

Mythopoesis and Creativity

By Douglas Lockhart

Psychology sometimes seems to suffer from a memory loss that borders on the pathological. Not only is the number of rediscoveries shamefully high, but valuable empirical and conceptual work carried out in the older traditions has disturbingly little impact on present-day research. The result is that certain defects in theory formulation diagnosed as long ago as the nineteenth century, are repeatedly reintroduced in psychology.

D. Draaisma
Metaphors of Memory p. 5.

One symptom of [brash contemporary thought] is the recurrent recrudescence of conservatism (and in far more than politics) in the second half of this century. We have . . . made a very clumsy landing on our new planet, and also left a number of things behind on the old that we might have done better to bring with us

John Fowles
Wormholes p, 197.

A Person-Centred Psychology

The first quote at the head of this chapter comes from *Irreducible Mind*, a landmark study by Edward and Emily Kelly, and this same quote sits at the head of their chapter on F.W.H. Myers, the 19th century psychologist to whom their highly sophisticated text is dedicated. I mention this by way of alerting the reader to their book's existence, to the fact that it is perhaps one of the most important publishing events in some time, and to introduce Myers as a figure whose intellectual contribution across the breadth of psychological studies is as worthy today as when first penned. And alongside Myers the Kelly's and their co-writers have placed William James, that other seminal figure in the history of psychology whose influence, like that of Jung and Myers, was eventually abandoned in favour of a narrower, more reductive form of thinking. And so the quote chosen begins to make sense, for it directly challenges the current, widely held idea that 19th century thinking in psychology is by its use-by date, and that people such as James, Jung and Myers are no longer of any intellectual consequence.

So when the UK based *Journal of Consciousness Studies* produced a

special edition to celebrate the pioneering work of William James, and by association Bergson and Myers, I saw an opportunity, alongside that of the Kellys' contribution, to access both James and Myers from another set of modern perspectives. The perspective most evident, however, was the one championed by James, and that entailed the "growth oriented dimension of personality [and] the spiritual self-realization of the person".¹ Everything else was there, too, of course - adventurous ideas blossomed on every page - but the primary focus was on the human being as a human being, and that was very different from current perspectives in psychology and philosophy where an individual's development as a person has little relevance. Hence the present disinterest in theories such as Jung's where psyche is conceived of as goal oriented. In today's scientific climate, such a notion is heresy.

So how do we get the human side of being human back into psychology and philosophy? Well, I think it will take a revolution in attitudes before this happens, and I perceive such a revolution to be on the horizon, but more on that later. My priority in this chapter is 19th century attitudes to how research into the human mind might be conducted, and that will entail a close look at first-person accounts of mental states, an area of research fraught with difficulties.

In the opinion of today's researchers, past attempts to plumb the depths of the human mind were not properly handled; they lacked the sophistication of those schooled, as they now are, in physically-based theories of the mind. We simply can't accept verbal reports of inner events at face value; they are, more often than not, subjectively contaminated sources of information. That is of course true; or is it? Some people are good at reporting on their subjective states; some are not. Some can be taught how to report accurately on what they sense and feel; some will never gain those skills. So it is a mistake to put everyone in the same basket and write them off as inherently unreliable. But more than that; it also pushes the existential dimension out of the equation and relies on progressively abstract estimations of the human that contract rather than expand our knowledge of the human. Which is to say that the more we learn about ourselves in this fashion, the less we know about ourselves in terms of depth.

Another reasons for this state of affairs may be that modern approaches to human psychology lack a suitable language through which to express themselves. I mean by that a language that is sensitive to the human dimension in its own right. Approach the human through theories of the human that systematically undermine the experience of being a human, and you cannot but do the human dimension a disservice. Yes, we function on automatic pilot most of the time, but as Bergson points out, and I concur, we each have the capacity to escape from this state of low awareness - the conforming, reactive robot can wake up. What has to be understood here is that this low level of awareness applies as much to researchers as it does to subjects. No one escapes; we're all in the same boat. And when it comes our turn to be treated by others as less than human, guess whose the first to complain? Abstracted forms of communication driven to lawyer-type extremes have become the norm in most of our major disciplines, but perhaps not for the reasons generally supposed. The tendency towards verbal obscurantism may not be the result of the search for greater, and greater intellectual precision; it may just be the result of good writers being forced to write badly because bad writers - what I term "convoluted" writers - have managed, for equally obscure reasons, to command greater academic respect.

