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ECKHART AND THE 'UNCONSCIOUS'[1]

LUÍS M. AUGUSTO

(University of Sussex, Dept. of Psychology /
Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia)

To think that the unconscious was born with Freud and has had no further development is as wrong an idea as could be: Freud merely elaborated on a concept that has been around since at least Homer and that has undergone recent developments within areas such as psychology, cognitive science, and even logic.[2] This tells us, to begin with, that psychoanalysis was not, and is not today, the exclusive field in which the concept of an unconscious part of the human mental life or the notion of unconscious cognitive processes has been productive in both theoretical and practical terms.

The very beginnings of what we might call psychology with Homer's characters already included the notion that an important part of an

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[1] This paper was firstly a personal presentation in the seminar "Universalidade da Razão, Pluralidade de Filosofias na Idade Média. Em Memória de Pedro Parcerias" organized by the Gabinete de Filosofia Medieval of the Arts Faculty of the University of Porto in January 2008. The footnotes are an ulterior addition.

[2] The rationale behind this paper is that ulterior developments in human knowledge can justly recognize past theories and achievements as a rightful part of their contemporary state of knowledge in a field; this is not the same as *reduction*. A good example is that of the *integration* of the Michaelson-Morley experiment and of the explanation of its results by the Lorentz transformations into Relativity: because this explains them all, they are not reduced to (because they are *also* valid in their own contexts) but are integrated in it. In the same way, our contemporary notion of an/the unconscious allows us to integrate past theories in our own present ones; this, obviously, does not mean that they become an exclusive part of these theories: in the present case, what here is seen as a 'precursor' of the unconscious in Eckhart, can and should be also seen as an independent and contextualized theory, or group of theories, namely medieval noetics and 'psychology.'

individual's mental life escaped control by that same individual: this was the *atê*, a sort of supernatural power often resorted to in order to justify actions and deeds for which the individual did not want to be blamed.[3] That Homer's poems are not part of any science proper, being included in what we today call literature, shows that the concept of an unconscious part of human mental life was not developed exclusively in a strictly scientific arena. As a matter of fact, only recently has science reclaimed it, namely psychology in the form of unconscious cognition. But if it is quite true that the major developments that led directly to Freud's fundamental elaboration were a fruit of 19th century sciences and pseudo-sciences,[4] the fact is that some notion of an unconscious part of human mental life has never been absent from any discipline focusing on the mind.[5] Namely, it had a prominent presence in medieval noetics and 'psychology,' though the term 'unconscious' is not to be found anywhere but under disguised concepts. For example, Augustine's well-known *abditum mentis*[6] and the *abyssus humanae conscientiae*[7] are clearly notions that have much to do with our contemporary ideas regarding the unconscious: there is in us knowledge, or 'data' (*quarundam rerum quaedam notitiae*)[8] of which we are not aware but that actively — still better: determinatively — contribute to the whole of our mental life.

Although Eckhart cannot be said to have invented the wheel, given that much of his thought, though a revolutionary one to a great extent, roots in his predecessors, the fact is that his insistence on absolute knowledge as unknowledge, and his conceiving of the [highest state or degree of the] intellect as an abyss, or *abgrunt*, necessarily demand a rigorous study concerning a latent concept of what we today call the unconscious, both in dynamic and cognitive terms.

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[3] For a brief but enlightening account of the *atê*, see Dodds, E. R., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1963, p. 2-8, 37-41.

[4] Namely mesmerism, galvanism, and animal magnetism.

[5] Take 'mind' in the broadest sense as "(in a human or other conscious being) the element, part, substance, or process that reasons, thinks, feels, wills, perceives, judges, etc." (*Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*, retrieved February 2008 from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/mind). This will allow of a rough synonymy with concepts such as intellect and soul, and especially with their Latin and Greek 'equivalents' *intellectus*, *intelligentia*, *nous*, and *psuchê*.

[6] *De Trin.* XIV, 7, 9.

[7] *Conf.* X, 2, 2.

[8] *De Trin.* XIV, 7, 9.

Let us carry out the preliminaries to such a study, and let us begin with the first form just mentioned, the dynamic unconscious. Freud's main elaboration on this concept dates from 1915, in a text entitled precisely "*Das Unbewusste*"; in it, the unconscious is seen as a sort of *topos* characterized by four aspects: "*exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process, timelessness*, and *replacement of external by psychical reality.*"[9] Regarding the first aspect, this tells us that in the system *Ucs* there is only affirmation, and that, therefore, there is no room for the principle of contradiction; this feature is connected with the 'primary process' that, according to Freud, also characterizes the unconscious, meaning by it a kind of psychic process free from the constraints of the so-called rational principles. Thus, it has nothing to do with 'reality,' which *seems* to be ruled by the logical principles of identity and contradiction, as well as by time; as a matter of fact, this appears to be the element of connection of all the ingredients of reality, as Kant expressed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[10]

