

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND THE ADAPTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

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At the dawn of human consciousness, when people first gained the ability to reflect upon the world around them, it seems likely that they turned the spotlight of consciousness inward to try to understand themselves. After all, throughout recorded human history, self-knowledge has been a highly valued trait. For thousands of years, Buddhists have sought greater self-awareness through the practice of meditation. The Greeks inscribed “Know Thyself” on the wall of the temple at Delphi. Some of the most respected figures in the Catholic Church extolled the virtue of self-knowledge, such as St Augustine of Hippo, who in his prayer for self-knowledge wrote, “Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know You” (Augustinian Spirituality, n.d.). Similarly, St Teresa of Avila suggested that, “Self-knowledge is of such consequence that I would not have you careless of it” (St Teresa of Avila, 1577).

To be sure, different religions and philosophical approaches emphasize different aspects of self-knowledge. In Buddhism it is a realization of the transitory nature and unimportance of the self, and a route by which people can gain awareness of suffering and compassion toward others, as well as a greater awareness of one’s feelings and motives (Flanagan, 2011). In Catholicism, it is gaining a sense of humility and an appreciation of God’s power. For example, St Augustine’s prayer goes on to say, “Let me banish self and follow You, and ever desire to follow You” (Augustinian Spirituality, n.d.), and St Teresa of Avila adds, “I believe we shall never learn to know ourselves except by endeavouring to know God, for, beholding His greatness we are struck by our own baseness” (St Teresa of Avila, 1577).

Psychological science shares the idea that self-knowledge is of paramount importance, but with a somewhat different focus than religious teachings. Rather than spiritual growth or a sense of humility, psychology has focused on the value of self-knowledge (e.g., to mental health) and how people attain it. Here I will review research on each of these topics.

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Is There Value to Self-Knowledge?

The simple answer to this question is, “Of course”. People who are completely out of touch with their abilities, traits, and feelings are likely to be unhappy with themselves and insufferable around others. Indeed, a common definition of mental illness is a loss of touch with reality, including one’s own traits and capabilities. A person who believes he can fly after jumping off of tall buildings is unlikely to live for very long, and a teenager who is convinced that she will be the next star on the *American Idol* television show, despite an inability to carry a tune, is destined for failure and heartache.

But the question of how valuable self-knowledge is turns out to be more complicated. Taylor and Brown (1988), in a seminal article, suggested that “positive illusions” about oneself can be beneficial. Consider two people who are both talented singers. The one who has greater faith in her ability, and perhaps even exaggerates it a bit, is likely to work harder and persevere more in the face of failure, than the one who has a more realistic view. As long as positive illusions aren’t too extreme, this argument goes, they confer motivational and affective benefits.

The Taylor and Brown (1988) argument caused a good deal of controversy that continues to this day (see Vazire & Wilson, 2012). But a general consensus has emerged that positive illusions (sometimes called “self-enhancement”) can be beneficial or costly, depending on a number of circumstances. One moderator, as mentioned, is how extreme the illusions are. We have a name for people who exaggerate their own talents and achievements to extreme degrees – narcissists – and research shows that such individuals pay a price for their self-enhancement: others view them as pompous and unlikeable (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Schriber & Robins, 2012).

There is also evidence that it is best to keep our self-enhancing tendency to ourselves, because wearing them on our sleeves annoys others. Support for this hypothesis comes from a study by Dufner (2012), who found that there was a social benefit to *actual* self-enhancement but a social cost to *perceived* self-enhancement. The more people actually self-enhanced – that is, the extent to which they thought that they were more intelligent than they actually were – the more they were liked by their friends, perhaps because they were confident and happy people. But the more people were perceived to be self-enhancers by their friends, the more unpopular they were. The moral seems to be that it is good to privately believe that we are better than we are, but not to convey that view to others.

It is also important to consider the value of self-knowledge from a broader perspective. In addition to overestimating specific abilities, such as how well we can sing or how intelligent we are, are there key myths about

ourselves and the social world that increase our well-being? I believe that there are a small number of essential myths that human beings share. Whether they are adaptive is open to debate, though I suspect they are, at least in moderation. I offer four candidates of such myths here. Warning: Discussing these myths is tantamount to dispelling them, at least temporarily, so read on at your own risk!