Carl Jung has been accused of obscurantism by those who think his theories of the human mind far-fetched, if not ludicrous. Mind is no more than an emanation of the physical brain, they tell us, talk of experiences at "depth" no more than mental vertigo misunderstood. For Jung it was an altogether different story. He perceived human beings to be engaged in the cradle-to-grave task of dealing with life's problems through a deep engagement with psyche. In Jung's basic psychological scheme, problems were to the conscious mind what instinct was to the unconscious mind. In turning from instinct to intellect, consciousness had been created through acts of reflection - consciousness was not a location, it was an act. Instinct was "nature" at work; consciousness was "cultural sensibility" at work. Instinct sought to perpetuate nature; intellect turned even the attempt to return to nature into a cultivation of nature. To be without problems was to be submerged in nature; to have problems was to be without the security of instinct and discover "doubt" and "uncertainty" in the possibility of different approaches.²

Herein lay the essence of our dilemma, for to avoid fear we had recreated the security of instinct by other means, and intellect had been the only means available.

For this reason we were drawn to ideas and theories that explained existence in ultra-rational, ultra-precise terms; it allowed us to believe that all was well with self, other and world even if that were self-evidently not the case. Building theoretical structures that by their very nature excluded more than they included (particularly 19th century notions in psychology), we progressively whittled reality down to manageable textbook size. And not just in the sense of ignoring previously held theories, but also in the sense of not bothering to even acquaint ourselves with those theories. The world had moved on; everything not of our time was a waste of time. Nineteenth century experimental psychology's interest in mediumship, clairvoyance, trance states, apparitions, thought transference, automatic writing, telekinesis and mysticism signalled a mind-set out of tune with present day research requirements - such things were the province of parapsychology, and the least said about that the better. The only figure left standing from this era of naive claims was Freud the scientific rationalist - he alone had managed to weather the transition. Well, almost.

Mythopoesis and Creativity

F.W.H. Myers (1843-1901) created the term "mythopoesis" to capture what he believed to be the mind's inbuilt creative capacity for the creation of images at depth. At depth, ideas became images, and these images carried a psychic charge capable of changing them into mythic visions. This was the human imagination working well below the level of conscious awareness, and it revealed an inner symbolic life that could appear in totally sane individuals as well as those suffering from mental illness. For Myers, these deep levels of psyche heralded the existence of an inner life of which the surface self knew little; we were, in our depths, totally different from what we were at the awake end of the awareness spectrum. And there were yet other potential levels of psyche not necessarily known to one another.³ In alignment with Myers' theory of images, Bergson went

one further and posited a universe composed of interconnecting images below the capacity of conscious awareness to detect; a dynamic continuum of images without division that mirrored human consciousness. The universe of images was, therefore, a virtual consciousness within which consciousness itself resided in latent form. In this sense pure perception was raw data perception culled from what we could potentially know, but had no immediate use for. As such pure perception was not subjective; it was not contaminated by memory and therefore objective in character.

What Myers seemed to be saying was that in the mentally ill we had the opportunity of witnessing the symbolic level of being through their hallucinations, whereas in individuals with no mental problems it was only through dreams and hypnotically induced states that the symbolic level could be detected. Normal individuals - those stranded mainly at the surface self's level of interaction - were fundamentally unaware of the symbolic level; they had no awareness of an interior life, and little interest in attempting to cultivate one.

The problem for regular psychology then and now is that the array of inner images presenting themselves to consciousness use exactly the same channels - so who's sane, and who's insane? At the blunt end of secular humanism's evaluation of self, other and world, the abnormal psychic experiences of normal individuals are seen as no more than a slipping of psychic gears, for whatever does not belong to cognition is, by definition, fantasy, and that should be the end of the matter. Alas, it isn't. The quite unique psychological perspectives held by Myers, James, Bergson and Jung are by necessity surfacing all over again, and they look like having an even greater impact today than they had in the 19th century. Why so? Because, as the German historian and poet Jean Gebster (1986) suggested, and Allan Combs records in his editor's Forward to 'The Victorian Guide to Consciousness':⁴

. . . following this hyper-rational era there would come an 'integral' age that could enfold the past gains of both the mythical and rational periods, incorporating them into a unified and expanded world view.