A look into Eckhart's characterization of the *vernünfticheit*, or 'intellect,' immediately shows how close it is to the Freudian system *Ucs*: in the Middle High German sermon no. 69, the Rhineland philosopher speaks of it as abstracting from both space and time (*si scheidet abe von hie und von nû*),[11] being like nothing else (*si nihte glîch enist*),[12] being pure and unmixed (*lûter und unvermenget*),[13] and as searching always within itself (*si alwege inwendic suochende ist*),[14] characteristics that he, interestingly enough, borrowed from the Aristotelian *nous* of the *De anima* and *noêsis* of the Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*.[15] If this *vernünfticheit* is

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[9] Freud, S., *The Unconscious*, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Freud. The Standard Edition*, vol. XIV, trans. by J. Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1968, p. 187.

[10] Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 145/B 184.

[11] *Pr.* 69, in *Predigten* (60-86), in *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke: Die deutschen Werke* [DW] III, ed. and trans. by J. Quint, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1976, p. 170.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

[15] The following table shows this 'borrowing':

Eckhart's *vernünfticheit*	**Aristotle's *nous***
1) it abstracts from space and time	1) cf. his theory of abstraction (*De an.* III, 6)
2) it resembles nothing	2) *ibid.*, 4 and 8
3) it is pure and unmixed	3) *ibid.*, 4, 429a18-20
4) it searches always inside	4) *Met.* Lambda, 9, 1074b34-5

primarily seen as a sort of divine intellect, that does not mean that man's psychic structure does not comprise such a faculty; as a matter of fact, it does, because every human individual has what he calls a "little spark" (*vünkelîn*)[16] of this Intellect. In the sermon no. 11, Eckhart emphasizes the timelessness of this faculty, as well as what Ignacio Matte Blanco more recently saw as one of the major characteristics of the unconscious: the overall identification — which he called *symmetry*[17] — that leaves no room for distinctions, that is, the absence of the logical principle of contradiction:

> This faculty has nothing in common with nothing; from nothingness it makes each and every thing: It knows nothing about yesterday or the day before yesterday, about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, because in the eternity there is neither yesterday nor tomorrow, there is an ever present now.
>
> (*Pr.* 11, DW I, p. 182-3; my trans.)

The fact that Freud sees the source of this unconscious as both firstly "inherited mental formations," or instinct,[18] and "later […] what is discarded during childhood as unserviceable,"[19] namely by such processes as regression and censorship, does not contradict the closeness between these two 'entities,' or 'systems'; first and foremost, these are characteristics arrived at through the analysis of the psychic life of human individuals with a view to the therapy of mental problems: Freud's belief was that this unconscious is not only highly dynamic in its internal functioning, but that it also interacts with, or still better, determines the conscious life of an individual. Certainly the former are not present in Eckhart's *vünkelîn*, but this, too, determines the way one leads one's life, namely in ethical terms. Thus, the practical ends of psychoanalysis and noetical analysis, one aiming at cure and the other aiming at what at the time might have been seen as a sort of cure, salvation, emphasize the proximity between the two. Another common point strengthens this paralleling of both 'entities': neither for Freudian psychoanalysis nor for Eckhartian noetics is there any need of localizing in the brain the sources of the diverse aspects of mental life; as such, they are purely *psycho*-analytical in the true sense of the word. In this, Freud escapes to a great

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[16] Cf. *Pr.* 9, in *Predigten* (1-24), DW I, ed. and trans. by J. Quint, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958, p. 151.

[17] One of the core ideas of his book *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets: An Essay in Bi-logic*, London: Duckworth, 1975.

[18] *The Unconscious*, p. 195.

[19] *Ibid.*

extent the empirical demands of the positivism prevailing in his time, just as much as Eckhart greatly evades the ventricular localization, a practice founded on Galen, for whom "the *psuchê* dwells in the actual body of the brain."[20] And interestingly enough, Freud was primarily a neurologist, and Eckhart was probably acquainted with those 'physiological' theories of the soul, or mind.

However striking the closeness of Eckhart's incipient notion of an unconscious 'part,' or *topos* of the soul to the Freudian topology, his notion of absolute knowledge as unknowledge is even closer to contemporary developments in the theory of the unconscious and of unconscious cognition. The concept of an unconscious—and that of consciousness, for that matter — was very much restricted to the field of psychoanalysis, having its entry barred from the field of psychology by the all-powerful behaviorism that admitted of no non-observational characteristics of mental life. Recently, with the twilight of that very behaviorism, psychology became far more receptive to the concept of consciousness, and even more so as far as 'the unconscious' is concerned: in the late 60's, A. S. Reber came forward with the thesis that there were unconscious cognitive processes and contents that, though not accessible to consciousness, influenced to a great extent an individual's conscious life, namely his/her verbal performance.[21] Research in this field has secured the following results concerning an unconscious — or implicit, as it is also known — cognition: it is non-propositional,[22] and non-verbalizable, i.e., it is overall procedural (vs. declarative) in that the individual acts without being able to justify her/his actions;[23] it is more durable and robust than conscious

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[20] *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, trans. by P. de Lacy, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980, p. 445.

