The Unconscious Mind:

How logic is not suited to understanding the unconscious and why we need intuition

Groupthink:

How the effect of a culture influences our thinking and judgment

Symbolism:

If the language of logic is grammar, the language of intuition is symbolic imagery

NASCENT STATE
Magazine

From the Editor

This edition of Nascent State magazine explores the idea of the unconscious mind.

The modern era is based on the belief that, by means of reason, we can eliminate all that is unconscious and irrational in human nature. If human nature was rational, this would be sufficient. But of course it is not.

'In the exploration of the unconscious we come upon very strange things, from which a rationalist turns away with horror, claiming afterward that he did not see anything.'

Carl Jung

Cover: The Burial of the Sardine by Francisco Goya, 1812

Not everything is as it appears, and what we do not have to live long to know that. What we see is often only the outward expression of hidden causes or motives. This is particularly true when it comes to human nature.

If we could see our inner life clearly, there could be no deception, no flattery, manipulation, tact or discretion, no crimes of passion, addiction, obsession, nor any hindsight regret for our past actions or deeds. The fact that such things are a part of life is evidence enough that we do not see our inner life clearly.

The French philosopher, Henri Bergson, wrote 'The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.' We can begin to see the unconscious mind by comprehending it first.

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The Unconscious Mind

An Intuitive Approach

While the appeal to reason is admirable, much of human nature is not governed by reason. The inner life is governed by a mixture of emotions, hidden motives, evocative imagery, instinct, social convention, unchecked assumptions, momentary passions and limited perception, all of which influence our behaviour either directly or indirectly. The problem is not whether we are unconsciously motivated, but whether we are aware of it.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the exploration of the unconscious was at the forefront of psychological thinking. Eduard Von Hartmann, in his Philosophy of the Unconscious (1893), was perhaps one of the first to attempt to address the issue on a rational basis. He wrote:

'How often, however, do we fail to understand ourselves; how enigmatical often are our own feelings, especially when they occur for the first time; how liable are we to the greatest self-delusions with regard to them! We are often mastered by a feeling which has already struck firm roots in our inmost being without our suspecting it, and suddenly, on some occasion or other, there fall, as it were, scales from our eyes.'

John Henry Fuseli - The Nightmare, 1871

The book, The Age of Reason (1794), was written as a statement of religious belief, but a religious belief based on the application of reason rather than on dogma, scripture or revelation. Its author, Thomas Paine stated 'My own mind is my own church' by which he meant that his belief in God was based purely on reason.

Reason dictated that we can no longer be governed by subservience to authority or to the iron laws of nature. This led to the pursuit of material prosperity, to the growth of technology, liberal culture, human rights and modern democracy. And yet for all the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Modern Era has given us some of the most destructive wars in history, two violent revolutions, the nuclear bomb, biological weapons and cyber warfare.
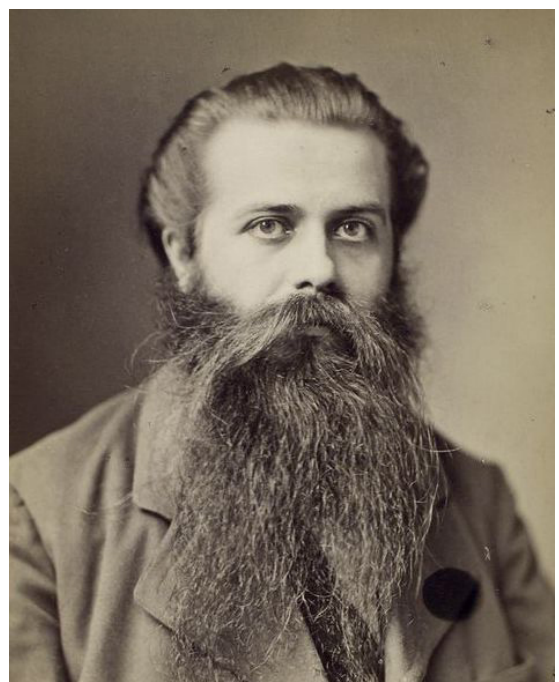

Hiroshima, August 1945

Eduard von Hartmann, 1885

The unconscious mind has proven problematic for the rationalism of the age. To acknowledge its existence would be to undermine the very notion of progress. William James (1842 - 1910), who wrote the first textbook of modern psychology, The Principles of Psychology, felt compelled to address the issue in the section 'Do unconscious mental states exist?'. While admitting the subject had numerous champions, he found it necessary to refute its existence; it simply did not conform to the notion that applied reason could make sense of the inner life.

