

Are there Unconscious Minds?

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I argue against the orthodox idea that some mental states are unconscious. First (A) I identify a necessary condition for the existence of the unconscious mind, and then (B) argue that this condition does not hold.

(A) Consciousness and intentionality are the two standard candidates for being the ‘mark of the mental’. If one wants to admit unconscious mentality, the mark has to be intentionality and there have to be unconscious intentional states (UIS). So:

(*) If there is an unconscious mind, then there are UIS.

(B) From (*), if one does not admit UIS, then one denies the existence of the unconscious mind. I argue that, as things stand, there are no compelling reasons to admit UIS. There are two main strategies for admitting UIS: (B1) indispensability arguments, and (B2) offering a convincing metaphysical model of what UIS may be.

(B1) The relevant indispensability arguments have the following form:

I) X talks about UIS and one cannot dispense with this talk.

II) If X talks about UIS and one cannot dispense with this talk, then UIS exist.

Conclusion – UIS exist.

I argue that for all plausible substitutes for X – common sense, psychoanalysis and cognitive science – the above argument is unsound.

(B2) The only plausible models of unconscious intentionality are offered by the Naturalised Intentionality Research Program (e.g.: Fodor 1990; Dretske 1981, 1988; Millikan 1984). Along with some notable contemporary philosophers (e.g.: Montague 2016, Kriegel 2011, 2013), I argue that these models are beset with a host of problems that cast serious doubt on the viability of the models themselves. In conclusion, given that strategies B1 and B2 fail, there are no compelling reasons to admit UIS in one’s ontology and so, by (*), no compelling reasons to admit the existence of the unconscious mind.

References

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