “We don't know what consciousness is.” The complete self-explanation of subjectivity is the system of transcendental phenomenology. The one presented in the text of the *Crisis* is, in Fink's words, just the A-B-C of intentional analysis. It moves in the field of consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) and, for the first time, uncovers what being-conscious or “consciousness” (*Bewusstheit*) means. Only from this point of view can the transcendental problem of being-unconscious (*Unbewusste*) be delimited in its meaning and, correlatively, also the problem of whether the unconscious can be methodologically recovered through the instruments of intentional analysis. As Fink states at the end of his short but incisive text:

As long as the exposition of the problem of the unconscious is determined by such an implicit theory of consciousness, it is in principle philosophically naïve. Only after an explicit analysis of consciousness can the problem of the unconscious be posed in general. However, only in the process of mastering this problematic will it become clear whether the “unconscious” is explicable by the methodological means of intentional analysis. (Fink, 1976: 475)⁷

The third notable case is Husserl himself. Indeed, no one was more attentive to phenomena in the life of consciousness that transgressed the Brentanian paradigm of the psychology of acts and experiences. Although he maintained to the end the idea of a subject who is master and absolutely conscious of himself, who lives in total self-responsibility, no one went deeper into the underlying dimensions of subjective life: passivity, both aesthetic, the orectic passivity of impulses (*Trieb intentionalität*) and the “instinctive,” as well as the dimension of thymic passivity of feelings and emotions. In addition, there is in his analyses an increasing focus on the alternation between waking life and dull life (*waches und dumpfes Leben*), the just outlined phenomenological theory of habitualities, the sedimentations of meaning that act surreptitiously in the ego of the living present, as well as the complex fabric of the network of intentional implications (*intentionale Implikationen*) implied in every conscious intentional act. In other words, in Moran's striking expression, all those “experiences

⁷ “Solange die Exposition des Problems des Unbewussten durch eine solche implizite Theorie über das Bewusstseins bestimm ist, ist sie prinzipiell philosophisches naiv. Erst nach eine expliziten Analytik des Bewusstseins kann das Problem des Unbewussten überhaupt gestellt werden. In der arbeitsmäßigen Bewältigung dieses Problems aber wird es sich allein zeigen, ob das ‘Unbewusste’ mit den methodischen Mitteln der intentionalanalyse auslegbar ist.“

in which the ego finds itself without quite knowing how it arrived at them” (Moran, 2017: 8). Husserl treats this duality from the old-fashioned concepts of a self of “freedom” or “spirit” and a self of “nature.” In a passage from *Ideas-II*, he writes: “If we, therefore, take the personal ego in its context of development, we find two strata [...]: the highest is the specifically spiritual, the stratum of *intellectus agens*, the free ego as the ego of free acts [...]. This specifically spiritual ego, as the subject of spiritual acts, [...] is dependent on an obscure background of character traits, original and hidden dispositions, in turn, dependent on nature” (Husserl, 1976: 276).⁸

It is, however, in another appendix to *Ideas-II* that Husserl goes straight to the dimension that I consider crucial for a phenomenological theory of mental life. As I will propose below, my description does not understand the conscious-unconscious pair, in the adjectival sense, in alternative or hierarchically, but instead as a duality of moments that are always operative, concomitant, and interacting in the overall complexion of mental life. Husserl's text goes in this direction when stating that,

In any case, all “mechanical I-doing” is simple nature. A sensory impulse arises, the impulse to smoke, for example. I pick up a cigar and light it, while my attention, the activities of my ego, in fact, my conscious being-affected is quite different: I am stimulated by thoughts, I follow them, I actively examine them, I approve of them, I disapprove of them, etc. There, we have ego affections and “unconscious” reaction. The being-affected goes to the ego, but not to the awakened ego of the “conscious” turning-to, of occupation, etc. The ego is constantly living amid its “history,” all its previous livelinesses [*Lebendigkeiten*] have declined and continue to have an effect, in tendencies, in occurring ideas, transformations or similarities of previous livelinesses, new formations fused together from these similarities, etc. – just as in the sphere of primordial sensibility, whose formations also belong to the milieu of the ego, to its actual and potential possession. (Husserl: 1976: 338)⁹

