

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS

DIVISION A: LOGIC AND METHOD: OWEN BENNETT, *Chairman*

Problem (a): *Can Unconscious Factors Influence Every Judgment?*

Several modern theories in the social sciences and psychology suggest that factors operating outside intellectual control—indeed, beneath the level of conscious awareness—insinuate themselves into the human judicative process. It seems that by affecting us subconsciously such factors color every judgment with some degree of uncontrollable subjective relativity. Sometimes this view is formulated in the statement that every judgment involves an element of rationalization—that is, distortion to make judgment conform to subjective needs and interests rather than to the objective reality of the content judged. A qualified position of this sort is an important thesis in dialectical materialism. In a different form the view appears in some existentialist expressions, which condemn unconsciously determined rationalization in favor of freely determined subjectivity, but admit limits to the effectiveness of freedom and so allow more or less influence on judgment by unconscious factors. Professional philosophers in Britain and America, however, seem not to have paid much attention to the influence of social and psychological unconscious factors in their theories of the process of judgment.

In this paper I wish merely to call attention to this apparently neglected field of epistemological problems. At present I do not even know enough to begin a survey of the field, of the work done by social scientists and psychologists in it, and of the seminal data from which their conclusions have developed—yet such a survey is needed before serious work can be undertaken toward solving the problems. However, having become aware of the field, I wish to commend it to you. I first will indicate the existence and approximate location of the field by brief references to Benjamin Lee Whorf, Karl Mannheim, and Sigmund Freud. Second, I will suggest a formulation of what I think will be the central question. Third, I will sketch lines along which this problem might be resolved.

Benjamin Lee Whorf was a scholar in descriptive linguistics and an original thinker in theoretical linguistics.¹ On the basis of his studies of Indian languages and under the influence of the teaching of Edmund Sapir, Whorf proposed what he called “the linguistic relativity principle,” which has since been called “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.”² From the data

¹ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (New York and London: The Technology Press of M.I.T. and John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1956) includes a brief biography of Whorf in the editor's “Introduction” (pp. 1-33), a complete bibliography of his publications (pp. 271-274), and selected bibliographies of his unpublished manuscripts and of books and articles by others relating to him (pp. 275-278).

² *Ibid.*, Carroll's “Introduction,” pp. 23-31.

he had examined, Whorf generalized that every language has its own set of automatic and involuntary patterns. These patterns are background phenomena of which users of the language are not aware, or only dimly aware, so that they are unconsciously bound by them. From this generalization the relativity principle follows. It is that the users of languages having different formal structures are pointed by the peculiar patterns of each language "toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." Sophisticated scientific views of the world, Whorf thought, "arise by a higher specialization of the same basic grammatical patterns that fathered the naive and implicit view."³ Even mathematics, symbolic logic, and philosophy are specialized extensions of language.⁴ Indeed, Whorf went so far as to suggest that the linguistic relativity principle was applicable not merely to linguistic expressions, but to the deeper or higher level which usually is called "mind": ". . . the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious."⁵

Because Karl Mannheim was an epistemologist as well as a sociologist and because he was working with full awareness of the history of philosophy and the current philosophic arguments, his theory of unconscious factors is highly articulated and subtly qualified. Moreover, because he developed his position over many years, revising it from time to time to meet criticism, fresh data, and his own new insights, his position is not the same in all of his works.⁶ The mature and best known statement of Mannheim's position is in his *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*.⁷ According to Mannheim, the problem of the sociology of knowledge is how men actually think. Denying that there is any group mind and denying also that isolated individuals think, Mannheim maintains that individuals participate in thinking within a social context so that the thinker is predetermined both by established social situations and by preformed patterns of thought. Moreover, he holds that thinking as it actually occurs is not apart from collective activity, but arises out of it and remains continuous with it.⁸ Mannheim criticizes the treatment of knowledge in "classical epistemology" for having ignored the social character and actional basis of thought, and considers that oversight to be the reason why it also ignored the unconscious factors which influence judgment:

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-245; quotations from summary of position p. 221.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 252 and pp. 246-270 *passim*.