Essential Myth 1: We Are Immortal

Everyone knows that they are mortal beings who have an expiration date. Some people believe in the immortality of the soul or in reincarnation, of course, but no one can deny that our existence in our current bodies will end sooner or later. Did you experience a ping of anxiety when you read that sentence? I confess that I experienced such a ping when I wrote it. Knowledge of our own mortality is the ultimate existential threat and people have developed all sorts of strategies to avoid thinking about the inevitability of their deaths (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). As a result, we live much of our lives avoiding the knowledge of our ultimate demise, or at least avoiding to think about it. Is such denial adaptive? The answer is no if it leads to behaviors that will hasten our demise, such as smoking cigarettes and overeating. But constant reminders of our ultimate end are paralyzing and I suspect that there is a happy medium, where it is best to live each hour without dwelling too much on the fact that it might be our last one, while at the same time trying to maximize our number of hours by adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Essential Myth 2: We Are Important

There is no one that we spend more time with than ourselves. As a result, it is hard to avoid the impression that we are an important force in the world, individuals who make a difference and are of great consequence to many other people. For most of us, this impression is probably not as true as we think it is. Suppose, for example, that I gave a questionnaire to your friends and family that asked them to (a) rank how important you are to them, in comparison to their other loved ones, and (b) to keep track of how often they think about you when you are not around. Next I ask you to guess what your average “importance ranking” is among your friends and family, and to guess how often you are in their thoughts. To my knowledge such a study has not been done, but if it were, I would bet that most of us would overestimate our importance and salience to others.

This myth probably helps us get out of bed in the morning, work hard at our jobs, and strike up conversations with strangers at parties. After all,

why do any of these things if we are just one insignificant speck in the universe? Of course, this myth can be taken too far, resulting in narcissism. And showing people that they are not as important as they think they are might have the benefits of reducing the number of inane posts they make on social media sites, shorten the length of their boring stories at parties, and increase the likelihood that they focus less on themselves and more on helping others. In this regard, it is interesting to note that many religions stress the insignificance of any one of us on earth, stressing humbleness over self-importance. But again, exaggerating our importance a tad probably has motivational benefits.

Essential Myth 3: The World Is as We See It

When we observe the social world and form impressions of other people, we are often surprised to learn that other people saw things differently from us. The reason we are surprised is because of a pervasive phenomenon called naïve realism, which is the assumption that we observe the world as it actually is, rather than interpreting, construing, or selecting the information that reaches our senses (Ross & Ward, 1996). Because we believe that we see things as they are, when others disagree with us, we believe that it can only be because they are wrong and we are right.

Naïve realism is not simply a motivational strategy that people adopt in order to feel good; rather, it results from the fact that people are not consciously aware of the mental processes that select and interpret information as it hits our senses. Because we cannot directly observe this process of construal, our interpretations of the world appear to us simple observations (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). It is also clear that naïve realism has many negative consequences. For example, it is a roadblock to resolving conflicts between adversaries; often, the two sides cannot even agree on the facts, given that each side believes that it is viewing them accurately while the other is twisting the facts to suit its own purposes. But is naïve realism also adaptive in some way? In small doses it may have some benefits. People who are never sure what the world is really like, and are constantly aware that theirs is but one of hundreds of interpretations, are likely to spend more time equivocating than acting.

Essential Myth 4: Other People are Predictable

Think of a close friend that you know really well. Now suppose that your friend found a \$20 dollar bill on the floor of a bookstore. Would he or she pocket the money or try to find the person who lost it? How confident are you in your guess? Research shows that we are overconfident

when making such predictions – we are not as accurate as we think we are (e.g., Dunning, Griffin, Milojevic, & Ross, 1990). One reason for overconfidence in predicting other people’s behavior is naïve realism (e.g., the assumption that our interpretation of the lost money situation is the same as how our friend would interpret it). Another is a phenomenon called the fundamental attribution error, which is the tendency to attribute other people’s behavior to stable personality traits and to underestimate the role of situational factors in influencing behavior (Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977). We might be sure that our friend would return the money because we believe that he or she is an honest person. But we would likely be overestimating the extent to which honesty is the sole determinant of behavior in this situation, and underestimate the role of such situational factors as how much of a hurry our friend is in and how crowded the store is.