⁸ “Nehmen wir also das persönliche Ich in seinen Entwicklungszusammenhänge, so find wir zwei Stufe [...]: die höhere ist die spezifisch geistige, die Schicht des *intellectus agens*, des freien Ich als Ich der freien Akte [...]. Dieses spezifisch geistige Ich, als Subjekt der Geistesakte, die Persönlichkeit, findet sich abhängig von einem dunkeln Untergrunde von Charakteranlagen, ursprünglichen und verborgenen Dispositionen, andererseits abhängig von der Natur.“

⁹ “Jedenfalls bloße Natur ist alles ‘mechanische Ich-tue’. Es regt sich ein sinnlicher Trieb, der Trieb etwa zu rauchen, ich greife zur Zigarre und zünde sie an, während meine Aufmerksamkeit, meine Ichtätigkeiten, ja mein bewusstes Affiziertsein ganz so anders ist: mich regen Gedanken an, ich folge ihnen nach, ich verhalte mich zu ihnen aktiv prüfend, billigend, missbilligend etc. Da haben wir ‘unbewusste’ Ichafektionen und Reaktion. Das Affizierende geht auf das Ich, aber nicht auf das wache, auf das Ich der ‘bewussten’ Zuwendung, Beschäftigung etc. Immerfort lebt das Ich im Medium seiner ‘Geschichte’, alle seine früheren Lebendigkeiten sind herabgesunken und wirken nach, in Tendenzen, in Einfällen, Umbildungen oder Verähnlichungen frühere Lebendigkeiten, aus

3. The structure of the mind: consciousness and unconsciousness

Husserl gets right to the point I'm interested in in the text I have just quoted. The expression “mechanical” self is not the most felicitous, though. Instead, it would be better to call these processes the “automaticities of mental life.” We all know them. For example, in games that require a speedy response and dexterity, the perceptual-motor system acts much faster than consciousness. This is also the case when we drive absorbed in thinking so that when we reach our destination, we have little or no recollection of the vicissitudes of our journey. However, we perceived everything and successfully drove the car based on learned automatic routines. Indeed, only when these routines cannot solve something along the way can the whole motor and perceptual process jump into the realm of consciousness so that we can decide what to do. The same always happens in our mental life, for example, in the constant regulation of the body and in immediate perception and response, while our field of consciousness is directed towards other subjects. The mind continuously processes a set of parallel routines with little interconnection. Integration and serial organization are only relative to one part and have to do with what we call the “conscious life” of a self. Moreover, there is a constant back and forth between the two dimensions: consciously learned processes become routines that we perform unconsciously; passive dimensions, such as drives and emotional life, can suddenly burst into the field of conscious experience. Sleepwalking is an extreme case in which conscious life seems to have been eclipsed, but this does not prevent sleepwalkers from walking, performing habitual, stereotyped acts, and even, as has happened, being able to drive. These are all cases of mental life without the “being-conscious” dimension.

However, casuistic reasons are inappropriate here. We need a conceptual delimitation of the mind's structure so that these processes, whether conscious or unconscious, can be fully categorized and appropriately placed.

The following categorization is simply a first sketch. We find:

1. A passive stratum whose configurations are found beforehand in the active life of the ego. It includes sensitive elements that I will call “aesthetic” (from *αἰσθησις*), elements that have to do with emotion and feelings, which I will call “thymic” (from *θύμος*), and the impulsive, desiderative and volitional dimension, which I will call “orectic” (from *ὀρεξις*).

solchen Verähnlichungen zusammengeschmolzenen neuen Gebilden etc. - ganz wie in der Sphäre der Ursinnlichkeit, deren Gebilde auch zum Ichmedium, zu seiner aktuellen und potentiellen Habe gehören.“

Aesthetic pre-givenness, with its internal forms of configuring contents that affect the ego and to which it gives free course or not, was studied by Husserl in his lessons on passive genesis (Husserl, 1966). However, there is no overall approach to the orectic and thymic fields, although incisive texts can be found in the set of manuscripts published in three volumes under the title *Studies on the Structure of Consciousness* (Husserl, 2020), particularly in the second and third volumes.

2. The acts of volitional, evaluative, and, at the base, perceptual intentionality, which can gain increasing complexity, with syntactic-categorial elements, up to objectivities of understanding and judgment in the form of the “in general” (*überhaupt*). This “genealogy” is well presented in the work organized by Landgrebe, based on Husserl's texts, titled *Experience and Judgement* (Husserl, 1999).