⁶ Paul Kecskemeti treats the influences on Mannheim's theory, charts its development, and offers an excellent brief critique of it in his introduction to a volume of Mannheim's essays which he edited: *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1952), pp. 1-32.

⁷ Tr. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1936).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

Precisely because knowing is fundamentally collective knowing (the thought of the lone individual is only a special instance and a recent development), it presupposes a community of knowing which grows primarily out of a community of experiencing prepared for in the sub-conscious. However, once the fact has been perceived that the largest part of thought is erected upon a basis of collective actions, one is impelled to recognize the force of the collective unconscious. The full emergence of the sociological point of view regarding knowledge inevitably carries with it the gradual uncovering of the irrational foundation of rational knowledge.⁹

To summarize Mannheim's thesis, he held that unconscious factors deriving from one's social situation determine the experience which one acquires in collective action, that such action thus is at the experimental base of knowledge, and that the social process in this way penetrates the perspective in which assertions are made. The penetration in question is not slight; it extends in particular to metaphysics, in which the ontological judgments offered by various groups are related to their differing social situations which lead them to experience the "same" reality with different modes of experiencing.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Mannheim allows that there are cases of formal truths in which the truth-content of a statement is detachable from its genesis; his favorite example is $2 \times 2 = 4$.¹¹ Moreover, he strives mightily to show that his position does not involve him in illusionism or subjective relativism, but rather requires a new definition of objectivity within a relational and perspectivist theory of truth.¹² And most important, Mannheim maintains that the unconscious determining factors can become uncovered in certain social situations, and it is precisely such a revelation, making possible more conscious control and rational determination, that he wished to accomplish by insisting upon the pervasive influence of unconscious factors upon judgment in certain situations.¹³

The entire psychoanalytic literature could be investigated with profit to discover evidence of the functioning of unconscious psychological factors upon judgment. Although more concerned with motivation than with cognition and more relevant to sense memory and experience than to intellectual operations, the work of Freud is sprinkled with suggestive bits of evidence and his over-all theoretical constructions seem to imply that conscious operations, even of the most intellectual sort, are but fragments of the entire mental structure which largely remains unconscious.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Mannheim proceeds immediately to explain the oversight of the position he is criticizing by its genesis within an individualistic form of society.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39, pp. 262-263.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 269-275 and *passim*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 5, pp. 30-46. Thus Mannheim reveals himself as a modern Socrates, rather than as a latter-day Protagoras, and by his emphasis on self-knowledge he justifies his claim that his position is not relativistic.

¹⁴ E.g., Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, V Vols., ed. James Strachey, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959), V, 376-382.

Freud's work has been widely utilized to explain the development of literary and artistic forms and works, and attempts even have been made to explain psychoanalytically the content as well as the motivation of metaphysical construction.¹⁵

Freud himself developed a general theory of intellectual judgment which he published in 1925 in a brief paper entitled, "Negation."¹⁶ According to this theory, judging is an intellectual termination of a tentative process of action—thought—which leads to determinate motor activity. Negation in judgment is an intellectual device to maintain a quasi-repression of content which has arisen to consciousness. Freud recognizes that in the course of development the determination of judgment becomes the concern of the final or reality-ego, but he maintains that a basic presupposition for examining reality is that there be an interest in the availability of the object. Hence he concludes that affirmation is aligned with erotic and negation with destructive instincts, and he believes that the intellectual function of judgment is derived from these fundamental impulses.

With these few references to indicate the field of epistemological problems that I am commending to you, I now wish to suggest how the central question in this field should be formulated.