There followed a number of false starts in the study of the unconscious. The methodology employed by psychoanalysis - by Sigmund Freud in particular - led Sir Karl Popper (1902 - 1994) to point out that its findings could not be proven false, and so it was therefore unscientific. While Popper's conclusion was understandable, what he did not address was the greater problem, which is whether we are fully conscious of what guides and influences our behaviour.
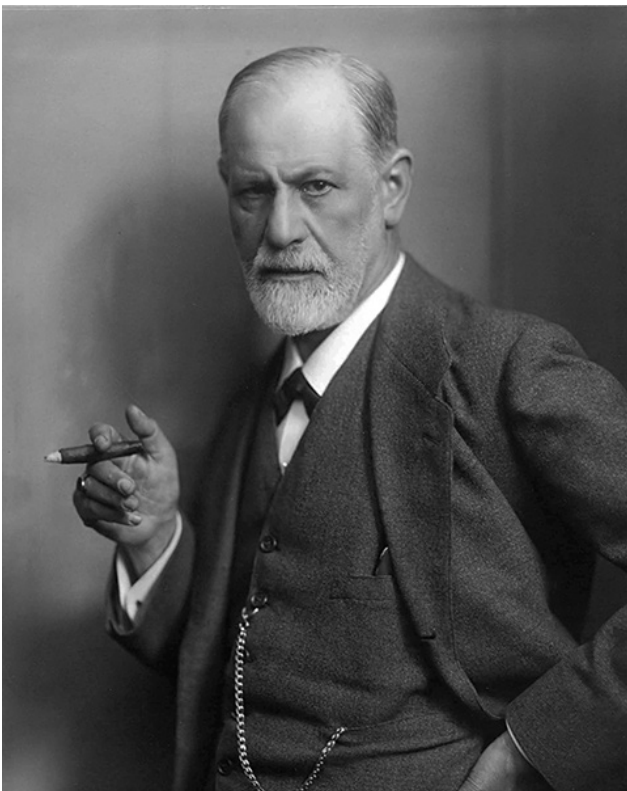

Sigmund Freud, 1921

The unwillingness of the modern era to address the unconscious mind means that what we call 'progress' has been a mixed bag. The mass media, for example, while ostensibly intended to disseminate news and information in society, includes much that is intended to influence public opinion, and often by underhanded means.

Military propaganda, government spin, public relations and political lobbying are commonplace examples of the attempt to influence public thinking by hidden means. Walter Lippmann (1889 - 1974), who played an influential role in the development of the public relations industry, coined the term 'the creation of consent' to refer to this indirect approach. In his book, Public Opinion, he wrote:

'The creation of consent is not a new art. It is a very old one which was supposed to have died out with the appearance of democracy. But it has not died out. It has, in fact, improved enormously in technic, because it is now based on analysis rather than on rule of thumb.' [2]
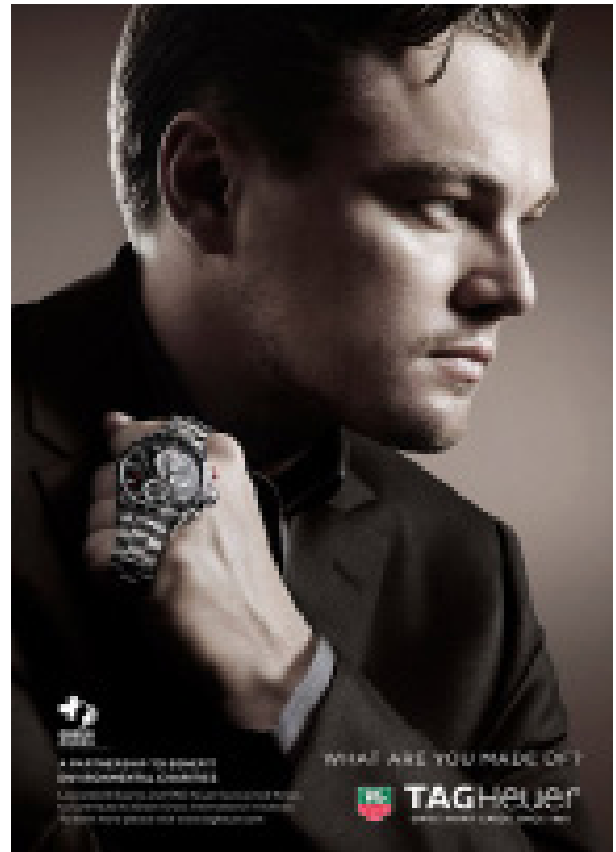
This is not an advert

Another person who played an equally important role in the founding of the modern public relations industry was Edward Bernays (1891 - 1995). In his book Propaganda, he wrote:

'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.' [3]

Bernays was no bystander; in addition to

coining the term 'public relations' to replace the tainted 'propaganda', he pioneered the use of appropriate imagery as the most effective means of selling a product. From this came celebrity endorsement, product placement, suggestive selling and the use of imagery over text in advertising. The public relations industry is presently worth somewhere in the region of £100 billion per annum globally. It would not exist if it was not possible to influence public opinion by such means.