3. The substitute for the “indirect object” of Brentano's psychology: experience (*Erlebnis*) or the being-lived (*erlebt*) as such, where, in the Husserlian most common interpretation, something like a pre-reflective and non-objective self-consciousness is lodged (I will return to this point right away).

4. Finally, a device for the self-recovery of mental life, remembrance, along with self-anticipation in expectation (all cases of “thetic presentification,” *thetische Vergegenwärtigung*); as well as another and powerful kind of thematic self-objectification: reflection (*Reflexion*).

Concerning point 3 above, what we find everywhere – in the wake of Husserl, by the way – is the thesis that objects are intended, but acts themselves are experienced, i.e., they are not co-present as secondary objects in the manner of Brentano but are instead given in a pre-objective and pre-reflective form of self-consciousness. Obviously, this sense of experience has to do with what I began by defining as “consciousness” in an adjectival or adverbial sense: being consciously intentionally directed towards some object *X*.

However, this conception of experience, i.e., of living and what is experienced, has deeply problematic aspects.

Firstly, as we are told, acts (and also states) are given, but given to whom? This is what is generally referred to as the “dative of manifestation.” However, if we answer that they are given to the very subject who lives them and thus has them as their own, a new question inevitably arises: how can we characterize this subject? If to avoid assuming that an experience is already an object for an “I,” which is untenable, one answers that this subject is defined as the one who continuously lives in his acts and states, we are going around in a circle: We affirm a subject *for* the experiences by saying that he is the subject *of* the experiences. The experiences

are lived by me, and I am the one who lives the experiences. Lipps had already come across this circularity in his lecture on psychology. He wrote: “It is not acceptable to define the psychic as belonging to the subject or the ‘I,’ and then to define the subject again as the connection of the psychic or the ‘I.’” (Lipps, 1896: 5-6).¹⁰

Secondly, there is a question of principle. Can we say that, by an essential law, every act (or state) *must necessarily* be experienced (*erlebt*)? This would be so if an intentional act or state were inconceivable without a concomitant experience. However, this does not seem to be the case on closer inspection. The concept of intentionality is a generic unit that contains several types or species. So, for example, saying “there is a perception of *X*” and “there is a perceptual intentionality of *X*” are equivalent insofar as “perception” is a species of the genus “intentionality” (or *Bewusstsein*, in the transitive sense of *Bewusstsein von etwas*). However, *Erlebnis*, experience, is not a genus for intentional acts or states. This becomes blatant when we express it verbally. Saying “A wants *X*” is not equivalent to “A has the experience of wanting *X*.” In fact, not only do the two assertions have different objects (either wanting *X* or experiencing *that X* is wanted), but they also do not entail each other: it does not follow that the truth of the sentence “there is a wanting or desiring of *X*” entails that the sentence “there is an experiencing of wanting or desiring *X*” is also true. The lesson is crucial to my point. It goes like this: an act or a state can exist as a mental fact without necessarily having to be experienced or (which is the same for us now) without necessarily having to be conscious in an adjectival sense. An act or volition without experience, or “self-consciousness,” is therefore neither a logical nor an essential impossibility: unconsciously wanting or aiming at *X*. It goes without saying that the one who says “I want *X*” has simultaneously a volition and the experiencing of that volition. However, the one who says, “I have always wanted *X*, although I have only just now realized it,” had an *unconscious* experience of wanting *X* till the moment when (s)he becomes aware of that volition. Stumpf had the very same conviction:

We would call unconscious in the strict sense those unnoticed states or activities that would otherwise have the character of the mental functions we know, that is, of representing, judging, feeling, and willing, and that follow their laws, but that are not accompanied by the slightest,

¹⁰ “[...] Die Psychologie habe zu Gegenständen ihrer Betrachtung die Bewusstseins-erlebnisse. Hierin liegt die Beziehung zu einem, der erlebt [...]. Natürlich darf nicht gesagt werden, das Ich oder Subjekt sei der Zusammenhang der Vorstellung oder der psychischen Tatsachen. Dies hieße im Kreise drehen und mit dem Fragenden sein Spiel treiben. Was eine ‘Vorstellung’ oder ein psychischer Tatbestand sei, dies ist ja eben die Frage, um sich handelt. Es geht nicht an, das Psychische als das dem Subjekt oder ‘mir’ Zugehörige, und dann wiederum das Subjekt als den Zusammenhang des Psychischen oder ‘mir’ Zugehörigen zu definieren.”

