

Comment on:

Tallis, F. (2002) Hidden Minds: A History of the Unconscious. London: Profile Books.

My intention is not to review this book, but to draw it to the attention of ASCAP members, and also to speculate on the relation between Tallis's unconscious and MacLean's triune brain, and finally to explore the possibilities of communication between conscious and unconscious minds.

This must be the best book on the unconscious since Ellenberger's "Discovery of the Unconscious" 32 years ago. Tallis has worked as a clinical psychologist including the Institute of Psychiatry in London, and has produced two novels and six non-fiction works. He writes extremely well, and has clearly done his homework.

There is a lot of good material here. Two outstanding examples of work he describes and which was a surprising revelation to me was that of Pierre Janet (who was eclipsed by Freud, and none of whose works appear to have been translated into English) and Lloyd Silverman, a psychoanalyst who did some very interesting empirical work on the unconscious.

In our study of Paul MacLean's triune brain, we have been dealing with phenomena which have an unconscious aspect. The emotional-based strategies of the paleomammalian or limbic forebrain are partly unconscious, in that they are only partly open to awareness and only partly under voluntary control. The strategies of the reptilian forebrain (such as depressive de-escalation) are entirely unconscious in that there is no awareness of them or voluntary control over them. But these unconscious aspects appear to be nothing at all to do with what Tallis is talking about, which is very much the psychoanalytic unconscious, and is concerned with aspects of experience which is in some way "split off" from conscious awareness. Tallis's unconscious is concerned with declarative memory, and is full of people and events. MacLean's unconscious, on the other hand, is concerned with procedural memory, and is all about alternative strategies for dealing with environmental change. From the geographical point of view, Tallis's unconscious appears to be mediated by MacLean's neomammalian forebrain, and has little of nothing to do with the lower two levels, except that some unconscious memories can elicit emotional reactions from the limbic brain, in the same way that conscious memories can. One might say that Tallis's conscious/unconscious distinction is orthogonal to MacLean's triune brain.

Communicating with the unconscious

I think it is true to say that techniques of communicating with the unconscious are not part of current psychiatric training or practice. If one were to try any out, it would have to be part of a research project. What is available? After reading Tallis, here is my (probably incomplete) list:

1. Reading the unconscious.

The study of dreams, parapraxes, and hallucinations.

The application of psychological tests, such as the Rorschach Test and the Defence Mechanism Test.

The study of trance-related phenomena such as automatic writing and spirit possession

2. Writing to the unconscious

Post-hypnotic suggestion

Subliminal stimulation

3. Establishing a dialogue with the unconscious

Lucid dreaming

Hypnotic dialogue during age regression, etc.

Abreaction, induced, e.g., by Pentothal

Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) – this is closely related to hypnotic techniques and is probably the most widely practiced method used today. Surprisingly, NLP is not mentioned by Tallis.