

Is Your Unconscious Smarter Than You Are?

A review of

Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious

by Timothy D. Wilson

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Reviewed by

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☰ The title of this book evokes memories of Albert Camus, writing in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that";. This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction.. This very heart, which is mine, will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself. (Camus, 1942/1955, pp. 14-15)

☰ Camus blamed his estrangement on the absurd confrontation between human consciousness and an unintelligible universe. But Timothy Wilson locates the problem in the limitations of consciousness. The world is knowable, and so are we, and in fact, by virtue of our "adaptive unconscious," we know a lot about ourselves and the social world in which we live. We just do not know that we know it, and we'd be a lot better off if we would just stop trying so hard to understand things and

just behave.

— In a now-classic paper, Wilson and Richard Nisbett argued that we have only very poor knowledge of the causes of our own behavior, and instead rely on a priori theories to make sense of processes that actually run off unconsciously (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). In this book, Wilson expands the argument to cover much broader territory. Not only do we not know why we do what we do, but we also do not know how we feel about things and events, and we're bad at predicting about how we'll feel about them in the future. Each of us has a sort of dual personality, one conscious, and the other unconscious. Because only the unconscious one really matters, we can learn more about ourselves from observing our behavior than by introspecting on our motives and goals. The stories that we tell about ourselves are just stories, and they're accurate to the extent that they happen to reflect our "nonconscious goals, feelings, and temperaments" (p. 181).

— The adaptive unconscious, in Wilson's view, is a powerful learning device, processing information quickly and efficiently, filtering stimuli, evaluating events, rendering judgments, and setting goals—all outside of our conscious awareness. Consciousness, if not wholly illusory, plays only a very limited role in human experience, thought, and action. Freud pretty much got it right, except that "our friend the adaptive unconscious" (p. 121) is kinder and gentler—and more rational—than Freud's seething, primitive, infantile, anxiety-evoking sexual and aggressive monsters from the Id. While Freud thought that consciousness was only the tip of the iceberg, Wilson thinks that it is "more the size of a snowball on top of that iceberg" (p. 6).

— To illustrate and support these ideas, Wilson musters an impressive array of fictional examples, anecdotes, and scientific research.

The fictional examples are—well, fiction, and the anecdotes are sometimes of dubious relevance. For example, Wilson cites the case of a University of Virginia student who won a prestigious Marshall Scholarship, but who almost did not apply because “she did not think she had much of a chance to win” (p. 201). The implication is that she did not know herself as well as her advisors did. Maybe. On the other hand, with only 40 scholarships awarded and a field of some 1,000 applicants that year, perhaps she knew herself quite well, but also calculated the base rates. In any event, the fact that she actually won against such odds tells us nothing about her unconscious personality, or the degree of her conscious self-knowledge.

☞ Of course, in a book that seeks to interpret scholarly research for a wider audience, it is the research that matters. Unfortunately, the studies Wilson details are often either irrelevant or subject to alternative interpretations. For example, he cites Lewicki’s research on implicit learning to support the claim that the adaptive unconscious is a powerful detector of patterns in the stimulus environment (Lewicki, Hill, & Bizot, 1988). But as it happens, Lewicki never compared incidental, implicit learning to an adequate control condition involving conscious, deliberate knowledge acquisition (nor do most demonstrations of the purported power of implicit learning, for that matter). Arguably, the most powerful learning mechanism available to human beings is what Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1986) has called social learning by precept, or sponsored teaching. That is why we give introductory psychology students textbooks, and make them attend lectures, instead of hoping that they’ll induce the principles of depth perception from repeated exposures to Renaissance paintings.

☞ Wilson cites Schachter and Wheeler’s apparently paradoxical finding that the

injection of epinephrine led to increased laughter when subjects viewed a slapstick film, but not to increased ratings of the film's humor (Schachter & Wheeler, 1962). His interpretation—repeated twice (pp. 132 and 210), so he must mean it—is that the adaptive unconscious found the film to be funny, and thus generated laughter, while the subjects' conscious ratings of the film were based on abstract personal theories about what kinds of films they liked. But a more parsimonious interpretation of the Schachter and Wheeler study is simply that the drug disinhibited laughing behavior without altering the subjects' sense of humor. In other words, the effect has nothing to do with the unconscious, adaptive or maladaptive.