however weak, consciousness and cannot be called into consciousness by any effort of attention, either while they are happening or afterward. Whether or not they exist is, as is well known, a much-debated question. Their logical possibility cannot be denied since no internal contradiction arises if the characteristic of consciousness is removed and the rest of the characteristic complex is retained. (Stumpf, 1939: 339)¹¹

Let us remember Husserl's "mechanical self," which, under an "unconscious" but actual affection, starts smoking without realizing what he is doing, only to become aware of it later. Or consider the case in which we suddenly realize that we were emotionally altered all day – by anxiety, for example – without having realized it until then.

If you grant me this point, you will be granting me that the being-experienced (*erlebt Sein*) is not an ingredient by essence always present and, therefore, a necessary companion of every mental act or state. Thus, you will be granting me a phenomenological concept of the unconscious. In doing so, you will also give me a new phenomenological way of accessing the phenomenon of being-conscious.

In fact, instead of assuming that consciousness is something obvious, working on the erroneous Cartesian-Lockean-Brentanian assumption that mental life and consciousness are the same, the productive questions about consciousness can eventually be asked from a phenomenological concept of the unconscious. What, then, is being-conscious in an adjectival sense? What elements are brought into mental life by the fact that its contents are or become conscious?

The central point of this question has to do with a reappraisal of the thesis that considering consciousness in an adjectival or adverbial sense is tantamount to talking about some pre-reflective kind of *self*-consciousness. Therefore, I ask: Does being consciously aware of *X* mean, *eo ipso*, being *aware* of the awareness of *X*, in a kind of embryonic reflection, a *Reflexion-im-Ansatz*, as Gerd Brand had put it (Brand, 1955: 74)? I think not. First, when seeing a tree and hearing a bird singing, for example, the seeing and hearing themselves do not appear "concomitantly or laterally." This intentional diplopia was Brentano's thesis, which I rejected

¹¹ "Unbewusste im strengen Sinne würden wir solche, unbemerkt, Zustände oder Tätigkeiten nennen, die zwar im übrigen den Charakter der uns bekannten psychischen Funktionen, also den Vorstellens, Urteilens, Fühlens, Wollens trügen und ihren Gesetzen folgten, aber nicht von dem mindesten, noch so schwachen Bewusstsein begleitet wären, und durch keinerlei Anstrengung der Aufmerksamkeit weder während ihres Stattfindens, noch nachher ins Bewusstsein gerufen werden könnten. Ob es solche gibt, ist bekanntlich eine viel umstrittene Frage. Ihre logische Möglichkeit kann nicht bestritten werden, da kein innerer Widerspruch entsteht, wenn das Merkmal des Bewusstseins gestrichen und der übrige Merkmalkomplex beibehalten wird."

(repeating Lipps, 1896: 5).¹² As Husserl understood, acts and their immanent temporality only constitute *qua* objects in reflection. Before reflection, there is no such duality in the being-consciousness of something. What is it, then, to be *consciously* hearing the birds singing and seeing the tree? Is it being aware of it? Certainly. But how? Because the acts impressively appear to themselves as present in an internal consciousness? This is Zahavi's thesis, which assimilates internal consciousness and consciousness of time: To be internally conscious of seeing and hearing means, in his reading, that seeing and hearing self-manifest as experiences now occurring in the proto-impressional, retentive, and protentional structure of immanent time. He writes, "Before reflection, there is no consciousness of internal objects, and there is no distinction between pre-reflexive consciousness of experiences and internal consciousness of time since the latter is simply a new term for the former" (Zahavi, 2010: 336).

I agree with this equivalence of internal consciousness with the consciousness of time, although, as Zahavi points out, Husserl wavered on this point. However, I agree with it with a double qualification.