[21] Reber's work was mainly centered in unconscious processes of acquisition of verbal knowledge: see for instance "Implicit learning of artificial grammars", *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 5 (1967), p. 855–863, and "Transfer of syntactic structure in synthetic languages", *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 81 (1969), p. 115–119.

[22] At best, it is atomic in the sense that more complex propositions cannot be decomposed; for instance, the subject fails to decompose *P&Q* into its constituents *P* and *Q*. P. L. Roberts and C. MacLeod ("Representational Consequences of Two Types of Learning", *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 48A:2 (1995), p. 296-319) define this kind of knowledge as holistic.

[23] See for instance Berry, D. C. and D. E. Broadbent, "On the Relationship between Task Performance and Associated Verbalizable Knowledge", *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 36A (1984), p. 209-231; Berry, D. C. and D. E. Broadbent, "Interactive Tasks and the Implicit-Explicit Distinction", *British Journal of Psychology* 79 (1988), 251-272.

or explicit knowledge;[24] and it is purely statistical,[25] that is, unaffected by prior conceptual knowledge. In epistemic terms, and within a pragmatist theory of truth, this knowledge is true, since action grounding on unconscious knowledge actually may secure the well-being and survival of the individual. A very good example is the one offered by patients suffering from blindsight: although they can swear that they cannot see a figure on a screen (for e.g.: a cross, or a circle), when forced to 'guess' they will get it right almost every time.[26] This 'unconscious sight' *may* lend itseef to training aiming at the well-being of patients as in avoiding obstacles and in the detection of moving traffic.

Where does Eckhart fit into this scenario of contemporary empirical science? In the theoretical part: both contemporary psychology and medieval noetics share the same foundational theory that 'absolute'[27] knowledge is of a non-propositional — or merely atomic[28] —, non-verbalizable type. Contemporary psychology does by no means deny conscious cognitive processes, but a part of the scientific community sees them as less robust and less reliable in certain conditions than unconscious ones.[29] Medieval noetics, influenced by ancient, namely Neoplatonic, theories on the soul, reserved the highest degree of knowledge to intuition, or to a purely spiritual kind of knowledge with no contribution whatsoever from the senses. In this highest of levels of cognition, there is not even cate-

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[24] Allen, R. & A. S. Reber, "Very Long-Term Memory for Tacit Knowledge", *Cognition* 8 (1980), p. 175-185.

[25] Dienes, Z, G.T.M. Altmann & S.-J. Gao, "Mapping across Domains without Feedback: A Neural Network Model of Transfer of Implicit Knowledge", *Cognitive Science* 23:1 (1999), p. 53-82

[26] For a 'classic' study on blindsight, see Weiskrantz, L., *Blindsight: A Case Study and Implications*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

[27] If the adjective 'absolute' concerning knowledge is to be used with reservations in philosophy, it is even more so in psychology and cognitive science, fields in which knowledge is basically synonymous with information and is, therefore, connected to memory (encoding, storing, and retrieval of information). However, truth considerations are not altogether absent from these fields, allowing us to speak of 'true,' or even 'absolute' knowledge (e.g.: "Stored information in both systems [episodic and semantic memories] represents aspects of the world, and it has truth value, unlike many other forms of learned behavior that do not." In Wilson, R. A. and F. C. Keil (ed.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 278).

[28] In the sense above.

[29] For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Dienes, Z. & D. Berry, "Implicit Learning: Below the Subjective Threshold", *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 4:1 (1997), p. 3-23.

gorization, as a matter of fact, as is well-illustrated by the following passage by Eckhart:

> There [in the *lûter geistlich bekanntnisse*, or "pure spiritual knowledge"] one hears without sound and knows without matter; there is neither white, nor black, nor red.
>
> (*Pr.* 61, DW III, p. 38; my trans.)