The question is not whether we can be influenced unconsciously, but whether we are aware of it or not. If we were fully aware of what motivates us, there could be no deception, manipulation or flattery, all of which depend on the recipient being unaware this is taking place.

Lord Stanhope, 1765, by Allan Ramsay

Philip Stanhope, or Lord Chesterfield (1694 – 1773), a high ranking British diplomat, was both informed and effective in the use of flattery as the means to influence others. He knew that flattery works by addressing the other person's insecurities, particularly those of which they were least aware. He suggested that if a woman is beautiful, she should be complimented on her intelligence, and if she was intelligent, she should be complimented on her beauty. His opinion of men was no different:

'Seek first, then, for the predominant passion of the character which you mean to engage and influence, and address yourself to it.' [4]

The rationalism of the modern era, for all admirable qualities, does not assist us to see the unconscious mind, but actually prevents it. Any attempt to apply reason to what is not subject to reason is bound to be futile.

It is interesting to note that the arts, being less constrained by the demands of logic, have been more able to represent this darker aspect of human nature. At about the same time as Von Hartmann wrote his Philosophy of the Unconscious, Robert Louis Stephenson provided a much more resonant example of the unconscious mind in his book The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886):

'It was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both...'
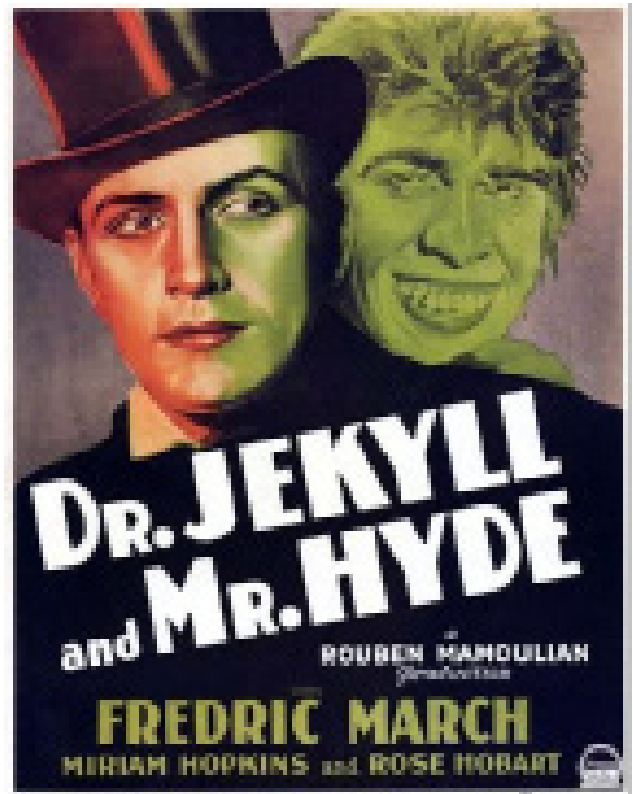
Stephenson's tale, intended or not, points to one of the limitations of logic, which is that it polarizes thinking into pairs of opposites; if we are good, then we cannot be evil, and if we are moral, we cannot be immoral. It also follows that if we employ only reason in our study of human nature, we will miss what is not subject to reason.

Logic deals with the world as we know it. Once we know what something is, we can define and categorize it. Logic allows us to say that wood is not metal and an animal is not a plant. But by the same measure, logic also polarizes thinking into opposites; if we regard ourselves as moral, then we cannot regard ourselves as immoral. Stephenson's tale depicts this duality in the inner life. It follows that, in order to see that which is presently hidden, we must be prepared to challenge the simplistic black and white view of logic.

We deal with the unknown intuitively. We employ intuition to make some of our most important decisions in life, about new acquaintances and new situations, and we do so because such decisions involve dealing with an unknown. If we don't know whether we can trust someone or not, or whether an unexpected event is a blessing or curse, we rely on intuition to inform our judgement. The same goes with our approach to the inner life; we begin to see what is presently hidden through intuition and insight, rather than through the analysis of what we already know.

The phenomenon of hindsight is instructive in this regard. It is largely through hindsight that the thoughts and intentions which formerly motivated us suddenly reveal themselves to us. Hindsight occurs because the emotions that informed our actions will wane with the passage of time. Once free of the governing passion, we are now able to see the influence for what it was.

Once again we must turn to the arts rather than to science to describe the phenomenon of hindsight. T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965), in his poem Little Gidding, from the Four Quartets (1941), wrote about what he called 'the gifts reserved for age', of which he included:

'the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.'

If we could see our inner life clearly, there would be no wisdom of hindsight. If we do not see the unconscious in our inner life, it is because we are blind to it, not because it doesn't exist.