I do not think that the central question is whether some or all judgments can be shown to be free or can be freed from the influence of every sort of unconscious factor. Certainly experience is in some way a precondition of every judgment and clearly the process in which perception and memory are sorted and organized to form experience is largely unconscious. In traditional terms, the operation of the cogitative and of the agent intellect does not fall within immediate awareness. Further, ignorance of which we are not conscious—that is, lack of experience and lack of sufficient clarity and definiteness in understanding—obviously limits the scope of judgment, even if it does not thereby lead to error. Finally, unconscious factors can attract interest, as the phenomenon of distraction amply shows, and in any case the initiation of the intellectual process must be due to factors which are intellectually unconscious, since it is impossible to be conscious without having begun to know something other than knowledge. All these factors can be grouped together, and we might call them "material influences" to distinguish them from the formal determinant which specifies judgment to either affirmation or negation.

The question, then, seems not to be whether some unconscious factors influence every cognitive process which terminates in judgment, but whether the certitude of every judgment may be due to the influence of factors of which we are not aware, and hence which we cannot take into account and control, so that judgment is inevitably colored by subjective relativity. Yet such a question cannot be investigated very fruitfully.

¹⁵ E.g., Morris Lazerowitz, "The Relevance of Psychoanalysis to Philosophy," in *Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method, and Philosophy—A Symposium*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1959), pp. 133-156.

¹⁶ Freud, *loc. cit.*, pp. 181-185.

The position that unconscious factors do influence judgment in this way clearly cannot be universalized, since it would then apply to itself as well as to all other judgments, particularly to all philosophic positions incompatible with it. Such sweeping relativism would amount to a universal scepticism, and while logically unsophisticated and epistemologically confused thinkers occasionally do attempt to state such an extreme position, only slight ingenuity is required to apply the classic refutation, which Aristotle formulated so well in his defense of the principle of contradiction.

Whorf, for example, can be read as a very enthusiastic and equally incautious advocate of unqualified relativism. But if the reading is just, the refutation is merely to point out that he has managed to become aware of language patterns, that he can successfully translate from languages of the most alien structure into English and explain the differences in pattern to us, and that even the inadequacies of the best translation he can manage are not insuperable obstacles, since he can point them out to us and explain the linguistic reasons for them. Very quickly the thesis at least must be limited to read that linguistic patterns of which nonlinguists are normally unconscious might be determinative of some or all of the judgments which are not essential presuppositions for them to learn linguistics. As I have pointed out already, Mannheim is well aware of the reflexive problem, and he is careful to avoid taking an absurdly extreme position.

On the other hand, we cannot maintain that all unconscious influences on judgment are merely material. Although all too often sadly neglected, the fact remains that erroneous judgments are often made with complete subjective certitude. And even apart from the large number of judgments in which we find ourselves or others in error due to some factor which was for a time to ourselves or to the other unconscious, there is the fact of common experience that incompatible judgments are made with complete subjective certitude, not only with respect to matters of personal or practical import but even with respect to scientific and philosophic questions. Although I am not prepared to offer the necessary epistemological analysis, I would like to offer for discussion here and for investigation later the following proposition: that error in judgment always is due to the determination of certitude by unconscious factors, so that perfect knowledge would coincide with complete consciousness.

The central question in this field of epistemological problems, it therefore seems to me, should be formulated thus: In which judgments is the formal specification to affirmation or denial influenced at least to some extent by unconscious factors, and in which judgments is every such influence excluded? Further and subordinate questions will concern what sorts of unconscious factors there are which formally influence those judgments in whose determination they can enter, precisely how unconscious factors influence the determination of judgments into which they do enter, and under what conditions such determination by unconscious factors leads or is likely to lead to error.

With this suggestion for the formulation of what I think will be the central question in the field of epistemological problems that I am commending to your attention, I now wish to sketch lines along which these questions might be investigated and the central problem resolved.