Are overconfident predictions adaptive in some way? As with the other myths we have discussed, it may be helpful in small doses. Obviously we don’t want to be so overconfident that we are constantly surprised by what other people do. But it might be to our advantage to exaggerate our ability to predict, to some small degree. It is reassuring to believe that we can predict what our loved ones will do tomorrow, next month, and next year, rather than knowing that they might well surprise us in unsettling ways.

In sum, it is likely that the Goldilocks principle applies to each of the four myths I have just reviewed: We don’t want too little or too much of them, but a level that is just right. The happiest, most effective people are probably those who don’t dwell too much on their mortality, overestimate their importance to others just a little, think that they are astute observers of the world and yet can also appreciate others’ points of view, and believe that they are excellent predictors of what their friends will do, while also recognizing that they are not always right.

How Do People Attain Self-Knowledge?

Although there may be benefits to some forms of positive illusions, the fact remains that it is critical to have some awareness of our own abilities, preferences, and traits. If we were clueless about what we liked, or where our talents lie, it would be difficult to accomplish much or achieve happiness. As Tennyson noted, “Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control – these three alone lead life to sovereign power”. How, then, should we go about discovering ourselves?

Throughout most of human history, the path to self-knowledge has been thought to lie inward. Via introspection, prayer, or meditation, people focus inwardly on their own thoughts and feelings. And yet, in the past few

decades, psychological research has demonstrated the limits of introspection. As powerful as human consciousness is, it is not a powerful beam that, when turned inward, illuminates all of our motives and traits.

Sigmund Freud, of course, was one of the first to point out the limits of the conscious mind. Consciousness is the mere tip of the mental iceberg, he argued, such that most of our mental lives, including our deepest wishes, motives, and feelings, are hidden from view. And, we devote quite a bit of psychic energy to keeping them hidden, because it would be upsetting to acknowledge to ourselves how base and animal-like many of our urges are.

The modern view of the unconscious is different. While not denying the existence of the Freudian unconscious, the emphasis is more on the extent to which the everyday operations of the mind are unavailable to introspection. There is a vast *adaptive unconscious*, according to this view, that evolved over thousands of years, and includes most of the way in which the mind works (Wilson, 2002). Consciousness evolved much later, and although it is an amazing evolutionary achievement, it is not fully integrated with the rest of the mind. Put differently, human beings were probably sophisticated information processors before the dawn of consciousness, with the ability to learn, interpret incoming information, set goals, and form preferences. We have retained the ability to perform these mental feats unconsciously, without the involvement of consciousness. As a consequence, consciousness is limited not only by what we don't *want* to know, as Freud argued, but also by what we *can't* know. This is not to say that everything is unconscious. People are obviously aware of a rich set of thoughts and feelings – especially feelings, which seem to have priority in consciousness. But the point is that there is much more to the mind than what we can be aware of (Wilson, 2002).

People as Story Tellers

That doesn't mean we can't figure it out. Just as we are astute observers of other people, and make good inferences about who they are and what they are likely to do next, so can we be astute observers of ourselves. After all, we have a great deal of information to go by, more than we have about anyone else – knowledge of how we have acted in countless situations, how other people react to us, and how we feel (because, as mentioned, emotions seem especially likely to rise up into consciousness). In addition to this “raw material”, we can try to see ourselves through the eyes of others, comparing our view to theirs and revising our views accordingly (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Vazire & Carlson, 2010).

In my view, self-knowledge is all about the way we integrate this raw material into stories about ourselves. Like narrative interpretations of a text,

there is not a single “true” story. Narratives are arbitrary to a degree; given the same “raw data” about others and ourselves, we can arrive at radically different interpretations. A person could view her spouse as the love of her life who should be forgiven his minor foibles and flaws, such as the fact that he once had an affair and was not the best father in the world. Or, she could weave a quite different story, ruing the day she met such a cad. Similarly, there is considerable latitude on the narratives that we construct about ourselves. Based on the same “data”, a woman could view herself as a talented professional who, despite some setbacks, has become a star in her field, or as an imposter who has succeeded through blind luck and will be drummed out of her discipline as soon as people catch on.