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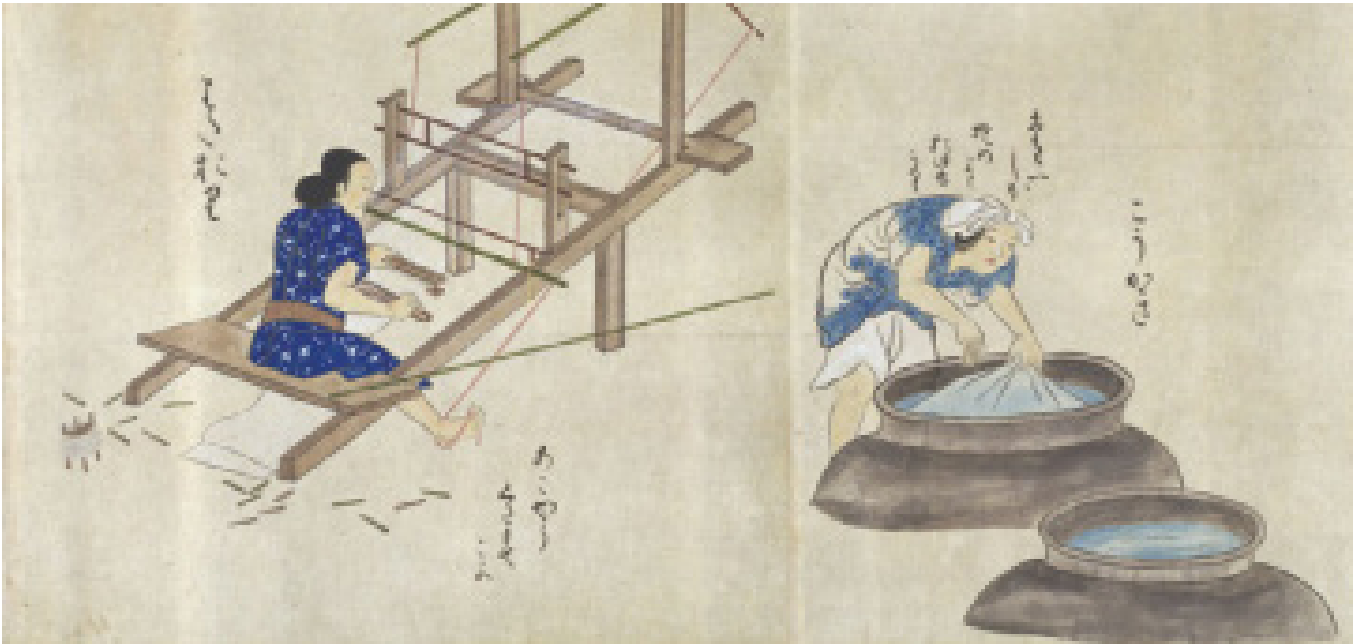[6] T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets (London: Faber & Faber, 1944) p. 45
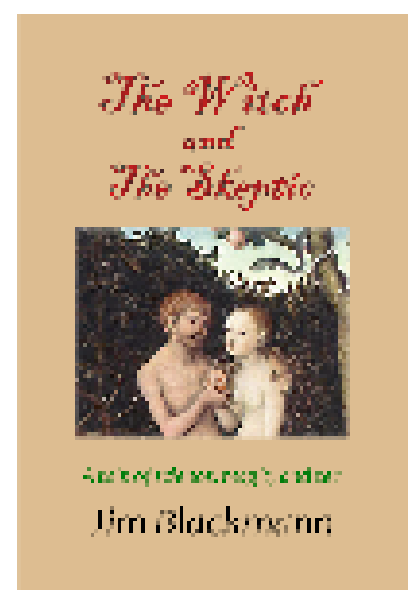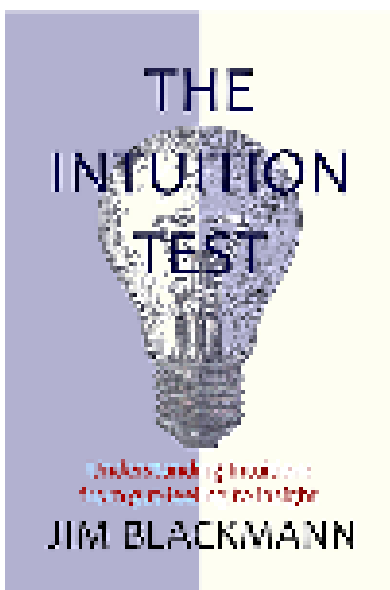
Groupthink
or the truth of consensus

Kano Seisen'in Osanobu, Dyer and Weaver, 1846,

Japanese woodcuts prior to the middle of the nineteenth century did not include shadows. This is because the Japanese artists who created them did not regard shadows as real, and therefore saw no reason to depict them.