Interestingly enough, this knowledge appears exactly as a kind of 'unknowing knowledge' in the sense that one does no longer know the properties of the objects in a categorial or definitional sense — rather one *is* the very object known, in accord with Aristotelian psychology as expounded in the *De anima*[30] —, and not only in the sense of an influence of the negative ontology with its roots in the Dionysian negative theology. What radically separates Eckhart's 'unknowing knowledge' from, for instance, Bonaventure's 'mystical night'[31] is the fact that the Thuringian does not see this highest level of knowledge as an ecstasy, his view on this matter being clearly detached and solely 'academic.'[32]

Following A. Reber's first intuitions and results, psychologists working in the field of unconscious cognition such as A. Baddeley, D. L. Schacter, and E. Tulving, to name but a few, soon carried out a hierarchical distinction in kinds of memory, and namely one distinction between what they call a procedural and a semantic memory, the former being non-propositional, while the latter is characterized mainly by its allowing of verbalization. What is of interest in here, besides the obvious salience of the fact that ancient and medieval noetics also carried out complex dichotomies between degrees or states of the intellect, all rooting in Aristotle's distinction between the agent and the passive intellects,[33] is that both contemporary psychology and medieval noetics postulate that there is one kind of memory/intellect whose content is so to say always in actuality. Psychologists working in this field verified that procedural

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[30] Cf. *De anima* III, 4.

[31] Cf. *Itinerarium mentis in deum* VII.

[32] See for instance *Sermo* XXII, n. 216, in *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke: Die lateinischen Werke* [LW] IV, ed. and trans. by Ernst Benz *et alii*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1956, p. 202-3.

[33] For a detailed history of this hierarchization process, see Gilson, É., *Les sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant*, Paris: Vrin, 1981.

memory is never lost, not even in severe cases of amnesia.[34] As for Eckhart, following Aristotle,[35] the content of the agent intellect, the forms in act, is also unchangeable regardless of what might be going on in inferior levels of the intellect.[36]

If this latter doctrine cannot be said to be specific to Eckhart, his elaboration of a theory of the *abegescheidenheit* is: in order to reach absolute knowledge, the individual should intentionally free his or her mind from any representations, so as to be able to reach a formal identity between her-/himself and the object represented; the technical basis of this doctrine is the Aristotelian doctrine of abstraction, and the mental state intended is that of a desert, *wüeste* or *wüestunge*, a state of complete non-knowledge that is absolute knowledge of the object represented.[37] Again, this unknowledge is the ground for action by the individual in that one

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[34] Cf. Cohen, N. J., *Neuropsychological Evidence for a Distinction Between Procedural and Declarative Knowledge in Human Memory and Amnesia* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1981).

[35] *De anima* III, 5, 430a17-8.

[36] Note, however, that Eckhart does not emphasize the dichotomy agent intellect/possible intellect, which is only in accord with his Neoplatonism: although the Neoplatonist philosophers were perfectly aware of the Aristotelian separation between the two intellects, their obsession with unity within an emanatist cosmology did not allow for an emphasis of this dichotomy. However, their *nous* is clearly the agent intellect of the Stagirite. Given that Eckhart sees the Christian God as an intellect (cf. *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, LW V, ed. and trans. by B. Geyer *et alii*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007), and that the Christian verb corresponded, within Latin thought, to the agent intellect, when speaking of any of these one may deduce that the Thuringian means the latter. As an illustration, see for instance the following passage: "The reasons of things are not created, nor are they creatable as such. They are *ante rem* [in the verb, following Albertus Magnus's terminology established in *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus*] and *post rem* [in the human mind; *idem*], but the original cause of those same things. On account of what through them the mutable things are known as through causes and by an immutable science, as is evident in the science of the natural <things>. […] And this is what is meant here: God created, so that everything would be. In him things are the reasons of things, *Jn* 1 "in the beginning was the verb," or *logos*, which is the reason […]." (*In Sap.*, c. 1, n. 22, LW II, ed. and trans. by K. Weiss *et alii*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1992, p. 343; my trans.)

[37] Cf. *Pr.* 23, DW I, p. 394-6: "A master says [Aristotle, *De anima* III, 4, 429a15-22]: he who wants to know the natural things and also the material things must make his knowledge (*verstantnisse*) bare of all other things. […] Through that man must trample under his feet all the other earthily things and all that can cover knowledge so that nothing will remain but that which is identical to <that> knowledge." (my trans.)

thus 'taken' by the *non-propositional* representation of, say, justice, is justice itself, that is, immediately just, and this without any phenomenology in between, or any awareness of that fact: one simply *is* justice, one *acts* justly without consciousness of being or acting so.[38]

[38] This is in accord with Eckhart's identification of being and knowing: "But that the just first of all sees justice, inasmuch as just, is firstly evident because from the same a thing has being and knowing, maximally so in the simple and divine things, where being and knowing is the same and originate in the same; secondly, because the principles of being and of knowing are the same; thirdly, because every thing is known in its original principles." (*In Ioh*., c. 1, n. 189, LW III, ed. and trans. by K. Christ *et alii*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1994, p. 158; my trans.)