One path on which investigation might proceed would be to attempt to reduce all apparent or alleged unconscious factors to a single basis, for example to psychological impulses or to moral bias, and to explain the mode in which they operate as the captivation of reason by emotion or by disordered will. This way promises a fast and relatively easy trip through the tangled field of problems under consideration, and its adoption is favored by the common sense familiarity of the explanation it offers, for every one knows by personal experience that judgment often is swayed by emotion and subjugated to a selfish will—especially by the selfish desire to have an answer, to “know” something that others wonder at, to be right and to find others mistaken, to find on the side of one’s self and one’s group, and to be in possession of whatever is necessary for personal security as a professional knower (or sophist) and the security of whatever persons and institutions one identifies with oneself. Yet despite its experiential ground, this path of investigation seems not to indicate clearly the lines along which a precise analysis might proceed and the explanation it offers is difficult to express in accurate and non-metaphorical terms. However, it seems to me important to preserve at least provisionally the richness of the distinction among the linguistic, social, intentional, and psychological domains as possible sources of unconscious factors, since each of these has its own peculiar status and so may influence the determination of some judgments in a unique way.

Considering language first, then, it seems to me that it will be essential at the outset to distinguish between the linguistic expression and the proposition or meaning-complex which it conveys. Properly it is not the verbal formula with its grammatical structure that is true or false, but the intention determined to affirmation or negation of which the linguistic expression is a sign. In the formation and interpretation of such signs, very complex unconscious processes of selection and organization, for the accomplishment of which what we call “learning the language” is an absolute precondition, must occur. The context of a linguistic expression is at no point necessarily limited, and so both exposition and interpretation must remain limited arts relying upon habitual operations subject to the unconscious determination of a language learned by more or less contingent personal experience.

The extent to which judgments are determined on the basis of written and oral communication thus opens a broad avenue for the influence of the unconscious factors of language use, and while all such judgments may involve a more general factor of belief, the peculiar mode of this influence deserves some special investigation. Even apart from its communicative function, language provides us with an almost indispensable symbolic basis for effective thinking. Inasmuch as we never think without images—in traditional terms, we do not judge without turning to phantasms—lan-

guages are a natural development in the human cognitive process, for they provide a precise and orderly set of images which is more suited to the requirements of the intellect than the relatively imprecise and variable images of natural objects. In this role, however, the unconscious processes by which linguistic images are selected and ordered in the conduct of actual processes of thought can lead to a variety of errors in the determination of judgment which the traditional treatises on fallacies in language only began to expose. A most important matter for investigation here is the precise manner in which we become conscious of and remedy the deficiencies of language as an associate of thought, for the development of language makes it clear that the limitations of linguistic framework are not an absolute barrier to the extension of thought, although it may be true that some languages are less suitable vehicles and provide more obstructions—for example, to the development of linguistics as an exact science or to metaphysics—than do others.

Considering society, in the second place, it seems to me that here we have in a new light the old problems of practical judgment. Individual character is not isolated, since man by nature is a social animal, and the entire process of education, which currently is designated by the fancy name "acculturation," is a matter of the inter-play of inner operations with a social context. Human existence—that is, moral life—is social, for even the most individual actions have some relevance to a social context or to aspects of the personality which are involved in a social context.

Practical judgment is never wholly determined by its own content or by reasons, but depends on inclination; it is knowledge by connaturality. Nor is the determination of practical judgment by inclination limited to the last and most concrete phases which are practical in the full sense. We know by experience what it means to say that the incontinent man syllogizes in four terms and we can at least imagine how it is possible for the secondary principles of practical reason to be blotted out of the heart.

Of course it is legitimate to protest that the very fact that practical knowledge is by inclination does not necessarily imply that unconscious factors are operative in the determination of every practical judgment. Yet it seems to me that there is truth in the position, maintained by the entire western tradition from Heraclitus to the present, that vicious and imperfect action involves a kind of blindness in which unconscious factors somehow are permitted to dominate judgment so that a bias which could not be accepted in the full light of consciousness can play its role.