Firstly, what appears in the consciousness of time are not the proto-impressional and retentive phases themselves. Indeed, these constitute the objectual now of the singing that is heard and the tree that is sawed, but the hearing and the seeing are neither "now" nor "before" nor "after." Instead, they are the quasi-flow of "absolute consciousness," which is not actually "flowing" – precisely what Husserl later named the *nunc stans*. What appears as now being is the tree itself and the bird's song in a field of objective simultaneity, which puts them together in one consciousness of the present. In my opinion, this is what *consciously* intending something means: The opening up of a unitary *field of presence* in the form of a "now" that brings together a multiplicity of intentional objects with their "objective tail" of past and future. This awareness is not, *prima facie*, a form of self-consciousness. On the contrary, if we follow the course of its own intentionality, we find the opening of an experience of the world in a now of objective simultaneity that always flows. So, although I agree with Zahavi in his equation between internal consciousness and consciousness of time, I do not follow him in his insistence on a self-consciousness intrinsic to experience itself, which represents something like an impressional, irrelative, and intransitive "self-manifestation" (Zahavi, 2003: 173), beneath the

¹² "Hier wäre alles ohne Weiteres klar, wenn wir außer dem Dasein des Empfundenen, Vorgestellten, Gedachten, auch noch das Empfinden, Vorstellen, Denken oder kurz die psychischen 'Akte' unmittelbar erlebten. Aber solche Akte gibt es in Wahrheit in unserer unmittelbaren Erfahrung nicht. Wenn irgend etwas, dann gehört der Akt oder Vorgang des Vorstellens, die Art, wie es gemacht wird, dass ein Vorgestelltes für mich da ist, in das Reich des Unbewussten."

concrete flowing of an objective field of presence. Indeed, I believe this is no more than a duplication: consciousness is a field of presence; it does not need to “self-manifest” to be so. i.e., to be the “here and now” where things appear, while it can also be the case in recollection or reflection, but not at this most fundamental level (parenthetically, I would add that this thesis by Zahavi has been the subject of an extensive criticism by Coate, 2018). Furthermore, if we go beyond Bernau's manuscripts on time, from whose lesson Zahavi departs to show that Husserl had at this epoch a different and better opinion than before, we will find in a preparatory text for the *Systematic Work*, supplemented in 1932, what seems to be Husserl's final position on a putative “self-manifestation” of the flux. There, Husserl assertively (albeit with hesitation) states that the self-manifestation of the stream of consciousness is an operation of the phenomenologizing I and not of the stream itself as such; in other words, that the self-manifestation belongs to the I, which, by reflective objectifying, opens up the field of transcendental experience. He writes:

But here it must be pondered that the transcendental “unveiling” of originary life, in the regressive question, is a performance [*Leistung*] of the phenomenologizing and developed transcendental ego, and that it is a regressive questioning from the constituted world, which contains the ego as mundanely constituted. [...] In the subsequent reflective activity, again objectifying, I see and say: To the essence of the flow of experiences, which in itself does not perform a real temporization [*Zeitigung*] and is not a corresponding performance of consciousness, belongs my constant possibility of infusing it with intentionality, so to speak. But the real temporization is not that of the flow as flow, but rather mine, that of the transcendental-phenomenological ego. (Husserl, 2002: 184)¹³

From this comes my second modification of Zahavi's thesis. How, then, am I aware of the life of consciousness if all self-temporization or self-manifestation is already the work of reflection? Precisely because, alongside the things that are given, I am present in this experience under two combined aspects: it is *for me* insofar as I appear in it as the *psycho-somatic* (“mundane”) *center* that creates the unity of a point of view. I do not “see” my seeing and my

¹³ “Aber hier ist zu bedenken, dass die rückfragende transzendente ‘Enthüllung’ des ursprünglichen Lebens eine Leistung des transzendentalen, phänomenologisierenden, entwickelten Ich ist und Rückfrage ist von der konstituierten Welt aus, die das Ich als weltlich konstituiert enthält. [...] In nachkommender reflektiver Aktivität, wieder vergegenständlichender, sehe ich und sage ich: Zum Wesen des Erlebnisstromes, der in sich keine eigentliche Zeitigung vollzieht und keine entsprechende Bewusstseinsleistung ist, gehört meine ständige Vermöglichkeit, ihm Intentionalität sozusagen einzuflößen. Aber die wirkliche Zeitigung ist nun nicht die des Stromes als Stromes, sondern meine, des transzendental-phänomenologischen Ich.“