Japan had undergone a period of self-isolation for more than two centuries. During that time, the Japanese had developed their own highly unique cultural identity. Then in 1853, the American Navy landed at Edo Bay and, through the use of force, opened Japan up to the wider world. From that time onwards, Japanese culture began to change, and shadows found their way into Japanese art.

We do not see the impact of a culture on our thinking because, like a fish in water, we do not consider our local environment to be unique.

The term 'groupthink' was coined by William H.Whyte, in an article he wrote for Fortune Magazine in 1952. Whyte defined groupthink as something more than the instinctive desire to conform, but what he called a 'rationalized conformity', whereby submission to the values of the group was regarded as moral and right, and nonconformity was deemed suspicious and quite possibly subversive.

A degree of conformity in society is natural; we adopt the mannerisms of those around us, through fashion and accent and attitudes, and for the most part we do this unconsciously. Early Victorian photographs depict the conditions and attitudes of the time, and often through the lesser details of stern faces and sombre attire. We look at such photos as though we were perceiving a different country rather than a different century.

Nazi Germany in the 1930s

The term 'groupthink' was further employed by Irving Janis, who published the book Groupthink: Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes (1972). Janis sought to explain the failed invasion of Cuba, or what became known as the 'Bay of Pigs' fiasco. Although the invasion

was ostensibly the work of Cuban exiles, it was funded by the American government, and the training had been provided by the CIA. Janis wanted to show that a culture of conformity - a military necessity - had prevented anyone from questioning its feasibility.

The term then gained further usage after the Second Gulf War (2003), when Iraq was invaded under the auspices that it possessed large quantities of chemical weapons and was intending to deploy them against the West. Saddam Hussain, its leader at the time, was accused of hiding them, and so in order to disarm the threat, the country was invaded. After the invasion, few if any were found, and questions were asked about how the intelligence went so badly wrong.

While the term 'groupthink' is relatively new, the effect of conformity on decision-making is not.

The emperor Justinian I (527 - 565) is remembered for attempting to restore the Roman empire to its former glory by purifying all non-conformist thinking from Roman lands. He shut down all the Greek philosophical schools, including the Neoplatonic Academy which had found approval with Saint Augustine, and banished them to Persia and beyond. Bertrand Russell, in his History of Western Philosophy, noted the effect this had on European culture:

'The Academy, where Plato had taught, survived all other schools, and persisted, as an island of paganism, for two centuries after the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity. At last, in A.D. 529, it was closed by Justinian because of his religious bigotry, and the Dark Ages descended upon Europe.' [3]

John Foxe, the burning of Latimer and Ridley, 1563

This was by no means a unique event. The same intolerance towards non-conformist thinking continued into the Middle Ages, when the Church deemed it necessary to purge all the lands under its influence of heresy. In order to enforce this, a decree was issued, the Ad Extirpanda (1252), which condoned the use of torture as a means of interrogation. The brutality of the Inquisition followed. It is telling that the word 'heretic' means 'one who chooses'.

We might assume that the modern era, born out of the Humanism of the Renaissance, is now more tolerant of individual thinking, but little has changed. Groupthink now finds expression through secular culture, economics and political ideology.

Beijing students denouncing the former vice chairman, Liu Shaoqi in 1967

In the twentieth century, the demand for ideological purity led to Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, and to the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s. The Cultural Revolution was headed by Chairman Mao's wife Jiang Qing ((1914 – 1991)), who stated 'there cannot be peaceful coexistence in the ideological realm'. The Cultural Revolution was intended to purge the last remnants of Capitalism from Chinese culture. It is estimated that as many as 20 million people died as a consequence of the purge.

While groupthink is an obvious factor in religion and politics, it also plays a part in science. The scientific historian Thomas Kuhn (1922 – 1996) noted the influence of peer pressure on scientific research in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. He used the term 'paradigm' to explain how this form of groupthink influences not only scientific thinking but also scientific research. He wrote:

'No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others.' [4]

Kuhn coined the term 'paradigm shift' to describe
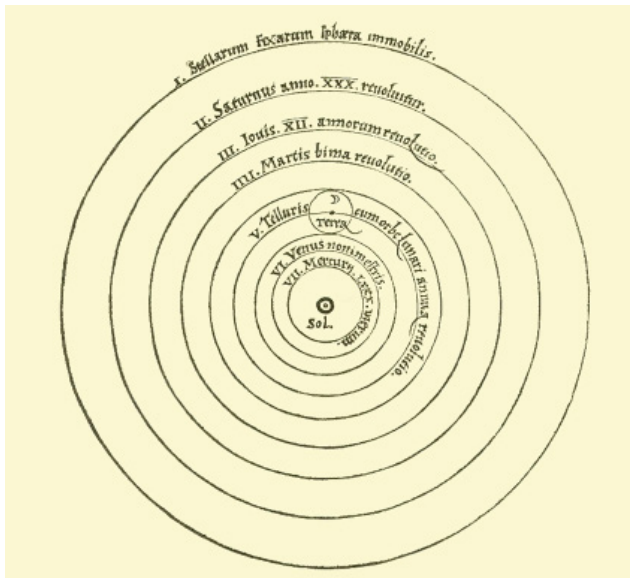
Nicolaus Copernicus' heliocentric model, 1543