Too optimistic? Not really. The "integral age" envisaged by Gebster is detectable at the turn of the twentieth century in the researches of James, Myers, Bergson and Jung. One may argue with their conclusions, but I think the seriousness of their attempts to disentangle what was going on in the depths of psyche is hard to refute; they were, each in their own way, pioneers in a field of inquiry crying out for a unified theory of consciousness such as Jung in particular would attempt to establish. And the prime mover in this group of thinkers was Myers, co-founder of the *Society for Psychical Research* in England in 1892, and a figure long overdue for re-evaluation in terms of influence. For at the heart of Myers' research was a desire to present human beings as worthy of scrutiny beyond the confines of a narrowing secular humanist rationale, and it was his respect for the human as a category in its own right that probably influenced his contemporaries to follow suit. But this required first-person accounts of inner experience to be taken at face value, and it was the narrowing of the secular humanist rationale that had identified a quite natural human tendency to embroider first-person descriptions of inner experience through previous experiences that had, in turn, undergone the embroidering process. Being desirous of data uninfluenced by other data, such renditions of experience were viewed by researchers as contaminated and therefore unreliable. Which, if you think about it, is a little bit odd, for the hardline secular humanist approach was itself only hardline because of an overly developed, one might even say pathological, respect for its own ideas. So who was actually distorting the facts of experience the more, the subject, or the observer of the subject? And, anyway, was interpretation and elaboration actually a distortion of the facts of experience, or was something else going on?

Evocation and Representation

The above conundrum of data filtering is ably dealt with by philosopher and cognitive scientist Pierre Steiner in a sophisticated article dealing with first-person reports as process.⁵ This is to stray somewhat from Myers and his influence on other 19th-century thinkers, but as will be quickly realised, it is a necessary

deviation given the seriousness of the claims made against first-person descriptions of inner experience. For if not reliable, then almost everything gleaned by, say, the *Society for Psychological Research*, is of little use, the attempt to build a depth psychology out of first-person reports a task that cannot by its very nature succeed.

For Steiner, this approach is in itself problematical; he objects to this interpretation on the basis that it is an ill-posed problem. What has to be understood, he contends, is that the act of "evocation" is not an act of "representation", and neither is it an act of "construction". Evocation is neither an "act of memory", a "belief" or a "theory"; it is, depending on its intensity, an expression of authentic experience in the moment into which one plunges, so to speak - it is not in any sense an "object" remembered through acts of mental distancing. First person accounts of any intensity do not involve the self in seeing past experience as ready made; they initiate a *re-living* of the experience itself. In this sense, the process of becoming aware of a past experience is not, in all instances, threatened by previous experiences, or by experiences post the experience in question; it is an authentic recapturing of the original experience as if for a first time enriched by, not diminished by, the process of evocation⁶ - it may in fact be a species of Jamesian *seeing all at once* without the bells and whistles of an altered state.

One further point has to be made on this issue before moving on: how do hands-on researchers validate first-person accounts? By what means can they feel secure that what they're hearing answers to Steiner's laws of evocation, and not to something quite different? On this question, Steiner points to levels of intensity in the subject during evocation, to the degree of observable contact the subject has with his experience, to the direction of the eyes during the telling, to the presence of co-verbal gestures, and to the flow of speech evoked by the telling. Also to linguistic devices used that allow evocation states to be experientially re-entered, and to specific expressions and ways of speaking. The tell tale sign of an authentic re-living of an experience is that the language used is expansive; it enriches and refines the experience, it does not contract the experience by breaking it down into pieces. And, finally, authentic first-person

descriptions are linguistically “idiographic”, not “representational” - inner events are not presented as objects separate from the experiencer, but as lived interactions with self, other or world grounded in symbols.⁷ First-person reports are, therefore, not objective reports that must necessarily fail in “immediacy” because couched in language; they are subjective reports that can succeed for very reason of being in the first person and not in some other grammatical tense. Such reports are then witnessable encounters with the deep strata self, not merely the surface self reconnoitring old forms of awareness via memory content. Language may well be present even in depth experiences as the philosopher Don Cupitt contends, but if Steiner is correct, and I think he is, then “grammatical tense” plus “image-based” (symbolic) forms of reporting may be clear indicators of primary, and not merely secondary, processes at work.