Even apart from the striking case of vicious action, we must recognize various stages in moral development. Certainly in the child social influences of which he is not conscious but which have been internalized in his character play the greatest role in determining practical judgments. And we can easily see the same thing in other adults. The process of moral development involves a progressive growth in awareness of our own character and of the inclinations which stem from it, and a conscious acceptance or effort to amend what we discover as we examine ourselves.

This process of moral self-development toward perfection seems not to be terminable in this life, and hence we may conclude that unexamined aspects of the personality always may influence the determination of practical judgment. What most needs investigation here, it seems to me, is the mysterious process of practical judgment itself.

Considering the domain of intention itself, in the third place, it seems to me of great importance to recognize the possible influences of unconscious factors. Many of our efforts at education rest on the belief that the possession or lack of intellectual habits and of suitable methodology plays a considerable role in the determination of judgment, and introspection does not seem to me to indicate that their function is always fully conscious. Moreover, in the determination of many judgments we depend upon a complex of previous judgments, whose evidence may not be available—that is, whose grounds are not present to consciousness. This set of judgments has traditionally been called “opinion” in contradistinction to knowledge. Although a general factor of choice may enter into all such judgments, the determination is made in view of the available evidence, and the point I think needs special investigation here is the possible influence of unconscious factors in determining what evidence is available.

Fourth, considering the domain of psychological factors, it seems to me that with respect to the *exercise* of any act of judgment, an influence more than merely material occurs here in virtue of attention. The fixing of attention may be involved with factors operating in the other domains, and in that case it might contribute not only to exercise but even to the specification of the judgment. Considered properly and by itself, the fixing of attention evidently is necessary for the exercise of any act of judgment, and this determination is subject to the influence of unconscious factors. From this point of view, it seems obvious but also important that the failure to make any given judgment may be due to the influence of unconscious factors.

In which judgments, then, is the influence of unconscious factors upon the formal specification to affirmation or denial completely excluded? The candidate I offer for this position is the class of universal and necessary theoretical judgments which are evident or demonstrable. The specification of such judgments depends upon their own content or upon the content of previous judgments which depend for their specification only upon their own content. This specification cannot occur without consciousness of the content judged. It does not depend formally upon the genesis of the judgment or upon its experimental base, although experience is a material condition and the psychological process preceding the judgment is essential for its exercise. The achievement of theoretical judgment occurs by excluding from determination everything which falls beyond the content under consideration. Thus the difference between a scientific judgment and a non-scientific one is that the scientist knows the limits of his knowledge. The limitations of knowledge which isolate the precise content of theoretical judgment are multiple. They include the cate-

gorical determination according to which the content of the judgment is affirmed or denied, the propositional form and modality, and in the case of demonstrated judgments the structure and content by which they become evident. In other words, if the modes of predication which logic studies can delimit the content of a judgment, that judgment can be made under proper logical control. And if the consciously considered and restricted content of the judgment is then sufficient to determine its specification to affirmation or negation, the judgment will be free in that respect from the influence of unconscious factors, since what is not conscious already will have been excluded from consideration.

On this theory it is important to notice that experientially evident judgments concerning contingent singulars are not necessarily free in their specification from the possible influence of unconscious factors. Therefore, the evidence of hallucinations, dreams, and mistaken recognition is not in conflict with this position. The determination of experience—the “judgment of the cogitative”—evidently can be influenced by factors which are present neither to sensory nor to intellectual awareness, and even an evident perceptual judgment of the intellect depends for its specification on the determination of experience.

These, then, are the lines along which I think fruitful investigation of the problem of the influence of unconscious factors upon judgment might proceed. I have not suggested what sources might be helpful, not only because I have not yet developed the bibliography, but also because I think that scholarship can proceed more fruitfully after the problem is outlined. The method for treating a problem such as this cannot be historical, since it is not a question about history, but must be a methodology appropriate to epistemology and to logic, because it is a question about judgment and its conditions, which falls within their subject matters.

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