when a new idea or insight affects the thinking of the group, which then creates a new paradigm. One of the most obvious examples of a paradigm shift in history was the Copernican Revolution (1543), whereby the assertion that the earth was unmoving was successfully challenged by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 – 1543). The assertion of a stationary earth was part of Church dogma, and the ensuing argument was not merely about whether the earth was in motion, but - more importantly - whether the Church owned truth.

The Copernican Revolution was by no means unique. Wilhelm Rontgen (1845 – 1923), the physicist who produced the first X-Ray, did not immediately recognise the significance of his discovery, because his conventional thinking caused him to regard the phenomenon as an anomaly. And the Michelson–Morley experiment of 1887, was initially regarded as a failure to demonstrate the existence of the luminiferous aether until Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955) pointed out that actually it demonstrated the constancy of the speed of light. The experiment laid the foundation for modern physics.

The problem is not consensus, whether in science, religion or politics, but when that

consensus is imbued with a moral element, and then becomes confused with truth. This has the effect of preventing anyone from questioning the governing paradigm.

While science, religion and politics might be seen as quite different matters, what unifies them is that, at present at least, each is founded on logic. Logic demands uniformity; if A is A, then A cannot be not-A. If wood is wood, then wood cannot be metal. While this is highly useful in physics, it is highly restrictive in dealing with human nature, and more particularly with our perception of reality.

Logic, for all its advantages, causes us to think in terms of opposites, and to attribute truth to one view over another, even if both views are flawed. This form of polarisation can lead to intolerance and persecution. Once we associate the dominant paradigm with truth, then any competing outlooks are seen as not just a threat to the existing order, but as a threat to truth itself.

Slum next to a casino in Havana, Cuba, 1954

In order to see the influence of the governing paradigm, we have to become free of it. This can happen progressively - such as when Victorian values are succeeded by liberal values - or suddenly, through violent revolution. It is interesting to note that prior to the French, American, Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions, the governing authorities were regarded as either indulgent or corrupt.

Perhaps what is most interesting is that the phenomenon of 'groupthink' can be discussed openly. This means that society is no longer governed by a single authority. The modern era has led to the rise of multiculturalism, to the proliferation of news channels, competing authorities, and finally to social media. While this has many advantages, unless supplemented by an understanding of the problem of groupthink, it can lead to conflict between the different competing voices all claiming to represent truth.

The modern era places a greater demand on the individual to think for themselves and, more importantly, to make their own judgements about what is right, true and important. This individual form of judgement is intuitive; when there is no single governing authority to dictate what is right, we have only our own intuitive judgement to inform our own opinions and outlooks. While this may seem less important than the necessity of earning a living and paying the rent, it is not.

Charles Ponzi, in Boston, 1920

In Boston, in the 1920s, an investment scheme was set up by Charles Ponzi (1882 - 1949), to trade on the difference in value of Postal Reply coupons across different countries. No investment was actually taking place; Ponzi was merely using the money taken from new investors to pay dividends out to existing investors. A journalist, Neal O'Hara, wrote an article for the Boston Traveler suggesting the scheme was a fraud. Ponzi took the journalist to court, sued him and

won. This was only three months prior to the collapse of the scheme.

The financial authorities of the day could not see this. Perhaps it is because too many had invested their own money in the scheme, and they did not want to see what ought to have been obvious to any disinterested observer. As with any form of groupthink; in order to see the governing paradigm, we have to be willing to question it. And that can only be done by individuals willing to think for themselves.

If we are not willing to take responsibility for our own thinking, that responsibility will be taken by others, or by events or by society. And it is we, as individuals, who have to deal with the consequences of that lack of thinking.

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Symbolism

Its language and meaning

The Great Sphinx of Giza

The Great Sphinx at Giza pre-dates recorded history. Its authorship is unknown, but its size indicates the importance it had for those who built it. The Sphinx was created by a culture which the modern era now regards as backward and superstitious.

Logic arose at the time of ancient Greece; indeed, one of the earliest examples of deductive reasoning comes from the Greek philosopher Thales (Sixth Century BC), who deduced the height of the Great Pyramid by comparing its shadow to his own. Since the time of ancient Greece, logic and analysis have superseded symbolic imagery as the means to transmit important ideas.