This raises the important question of how we can judge the “goodness” of a self-story. At one extreme, postmodern psychologists have argued that no story is truer than another, and that we should avoid accuracy as a criterion (e.g., Gergen & Kaye, 1992). But surely this argument goes too far. Even postmodernists would agree, I presume, that it is not adaptive for people to believe that if they jumped off of a tall building they could fly. Indeed, research shows that the more people’s conscious beliefs about their goals match their nonconscious goals, the happier they are. Consider, for example, two people who are deciding on a career. One believes that he is a “people person” and thus chooses a career that involves a lot of social interaction, such as sales. In fact, though, he has a low implicit need for affiliation, and is unlikely to be happy or successful in career that is mismatched to his implicit goals. The other person knows that she is not a “people person”, and chooses a career more suited to her goals, such as becoming an accountant. Research shows that the latter person will be happier than the former (Schultheiss & Strasser, 2012).

Thus, a “good” self-story should capture who we are, at least to some extent – and by that I mean that it should correspond to our unconscious traits, needs, and goals. This doesn’t mean that there is only way of telling that story, however. Indeed, late in his life, even Freud came to view the process of psychotherapy not as “uncovering truths”, but rather the construction of a narrative that provides people with healthy, coherent explanations of who they are (Spence, 1982). But regardless of how the story is told, it should correspond to the person’s adaptive unconscious.

Which brings us to another sign of a good self-story, namely what I have called the “peace of mind” criterion (Wilson, 2002). Our stories should provide us with a meaningful narrative that allows us to gain closure on negative episodes in our lives, instead of ruminating about them (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Writing exercises have been developed to help people find

meaning in traumatic events, which, in the current terminology, allows them to revise their stories in ways that make sense of their lives and allow them to move on (Pennebaker, 2004; Kross, 2009).

Finally, good self-stories should meet a “believability” criterion. Regardless of how true the story is, it should be convincing to the one who tells it. One wonders how dedicated postmodernists get through their day, if they really believe that the self-story they have adopted at noon is completely arbitrary and likely to be different from the one they adopt by dinner time. As Freud noted, in discussing the process of psychoanalysis, “an assured conviction of the truth of the construction ... achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory” (Freud, 1937/1976, p. 266).

Unanswered Questions

I have drawn a sharp line between the adaptive unconscious and people’s conscious stories about themselves. But the distinction is probably not as sharp as I have implied. People’s self stories are undoubtedly a complex mixture of conscious inferences and implicit assumptions that are not easy to verbalize. Consider first-year college students who unexpectedly receive a bad grade in a course. The way that they explain this to themselves is likely to be crucial to what happens next. If they construct a story that they are hopeless failures who will never succeed in college, they will not fare as well as if they infer that they simply need to try harder.

Many studies have assumed that people’s self-stories are crucial in situations such as this, and that relatively minimal interventions can succeed in getting people to redirect their story in a more positive direction (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Bugental *et al.*, 2002; Wilson, Shelton, & Damiani, 2002). And many of these studies have had spectacular success in doing so, helping to improve academic achievement, reduce child abuse, and alleviate stereotype threat (Wilson, 2012). But, evidence for the proposed mediating processes – namely that people’s stories changes in the ways that the researchers assumed – has been hard to come by. Some studies find evidence for story change (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011), whereas others do not (e.g., Wilson & Linville, 1982). Of course, this could be because the researchers are wrong about what is driving the change in people’s behavior. I suspect that they are right, but that people’s stories are a complex mixture of conscious and unconscious assumptions that are not easy to measure.

Second, the pendulum may have swung too far toward the study of unconscious processing. Consciousness has gotten a bad name in some quarters, as researchers (including myself) have investigated its limits and the

problems that result from too much introspection (e.g., Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, & Lisle, 1989). There is a rich tradition of studying the contents of consciousness, dating back at least to James (1890/1950), followed by such endeavors as the study of daydreams (Klinger, 1990; Singer, 1975) and mind wandering (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Many of these research programs examine important questions of mental control, or the extent to which people can consciously direct their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993). Again, much of this work involves the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious processes, such as the extent to which people can keep their mind on a task, and the conditions under which their attention wanders involuntarily from one topic to another. Clearly the interweaving of conscious and unconscious processes is a rich topic to study, though one that requires clever experimental methods.

Summary

Self-knowledge has been a central topic of study for philosophers, religious scholars, and psychologists, as well as for all human beings who have paused for a moment and directed their attention inward. Modern psychology has made considerable strides in understanding the limits of introspection, how self-knowledge can be obtained indirectly through the development of self-stories, and the value of self-knowledge. There is much to be learned about the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious mental processes, and psychological scientists are uniquely equipped to advance this learning.

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