Multiple States of Consciousness

The difference between normal, and abnormal mental functioning, is pretty well understood these days. Not so the difference between levels of the personality where states such as sleep and dreams, somnambulism, trance, hysteria, automatisms, alternating states of consciousness, epilepsy, insanity and induced states such as narcotism, hypnotic catalepsy, hypnotic somnambulism and such like can occur. This led Myers (the above list is his) to view the self as composed not only of levels within which disparate mental events could take place, but as fragmentary and illusive in its own right in spite of exhibiting what appeared to be a central will, a continuous memory and a homogenous character.⁸ We appeared to be psychologically stable, but just below the surface lay regions of the mind where almost anything could happen. Post-hypnotic suggestion had shown us to be preprogrammable, and other oddities such as visual and auditory hallucinations, emotional intelligence and savant levels of intelligence highlighted our wide-ranging capacity for exotic inner experience. And there was more, much more. We also had a capacity for creative reverie, ecstasy, spiritual epiphanies and what might even be latent telepathic and precognitive abilities. We were, in other words, legion in our responses to self, other and world, and in evolutionary terms

might even be capable of collective genius in some distant future. And that final point was Myers' central thesis; many of the above shared capacities indicated an evolutive base to human nature, and if that were the case, then a "plurality of selves" might well be a necessary part of that base structure.

In Myers' psychological scheme surface consciousness (the consciously awake self) was but one level of consciousness - a level evolved specifically for defence of the body - while other deeper levels were, as William James put it, unknown parts of the self that carried out their own appropriate programs of action.⁹ This was to say hardly anything at all, but it was to say something quite different from what was already being said by more deterministically driven researchers. In normal psychology, everything beyond cognitive thought was fantasy; unusual states of consciousness had no bearing on the conscious life of the individual beyond being disruptive; or, as in the case of hypnotically susceptible individuals, viewed as potentially useful in terms of behaviour modification. There was, in other words, little if any difference noted between psychopathic states and what Myers saw as transcendent states *in potentia* - all were of the same channel, therefore of the same meaningless substratum level of activity. A rational ordering of sense data would take care of these strange mental states; it was all just a matter of mental circuitry getting into states of disarray because of chemical and electrical imbalance.

For James and Myers, and in particular, Jung, psychopathological states were windows into a person's mental depths; they were privileged glimpses into the mind that afforded us valuable information about the base structure of psyche. In his 1896 Lowell Lecture, James' message was that a personal exploration of the subconscious (otherwise known as the "unconscious") led to mystical states of consciousness that were experientially transformative. Psyche was dynamic in constitution; it housed not only the rational conscious mind, it also housed subconscious levels of response outside of conscious awareness that were sometimes active, and sometimes inactive. In terms of self-observation, a sure way into the subconscious was through the spontaneous emergence of hypnagogic imagery at the entrance to sleep. In this strange twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness, filmlike images could arise over which, as in

dream, the conscious mind had no control. Hypnosis came next as a means of entry into the subconscious, it being a technique of tricking the conscious mind into not only relinquishing control, but into handing control over to some other mind that was fully conscious.¹⁰

For those suffering from mental illness the situation was altogether different; interaction with the subconscious was often a terrifying affair where spontaneous image and auditory production could strike at any moment. Overpowered by the subconscious, the individual would struggle against psyche's seemingly involuntary outbursts, the shock of such invasions causing further psychological disarray. For James, these psychopathological states were only difficult to understand because of our attitude towards them; they deeply frightened us because the degree of difference between normal and abnormal states of mind were not all that great.¹¹ In James' Myers-based psychological scheme, consciousness was a field with a focus and a margin, and it was the margin that somehow controlled meaning.¹² There were intelligent levels of consciousness other than rational consciousness, and in relation to mental illness, which James believed to be caused by split off fragments of the rational mind lodged in the subconscious as self-aware "entity" bits, these other intelligent levels of psyche came into play. Consciousness was therefore dual in nature; it was composed of waking consciousness and trance states within which could be detected other intelligent levels of subconscious awareness. Fundamentally, consciousness-as-a-whole was, as Myers believed, and James came to believe, evolutive: the emergence in some cases of a secondary personality superior to that of the primary personality suggested a subliminal form of intelligence at work; particularly when the secondary personality displaced the primary personality and become a permanent self.