This transition from symbolic to logical thinking can be seen in the early Greek texts. The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, for example, contain as much mythology as recorded history. Alexander Pope, in his preface to his 1899 translation of the Iliad, attempts to apply reason to this mix of fact and fable:

'Fable may be divided into the probable, the allegorical, and the marvelous. The probable fable is the recital of such actions as, though they did not happen, yet might, in the common course of nature; or of such as, though they did, became fables by the additional episodes and manner of telling them.' [1]

The modern era is founded on the notion that through the application of reason we will overcome the superstitious thinking of the past. That is why the dream-like imagery of symbolism is regarded as part of an outdated view of the world. And yet the use of symbolic imagery has continued into the modern era, and it is only owing to the dominance of logic that we do not see its importance and influence. We still employ metaphors to make sense of life and, indeed, being unrecognised as such, we mistake them for fact. Richard Dawkins, in his book, The Selfish Gene (1976), employed such a metaphor to describe human nature:

'We are survival machines - robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.' [2]

The same use of symbolic imagery also informs our concept of society. John Von Neumann (1903 – 1957), who gave the world 'game theory', which was employed by the military to justify the Cold War, regarded all human interaction as no more than a highly developed game, governed by pure mathematics. And yet for all the precision of his thinking, he too employed a metaphor to explain human behaviour. In the book he co-wrote with Oskar Morgenstern, the Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour (1944), he stated:

'A valuable qualitative preliminary description of the behaviour of the individual is offered by the Austrian School, particularly in analysing the economy of the isolated 'Robinson Crusoe'. We hope, however, to obtain a real understanding of the problem of exchange by studying it from an altogether different angle; this is, from the perspective of a 'game of strategy'.' [3]

The assumption that the modern era is governed by reason alone means we are not wholly aware just how much of life is also governed by symbolic imagery. The unthinking scientist in the novel Frankenstein was drawn from the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the Gods and was punished for his deed. The image of a seated figure of Justice, holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other, stands outside the modern courtroom. And the Caduceus of the artful Mercury is widely employed as a symbol in medicine. We live with symbolic imagery whether we are aware of it or not, and being unaware of it does not exempt us from its influence. In order to understand its nature, we have to apply a form of thinking suited to dealing with it.

Logic is reductionist; in order to think logically, we have to reduce a complex experience down to a single, definable term. A symbolic image, by nature, is complex and evocative. Its complexity means it cannot be reduced down to a single, definable meaning. That is why we employ the

words 'wolf', 'snake', and 'wildflower' to describe human traits; they evoke much more than is contained in the words themselves.
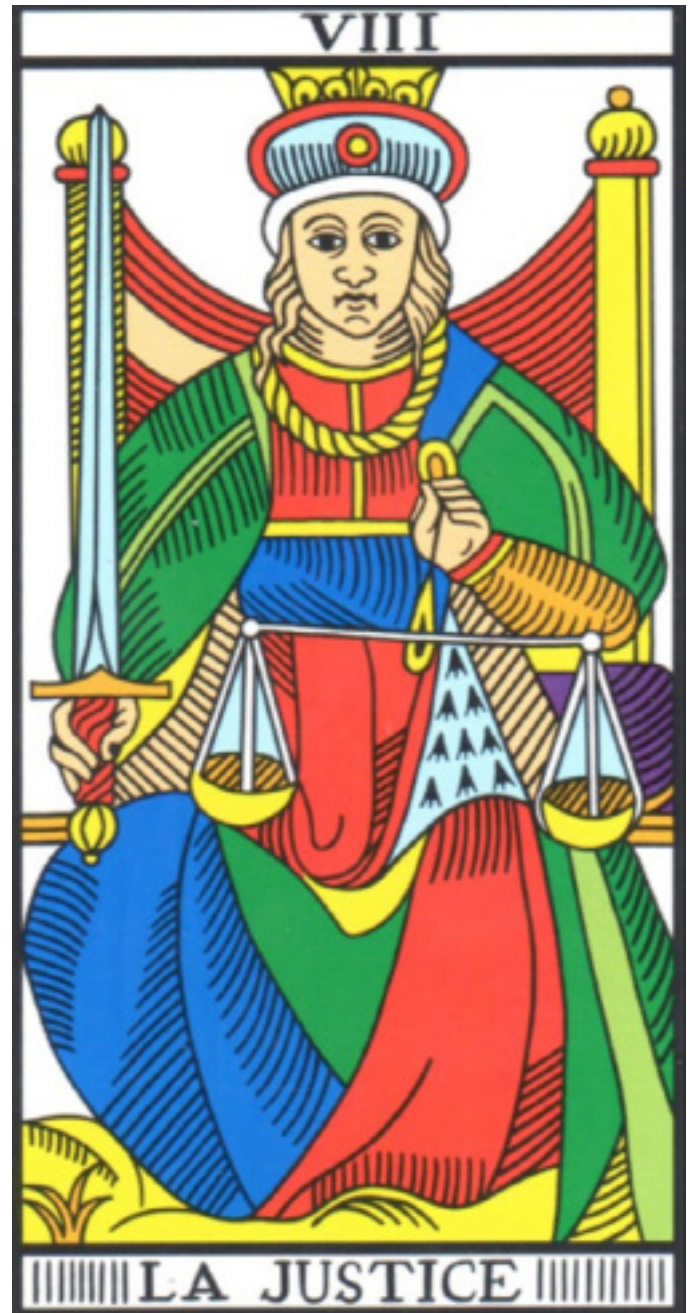
Justice, from the tarot de Marseille