hearing: I am the one to whom things appear from this point of view or perspective, and that is there as my bodily and psychic actual life is *connected* to the experience of the surrounding world. Thus, my (constituted, “mundane” or “worldly”) subjectivity is read, in the negative, in the way things are present to me, as a psycho-somatic-physical unity. In addition, it has to be stressed that value predicates and volitional directions load things that are present in the field of presence, giving them a *sense* that expresses my way of going through them: this is detestable, good, pleasant, that quenches my thirst, and so on. This is the way, the mode, and the status of how I appear as a concrete subject of a world that makes sense to me. As Sartre famously wrote, when I run hurriedly after the streetcar, there is no self-consciousness in the form “I am running after the streetcar,” but simply consciousness of myself in the intentional consciousness “tram-in-need-of-being-taken” (Sartre, 2003: 102)¹⁴. Lipps also saw this point incisively when he wrote:

I am, of course, immediately aware that something is there “for me.” To perceive, to represent, to think is the existence for me of what is perceived, represented, thought; or: perceptions, representations, and thoughts are what is perceived, represented, or thought, insofar as it *is* something that belongs to me or the subject, *a subjectively real thing*. (Lipps, 1896: 5)¹⁵

If what I have just said is correct, being consciously directed towards objects means their joint position in an omni-involving here-now that combines them all in a single field of presence.

So, I repeat the question: How does this having-consciousness impact mental life? Before dealing with this question in the next and final part, it should be said that this dimension that I have tried to uncover has to do with what Aron Gurwitsch, from his doctoral thesis in 1929 to his *opus magnum* in 1964 (see Gurwitsch, 1964, 2010), tried to describe under the name of “field of consciousness” (*Bewusstseinsfeld*).

¹⁴ “Quand je cours après un tramway, quand je regarde l'heure, quand je m'absorbe dans la contemplation d'un portrait, il n'y a pas de Je. Il y a conscience du tramway-devant-être-rejoint, etc., et conscience non positionnelle de la conscience. En fait je suis alors plongé dans le monde des objets, ce sont eux qui constituent l'unité de mes consciences, qui se présentent avec des valeurs, des qualités attractives ou répulsives, mais moi, j'ai disparu, je me suis anéanti.”

¹⁵ “Nur dass etwas ‘für mich’ da ist, davon freilich habe ich ein unmittelbares Bewusstsein. Das Wahrnehmen, Vorstellen, Denken, ist das Dasein des Wahrgenommenen, Vorgestellten, Gedachten für mich, oder: die Wahrnehmungen, Vorstellungen, Gedanken sind das Wahrgenommenen, Vorgestellte, Gedachte, sofern es ein mir oder dem Subjekt Zugehöriges, *ein subjektiv Wirkliches ist*.”

4. Consciousness and unconsciousness in mental life

Consciousness is a superior and highly differentiated dimension of mental life.

The first note that characterizes it is twofold: integration and centralization – integration of various elements and their centralization in a single “working space,” which Gurwitsch called the “field of consciousness.” However, we need to be more precise here. Gurwitsch's results are a good starting point. First, the question is the following: Which elements are constantly integrated? At the base, apart from complex supervening forms, are integrated elements relating to the sense of one's own body (*somatic self*), the surrounding perceptual world (*physical world*), and thoughts, be they motivated or simply occurrent, without *conscious connection* to others, I add (the *psychic self*). These elements are always present, although their intensity can vary. When we are, for example, absorbed in deep abstract thoughts, the sense of our own body and the surrounding perceptual world becomes minimal. If, however, we are practicing an intense bodily-closed activity, such as pedaling or swimming, it is the thoughts and the surrounding world that retreat into the field of consciousness, a surrounding perceptual world which, in turn, takes on a dominant function when we engage in the simple contemplation of an object, such as a work of art or a landscape. Moreover, centralization is not undifferentiated; it has an internal structure. Gurwitsch saw that centralization has a core that commands attention, which he called the theme, and a set of objects relevant to the theme, which he called the thematic field, while others, many others, are completely occasional and without relevance to theme and thematic field, which he, indeed following James' concept of *fringe*, called the “margin” and its “halo” (Gurwitsch, 1964: 10). If, say, the theme is driving a new car in an unfamiliar city, the bodily movements linked to the act of driving, together with motivated thoughts about location and routes to take, as well as the perception of surrounding objects, belong to the thematic field, while, for example, an occasional sound in the street, a particular sensation of pain in the arm or occurring thoughts about other objects are part of the margins of the field of consciousness, as they are irrelevant in the sense that they can vary without altering either the theme or the thematic field. All of this, it should be added, has an internal dynamism. An element of the thematic field can become a theme, and the same can happen to an element of the margin – for example, a background sound growing to the point where it becomes disturbing and takes the central place as the new theme that captures attention. The other way