In this expanded view of consciousness, subconscious awareness was more than brain reflexes devoid of conscious awareness; it pointed to complex forms of mental functioning taking place beyond the margins of conscious awareness that "displayed all the characteristics that we attribute to conscious beings, such as memory, intention, volition and creativity." Myers was adamant:

unconscious cerebration via brain reflexes could not account for such behaviour. Chains of memory were detectable, and that cancelled out the deterministic hypothesis that automatic type processes were mainly responsible. And so he coined his own terms to describe what was going on in our depths, and came up with "supraliminal" and "subliminal" to distinguish between forms of consciousness that were not part of ordinary conscious awareness.¹³ This was not, however, a mere distinction between "conscious" and "unconscious" processes; it was to posit an ongoing, moment by moment interchange (and sometime exchange) between conscious and unconscious levels of awareness. We were forever dipping below the awake state and touching, or being touched by, the subliminal level. The awake state was, therefore, not the highest state of consciousness available to us; it was more like a junction between multiple levels of awareness which slipped in and out of focus as we went about our daily business. Which meant that conscious awareness was not the main threshold of being, it was but a segment of being into which arose (or descended?) ideas and sensations; it was, in other words, a crossroads of conscious and unconscious interactions.¹⁴

Evolution and the Self's Numinous Depths

The perspective most evident in James' work was the "growth oriented dimension of personality [and] the spiritual self-realization of the person". There was more to consciousness than conscious awareness and memory; these were themselves fragments belonging to a greater whole of which we were aware only in the vaguest of terms. Awake consciousness utilised only what was useful to it in terms of survival; everything else had been filtered out by way of natural selection. Which was to say that the awake self was not the only possible self, nor that it was in any way superior to the rest of consciousness.¹⁵ For Myers, the assumption that conscious awareness was the pinnacle of mental achievement was to fundamentally misunderstand and misrepresent the consciousness spectrum; it was to elevate our awake state beyond its level of importance and

interpret everything about consciousness through that mistake. Fundamental to Myers' thinking was the notion that the universe had formed from a basic formlessness, a homogeneity without form that had eventually evolved into a hierarchy of complex forms inherent in the original homogeneity. This meant that consciousness, too, had existed latently in complex forms as they developed, and that in turn meant that consciousness had existed *in potentia* prior even to the formation of the planet itself. Or, as has been said by many an astrophysicist: We are the stuff that stars are made of. Christening this original, undifferentiated capacity for consciousness panesthesia, Myers speculated that along with the appearance of sensory organs in specific life forms, new forms of perception may still be evolving of which we as yet know very little.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Myers' thinking on evolution is his observation that the evolution of human beings has gone beyond mere adaptation to environment, and that through increasingly complex sensory processes basic sensory awareness has expanded into a system of discovery beyond mere registration.¹⁶ We are, with ever growing sophistication, not only aware of our environment, but now able to penetrate our environment to ever greater levels of clarity and depth. Armed with tools that dramatically extend our ability to observe the known world, we are now observing the unknown world underlying the known world of simple surfaces. But as it turns out, nothing about that world is simple; all is hugely complex, subtly interrelated, and part of an unimaginable whole, or unity. So also consciousness as a whole; it, too, is a unity of "surface" and "depth", a multiplicity which, in Myers' terminology, expresses its dual nature through "individuality" and "personality". Individuality equals the backgrounding "Self", the underlying unity within which personality (the surface ego-self) functions as a psychic fragment, and it may well be that it was this insight of Myers' that inspired both Jung's individuation process, and James' growth oriented dimension of consciousness.

But what of the self's "numinous" depths? Doesn't the word carry a religious connotation? Yes, it does, but as can be gleaned from the fact that it is also used by people who are not religious, even by atheists, the dictionary definition of numinous as "man's sense of communion with God and religion"¹⁷

is perhaps a little too neat. There again, the root of “numinous” is numen, and that translates from the Latin as “divinity”, so the term does seem to have something to do with God and religion. Well, it does, and it doesn’t. The word “divinity” need not be placed in the God basket; the dictionary definition of numinous is prefaced with “[a] feeling of attraction and awe characteristic of man’s sense of communion with God and religion”, (my italics) and those words open the door to the numinous being an encounter with something other than God. What this might be is not difficult to determine given the nature of the deep strata self. The backgrounding unicity of consciousness within which we move and have our being is experienced as an electrifying (psychically charged) confrontation with the greater Self that can initiate a deep, transformative sense of one’s own existence. Not only are we capable of designing and building tools of superb sensitivity with which to observe self, other and world, we are also in receipt of complex sensory systems that can experientially penetrate to the very heart of existence itself. The bogus simplicity achieved in general psychology through copying the external judgements of physical science is now under question. We are, whether we like it or not, on the threshold of a whole new appreciation of what it means to be a human being beyond scientific reductionism and religious imposition.

References and Notes

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