

Filosofia della Mente

Conscious and unconscious intentionality in Practical Realism

by

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Abstract:

This study highlights the peculiarity of conscious and unconscious intentionality expressed in languages within the theory of Practical Realism

About the concept of conscious and unconscious intentionality much has been said, but the opinions of the scholars concerning this question are still different and even opposite. I will give here a short outline of this matter according to Practical Realism, which is my theory about understanding.

Contrast the following two cases:

1. Suppose that John and Ann are junior colleagues in an academic department of a university. John, who thinks of Jane as his competitor, has seen her flirt with the head of the department. He tells his other colleagues that Jane is trying to gain an unfair advantage over him. He comes to dislike Jane, and often in conversation with people outside the department, he enjoys saying bad things about Jane.
2. Suppose that Ann and Joe are also junior colleagues in an academic department of a university. Although Jane professes to like Joe well enough, she frequently says something bad about him when he is brought up in conversation. She is surprised when her other

colleagues suggest that she is hostile toward John. Her other colleagues present Ann with specific evidence from her past remarks. Ann is surprised, but she comes to believe that her other colleagues are right, and that she, in fact, dislikes Joe.

In the first case, John consciously dislikes Jane. In the second case, Ann unconsciously dislikes Joe—at least at the beginning of the story. When Ann's colleagues present her with the evidence of her dislike of him, she comes to realize that she dislikes Joe, and her dislike of him becomes conscious. According to Practical Realism, unconscious intentionality is a matter of having an attitude that one does not realize that she has. John's dislike of Jane is conscious, because he would not disavow it. (If a colleague said to John, "you dislike Jane, do'nt you?" John would not hesitate to say, "yes".) But Ann's dislike of Joe (at the beginning of the story) is not conscious, because she would sincerely (but falsely) deny that she disliked Joe. What legitimates our attribution of unconscious attitudes—attitudes that the subject would deny having—is the fact that evidence could be brought to bear on the subject. That is, the subject would come to recognize that she had been mistaken about her own attitudes.

If someone we suspect of having an unconscious attitude can not be brought to awareness of her attitude, then there are two possibilities: Either the subject is deeply self-deceived, or we who suspect that she has an unconscious attitude are wrong. Sometimes we cannot tell which of the alternatives is correct: Is the subject deeply self-deceived, or are we wrong about her having the unconscious attitude?

We may not be able to find out, but we do have some guidelines for discovery. (a) The greater the agreement among those who know the subject well—therapists, confessors, and friends—that the subject has an unconscious attitude, the more likely that the subject is deeply self-deceived when she denies having the attitude. (b) The less flattering that the unconscious attitude is to the subject (e.g., it is a racist or sexist attitude, or it betrays hatred of homosexuals), the more likely that she cannot admit that she is the kind of person who would have such an attitude. [Even so, it is a fallacy to jump out from the fact that the subject would not admit that she is the kind of person who would

have such an attitude to the conclusion that she must have the unflattering attitude unconsciously. We may still be wrong.]

Practical Realism holds that even if evidence is inconclusive and we are not sure that someone has an unconscious attitude, there is still (with a qualification to be noted below) a fact of the matter about whether one does actually have the unconscious attitude. Someone may object: But in what does such a fact consist?

I have two responses: First, the fact consists in the truth of certain counterfactuals, whose truth we are not always in a position to gauge. An attitude, conscious or unconscious, supervenes on what the subject would do, say, and think in every possible situation in which the subject has the same general character traits that she has in the actual world. Of course, we limited beings do not know what the subject would do, say, and think in every such possible situation. However, the evidentiary value of various situations is weighted. For example, situations in which a subject comprehendingly and sincerely avows that she has a certain desire, and situations in which a subject acts in ways that aim to bring about something that would satisfy the desire, carry greater evidentiary value. Indeed, I believe that evidence from such situation suffices to justify our attributions of that desire. Still, we may be wrong since, holding the subject's character constant, there are always more situations in which we do not know what the subject would do, say, and think.

Second, as far as we can discover, there is sometimes unresolved vagueness about whether a person has a particular attitude—especially an unconscious attitude. We accept residual vagueness about whether a certain man is bald—even though we know exactly how many hairs he has on his head and how they are distributed. (It is significant that even being a hair is subject to vagueness.) Perhaps there is residual vagueness about whether a person has a certain attitude. Nevertheless, for many attitudes—even unconscious attitudes can be brought to consciousness by therapists and confessors, etc.—there is a clear fact of the matter about whether one has them. The Biblical character Samson was clearly not bald; the actor Yul Brynner clearly was bald. There are often facts of the matter, even about baldness. That is what a Practical Realism need say.