around, suddenly occurring elements not previously existing in the field of consciousness can appear in it and change its structure, like the unexpected rumble of thunder or a flash of light.

Besides all that good general description of the structure and dynamics of the field of consciousness, I must add an important point to Gurwitsch's analyses, namely, that the relationship with the surrounding world is not just perceptual. We know that objects of a higher order are constituted upon perception, such as predicative hierarchies, sets or collections, and so on. However, going back to the basic level, it must be said that there is always more than only perception. The objects given in the surrounding world are embedded not only with the somatic self of sensations and kinesthesia but also with thymic and orectic dimensions so that it is also an emotional and driven self that opens the ever more than just perceptual relationship with the surrounding world. Thus, the "I," the psychic and somatic self, has a world that is its own insofar as that world is embedded in the network of sensations, desires, emotions, and so on, which constitute its "self-feeling" in a world that is for it or its own. Thus, even before any act of reflection, the "I" is present to itself, not so much in a quasi-reflection, but because the world that is given to it is the world from its point of view or "its" world (the intersubjective relationship will make this world a common world, in certain respects, but that is not the relevant point here).

The field of consciousness is thus a structure of concomitant elements, given in the simultaneity of an objective "now." They are coordinated and integrated in a single "space": they are *conscious* in my adverbial sense. What is its impact on mental life?

This coordination-integration function is a powerful *connecting* device. It correlates among themselves somatic, orectic, and thymic elements, together with perceptions, evaluations, and thoughts of other kinds, whether motivated or simply occurrent. As the field of consciousness puts in a closed unity the world "inside" and "around" the subject, or better, as it puts a subject as the center of a world that is its own, even though the main form of the field is that of an inclusive "now," it also generates a "here," marking the own body's position in the surrounding world. This here-now system, which supports the content of the field of consciousness, has dramatic effects on the whole mental life. Indeed, it makes possible the *discovery* of relationships among co-given elements (including the "I" itself), quick *learning*, adaptive *flexibility* of behavior to new circumstances, and the rapid making of *decisions*. At a higher level, it also allows for processes of remembrance and anticipation, imbricated in the fluid structure of the "now," as well as acts of reflection and, in the case of beings endowed with language, processes of reporting mental life and self-description.

Therefore, consciousness in the adverbial sense has a decisive effect on mental life. Though, it is not the whole of mental life. If one wants to return to Husserl's terms, the functions referred to above (and still others) have only to do with waking life (*waches Leben*). However, while they do not appear in the conscious here-and-now system at the given moment of its occurrence, some processes are constantly operative and essential for the overall plexus of mental life. Let us call them the *dark life* of the mind. They are not the opposite of waking life or the point where it is canceled out, such as deep sleep, fainting, or coma. Instead, they are ever-effective processes that permeate and support waking life. Remember Husserl's "mechanical I-do" (or "automatic self," as I prefer to call it), which has a non-conscious urge to smoke and suddenly finds itself with a cigar in its mouth. This is a suggestive example, but it only gives a glimpse of the complexity of mental life. In fact, at every moment, processes are running in parallel, with little integration, relating to the regulation of one's own body, perceptual-motor routines, and passive orectic and thymic processes that suddenly appear in the waking mind (when and if they do) in the form of occurrent thoughts, i.e., not motivated either by the theme, the thematic field or the margins of consciousness. To see this, it's enough to recall Armstrong's famous example of the truck driver (Armstrong, 1997: 723)¹⁶. He is absorbed in his thoughts when driving. His waking mind is "somewhere else." However, he competently performs all the driving maneuvers, sees the lights, brakes, or accelerates without awareness. These are long-learned routines that go hand in hand with the constant proprioception of his body, his position, its inclination on the curves on the route, or even the permanent burning he feels in a finger. Once the journey is over, he can describe the temporal flow of his thoughts but has a blurred vision of what he did while driving. He remembers, for example, that he saw a lady passing with a dog and a red car that overtook him at high speed, but he cannot give them a well-defined temporal position in connection with the thoughts in his stream of consciousness. All of this takes place and is operative in that dimension I have called the "dark" life of the mind. It is just as essential as awakened life. Indeed, if everything that goes on in our mind were only what we are aware of in the "stream of consciousness" and can, therefore, remember, reflect on, and report, our mental content would be so poor that we would not be able to cope with the surrounding world.

