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Reigning in the Broad Careless Inscape

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"Another night from the gallery window I saw a brindled heaven, the moon just marked by a blue spot pushing its way through the darker cloud, underneath and on the skirts of the rack, bold long flakes whitened and swaled like feathers, below/ the garden with the heads of the trees and shrubs furry grey: I read a broad careless inscape flowing throughout"(Gerard Manly Hopkins - Feb 23, 1872)

There is a distinct difference between the "broad careless inscape" of thought that flows in our everyday life and thought that is carefully directed in a therapeutic context. My images explore the differences between these types of flow.

In everyday life and activity subconscious ideas mingle and flow throughout our thoughts without warning or notice. In the context of psychotherapy, and in particular psychodynamic psychotherapy, we aim to train ourselves to recognise that meaning can be traced through this flow of ideas.

My work consists of several canvasses that each depict visually a flow of thought that is either uninhibited or directed. The question I hope to raise in the minds of those who see the images is whether it is possible to direct thought flow, and if so whether thought flow that is uninhibited is more free than thought flow that is directed, such as by a therapist. What is it like to have a conscious thought? What actually happens to us when we think of something?

Philosophers of mind Dennett and Kinsbourne (1992) tell us "a conscious mind is an observer who takes in the information that is available at a particular (roughly) continuous sequence of times and places in the universe. A mind is thus a locus of subjectivity, a thing it is like something to be." The basic tenets of psychotherapy presume the existence of two types of thinking, unconscious and conscious. For thoughts to be conscious we must be aware of their content – unconscious thoughts occur without awareness. This distinction raises lots of questions: how do we know we have unconscious thoughts if we are never aware of them? Where are thoughts in the brain? How do unconscious thoughts become conscious?

Much of our modern thinking about these sorts of questions has been shaped by ideas that have stemmed from Cartesian Dualism. This is basically the idea that the mind and the body are two different kinds of things, material and immaterial, and that they meet somewhere in our brain. Alternatives to this model have been abundant in the past century or so, and they include a model proposed by philosophers of mind Dennett and Kinsbourne. The "multiple drafts" model, as they have called it, does away with the idea of a meeting place in the brain where consciousness comes together with our material body. Instead it is proposed that consciousness, rather than being immaterial and mysterious, arises out of the nature of how our brains work. Dennett and Kinsbourne's major problem with Descartes' model of dualism is the idea that there is a central meeting place where "it all comes together" in the brain – somewhere where all of the information our senses gathered had to come together and be 'viewed' by our mind into conscious thought.

This idea of a Cartesian Theatre was fraught with difficulty from the beginning. One problem was the mysterious nature of the interaction of the material and immaterial in such a centre of the brain. Another even more fundamental problem was the idea that such a central 'viewing' place would require a 'viewer', or homunculus, who presumably would also have some sort of centre

of consciousness, which would also require a homunculus – causing an inevitable infinite regress. The Cartesian Theatre concept has permeated our modern philosophy of mind so that it is difficult to find a way of conceiving of the mind without such a functional centre, let alone a material one. The multiple drafts model, however, is based on the idea that things do not have to be “re-presented” to some observer in the brain after they have occurred to warrant conscious.

Dennett and Kinsbourne maintain that material only occurs once, i.e. once it has occurred it does not need to be sent somewhere else to reoccur for the benefit of the “audience” of some Cartesian Theatre: "These spatially and temporally distributed content-fixations are themselves precisely locatable in both space and time, but their onsets do not mark the onset of awareness of their content. It is always an open question whether any particular content thus discriminated will eventually appear as an element in conscious experience. These distributed content discriminations yield, over the course of time, something rather like a narrative stream or sequence, subject to continual editing by many processes distributed around the brain, and continuing indefinitely into the future..." . The picture painted by Dennett and Kinsbourne is of an underlying almost chaotic state of affairs in our brains where, through a constant process of revising and editing, some items rise to the surface to enter into conscious awareness. Dennett and Kinsbourne’s definition of the stream of consciousness is that it “is not a single, definitive narrative. It is a parallel stream of conflicting and continuously revised contents, no one narrative thread of which can be singled out as canonical – as the true version of conscious experience.”

The processes of revision and editing that are proposed by the multiple drafts model are unconscious by definition: it is not that there are decisions being made somewhere somehow about what rises to the surface and in what form, but that it just occurs by the very nature of what is burbling underneath the surface. This is a rather grim picture for advocates of autonomy – it would appear that we have no control over what on earth is going on in our heads, that our thoughts almost seem to have a life of their own. So is it possible to rein in this broad, careless inscape? The only governing feature of the revisions that allow thoughts to become conscious seems to be in the nature of the thoughts themselves, the way that they fit together and point to each other in such a way that they naturally become associated. Therapists are trained to attend to these associations very closely – is it possible to preempt the revision processes that bring thoughts to consciousness? How would one even go about doing so?

I do not hope to answer such questions but just to raise them in a way that is meaningful to those who work psychodynamically in psychotherapy. The principle of meaning existing in every occurrence of thought and consequential behaviour is a very strong claim to make, with significant consequences for a philosophy of mind. The multiple drafts model slows for an aspect of this meaning in the idea that it is the inherent nature of thoughts, including their content, which allows them to rise to consciousness. However the multiple drafts model is only one way of looking at the properties of consciousness, and there are many others just as probable and convincing – the question is whether these models should have an impact on psychotherapeutic work. _____ Dennett, D. and Kinsbourne, M. (1992). Time and the Observer: The Where and When of Consciousness in the Brain. Behavioural and Brain Sciences, 15, 183-247.