— To demonstrate that consciousness can sometimes get in the way of adaptive behavior, Wilson describes his own research, which finds that analyzing the reasons, both pro and con, for a particular decision alters the preference itself, leading people to regret the choices they initially made. The implication is that the intuitive "gut" feelings produced by the adaptive unconscious are more accurate reflections of our true feelings than are those that arise from deliberate introspection. And the further implication is that we would make better decisions, and be happier with the decisions we made, if we did not think about them too much. This is a reliable finding in research on judgment and decision-making, and it is not uninteresting. But it may have nothing to do with the adaptive unconscious. People who are faced with a proliferation of choices usually are less happy with the choices that they make (Schwartz, 2004). The effect is caused simply by the abundance of choices available, combined with a tendency to maximize the utility of the choices made, and disappears when people apply a strategy of "satisficing" instead—or when the number of choices is reduced. In much the same way, Wilson's effect may be caused simply by the

proliferation of reasons, and not by whether the decision process is conscious or unconscious.

— Nevertheless, drawing on this and other research, Wilson asserts that we possess parallel sets of attitudes. Conscious attitudes reflect how we think we *should* feel about things, while unconscious attitudes reflect how we *really* feel about things. Conscious and unconscious attitudes may be discrepant with each other, so that people can be consciously egalitarian but unconsciously racist or sexist, and it is this unconscious prejudice that controls our behavior. Wilson cites research that seeks to measure people's "implicit" attitudes, and trace their effects on behavior. But he fails to make a clear distinction between attitudes that are truly unconscious and those that the person simply chooses not to divulge, or between unconscious racial prejudice and a person's knowledge of common racial stereotypes. The fact is, most studies of implicit attitudes do not include properly controlled comparisons with conscious attitudes, so we really do not know, yet, whether explicit and implicit attitudes can be dissociated from each other in the same manner as explicit and implicit memories. These are serious problems, which must be solved if we are to avoid the psychologist's fallacy of assuming that our inferences about other people's mental states are better than their own.

— In some ways, the argument in *Strangers to Ourselves* reflects the "automaticity juggernaut" running through social psychology—the widespread acceptance of the proposition that our everyday experience, thought, and action is largely if not wholly under the control of reflex-like processes that run off outside phenomenal awareness and free of voluntary control. To the view that most people are on automatic pilot most of the time, Wilson adds the further proposition that

we do not know what we're doing, or why, or what we feel about it. This conception of mental life is attractive to many psychologists, and other cognitive scientists, who are still made nervous by the topic of consciousness. Moreover, an emphasis on automatic, unconscious processes is compatible with the situationism that still infects much of social psychology—the view that social behavior is largely controlled by the immediate stimulus environment.

➤ Add to this mix the notion that people are fundamentally ignorant and irrational, and you have what I have come to call the “People Are Stupid” school of psychology. Wilson avoids stupidism, mostly, because he views the unconscious as smart and adaptive—although he does note that “the tendency for the adaptive unconscious to jump to conclusions, and to fail to change its mind in the face of contrary evidence, is responsible for some of society’s problems” (pp. 55-56). Even if the adaptive unconscious did not have its maladaptive moments, however, a view of mind and behavior, which is centered on unconscious, automatic processing seems dangerously close to the kind of functional, input-output behaviorism that was rejected by the cognitive revolution in the first place—call it Skinnerism with a cognitive face.

➤ Still, in more benign ways, Wilson’s book reflects the wide and deep acceptance of a non-Freudian view of unconscious mental life within contemporary scientific psychology. Unlike earlier cognitivists, who tended to view the unconscious as a wastebasket for displaced percepts and decayed memories, or as a filebox for latent knowledge, Wilson revives Hartmann’s 19th-century Romantic view of a dynamically active unconscious mind, which “can really outdo all the performances of conscious reason” (Hartmann, 1868/1931, p. 40). As with “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995; Salovey &

Mayer, 1989), the notion of the adaptive unconscious has already been subject to popularization: in 2005, Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, will publish *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown), which argues that the adaptive unconscious can produce results as good as, if not better than, rational thought; and that we would all be a lot better off if we would rely more on instinct.

— This would be nice if it were true, but both Ebbinghaus and James took Hartmann to task for having an overly broad definition of the unconscious, and for going way beyond his evidence. *Strangers to Ourselves* is a decided improvement on Hartmann in both respects. But precise details of experimental methodology, including the demand characteristics of the experiment, matter a great deal in this research—an issue raised by some critics of the original Nisbett-Wilson experiments (Bowers, 1984; Cotton, 1980; Smith & Miller, 1978; White, 1980). Wilson does not reply to his earlier critics in this book, but the same sorts of problems they identified still turn up in the later research discussed here. If the book is not entirely convincing, at least it makes an interesting argument and points the direction for future research. In any case, it seems certain now that the unconscious mind is back, and here to stay—if only its enthusiasts can avoid slipping into the dark side of epiphenomenalism, conscious inessentialism, and behaviorism.

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