If the language of logic is grammar, the language of intuition is symbolic imagery. Intuitive ideas are more like images than reasoned arguments. That is why inspired ideas are intuitive, and why they find expression through art, music and literature.

We deal with the known world through logic, and we deal with what we don't know through intuition. If we saw the world in its entirety, then logic would be sufficient. It is only when we suspect we are not seeing the whole picture that we employ intuitive thinking. Most of our major decisions in life involve thinking about the

unknown, whether it is an unknown person or an unknown future, and we employ intuition rather than logic to make such decisions.

We are surrounded by many more unknowns than we realize. The symmetry of a leaf, the colours in a wildflower, the economic use of material in a spider's web; all of these point to something more than meets the eye, however we choose to explain them. If we do not regard the world as an enigma, it is because logic is dominant. The world is full of enigmas, and if we don't see them, it is because we are not looking, not because they don't exist. The means to see enigmas is through intuitive observation. In order to see an enigma, we have to consider not what is obvious, but what is unobvious. In that respect, the study of symbolic imagery trains the mind to see the world as an enigma.

A symbolic image can convey layers of meaning. In doing so, it causes us to consider not simply what is obvious, but what is presently unobvious, and so to develop our understanding of its meaning progressively. This introduces fluidity into our thinking. The Eastern parable of the three blind men and the elephant, where each takes hold of one part of the elephant and then assumes this limited experience is the whole of the elephant, is instructive in this regard.

Eugene Delacroix, Liberty Leading the People, 1830

Symbolic imagery informs much more of life than we are aware. We would not build skyscrapers, fight wars or oppose tyrants if it wasn't for the images that accompany them. Without understanding symbolic imagery and its importance, we have only a half-view of life. This blindness has its consequences. We do not just depict our enemy as an enemy, but as the embodiment of evil. Indeed, our concepts of justice, freedom, progress and truth are much more symbolic than reason will admit.
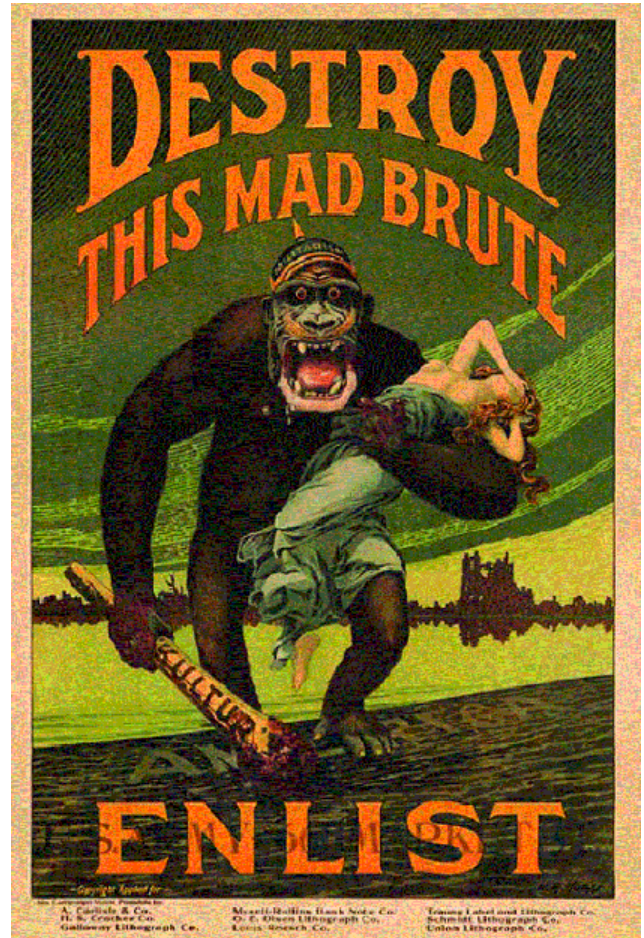
In the same way, our understanding of human nature depends very much on the imagery chosen to depict it; a limited view of human nature will see nothing but a complex machine. A fuller view of human nature cannot come from logic, which can only describe the obvious and apparent. To see what is hidden, we must employ a fuller metaphor. It was the American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote 'There is an optical illusion about every person we meet.' There is more to human nature than meets the eye.

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