I will end with an important observation. This awareness in an adverbial or adjectival sense is not an embryonic form of reflection, a self-consciousness, but only prepares for it. In

¹⁶ In his analysis of the example, Armstrong states that the consciousness missing here is "introspection." As the reader can easily see, I'm afraid I must disagree with this statement, although it is immaterial to the example.

fact, for a higher-order reflective act to take place, there must be a lower-order act with the property of belonging to the conscious center of the Here and Now. Reflection focuses on these contents because they are the ones that are internally objectifiable and reportable. This also marks the limit of reflection: Mental contents without this property are unreachable, except through the indirect form of self-imputation in the form of “I had to have done *X* to find myself in state *Y*” (for instance, I had to have the “unconscious” impulse to smoke to realize that I am smoking now). Thus, contrary to Brentano, consciousness is not *per se* self-consciousness but rather a higher function of mental life, through which some contents that enter the center of the Here-Now receive an additional elaboration by a detachment under contrast and a mutual connection with other mental contents. The first mistake is to confuse the totality of mental life with the few contents that are selectively brought into this higher function of consciousness in the adverbial sense. Mental content is broader than this conscious mental content, which is only a part of the totality of mental life. The second mistake is, in line with the first, to take this narrow content of the stream of consciousness as a realm closed in on itself as something that has an autonomous unity. Taking this last step is tantamount to assuming that there is always a surreptitious self-consciousness accompanying all mental life because, in this case, for mental life, being a unity is equivalent to being aware of it *as* a unity. Hence, the epoch-making Cartesian illusion that a mental process is defined by the awareness of having it at the very moment it occurs. Indeed, to think of the conscious mind as a separate or autonomous unit, one must always think of it as self-conscious. Therefore, only mental processes with the property of consciousness constitute the “mind” in this illusory and ultimately poor view. However, if, as for Descartes, to think is to know that one thinks (*penser c'est savoir qu'on pense*), and if thought is the essential attribute of the mind, then one must maintain that *l'âme pense toujours*, and consequently fall into the absurdity of presupposing that there is always self-consciousness, even when there is no awakened life and no conscious intentionality or attention. In his way, Brentano did not escape this illusion either: The descriptive autonomy of his psychology was based entirely on this assumption that only what is conscious is mental or that everything mental is self-conscious, so that the mind was an autonomous domain, a thesis that, for him, was at the service of a more veiled metaphysical and theological agenda. As a matter of fact, the last planned chapter (the sixth, never written, by the way) of his *Psychology* would be about the “immortality of the soul.”

In these conceptions, a theological and metaphysical presupposition operates surreptitiously. It goes like this: What essentially characterizes subjective life is self-knowledge

and self-consciousness. Instead, in my opinion, conscious mental life is only the highest point in the life of a mind that is inextricably linked to the somatic and physical dimensions. The mind is a function of a living organism, and a conscious mind is an even higher function. If we start from the bottom up, we do not have a subjective, self-conscious mental life closed in on itself, as if it were self-sustained and could be isolated in an all-encompassing pre-reflective self-consciousness that will further develop in total self-knowledge.

When searching for the remote origins of this assumption, we could perhaps be taken back to the famous Aristotelian definition of divine substance. It is characterized as νόησις νοήσεως νόησις, “thought of thought thought” (Aristotle, 1982: 638; 1074b: 34-35), in a complete omphalic encapsulation, as if the highest form of life, that of the perfect living being (το τέλειο ζώο), consisted of eternally gazing at... its very umbilicus!

Would this god be conscious?

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