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Book Review – Mills

UNDERWORLDS: *Philosophies of the Unconscious from Psychoanalysis to Metaphysics.* by. Jon Mills. Routledge, New York. Pp.189 with index

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Once again Jon Mills has written an erudite and probing text exploring one of his primary interests, the unconscious, as understood both in psychoanalysis as well as some major philosophical traditions. The mathematician/philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once noted that all of western philosophy was merely a footnote to Plato – an observation that would be hard to challenge. Accordingly, Mills starts his study with the Greeks – with a nod to ancient Egyptian religious thought – on their understanding of what it means to be a living person, their understanding of the life force that engenders one's sense of being i.e., the soul. Throughout his studies Mills focuses on the complexities of what we call consciousness as well the realities that ground and pull us every which way in our human task to find and progressively define ourselves, i.e., that is, the depths out of which and from which we experience and live life. That we are not masters of our own house seems obvious; that we progressively need to struggle to step out of the shadows of unknowing

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is again self-evident. How to conceptualize such unknowingness – its reality, its pervasiveness, at times its dominance in one’s life is the task to which many thinkers including theologians, philosophers and psychoanalysts have dedicated their lives to. Mills goes from Greek thought to western medieval reflections and then onto Hegel, Freud, Existentialism, Lacan, Jung and Whitehead offering his reading of such thinkers and their encounters with the unknown that informs us humans. Its one hundred and seventy-two pages is a tour-de-force, dense with meaning yet explicating these thinkers in a way that most clinicians will find not only clarifying but also clinically helpful. My minor reservation, which I will return to, is Mill’s chapter on Whitehead.

As I read through this text I became increasingly hesitant to review it; my concern was that I might do violence to both the clarity and complexity that Mills brings to his subjects. This text deserves a review-essay - lest it be reduced to sophisticated Cliff’s Notes. I will try to avoid the Cliff’s Notes route while not offering an in-depth essay. Allow me to highlight some of Mill’s observation - reading the text yourself will be its own reward.

While I am puzzled by some of Heidegger’s life choices, Mills explication of his reflections on our human thrownness, in his situating the

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human experience, helped me appreciate Heidegger's contributions more fully. The existential dialectic of authenticity vs inauthenticity - the need to create one's self - despite as well as in view of our being "thrust into the ontological contingency of "Being-in-the-world " (p.76) is clarified by such sentences as..."The failure to define oneself as other-than what one is, is to reify oneself as a thing and thus deny the possibility of a future transcendence." (p.80). Personally I have never been drawn to Hegel but reading..."For Hegel, the unconscious is pure process, a changing, flexible and purposeful activity of becoming...This self-generating dialectical movement of the unconscious is the evoking, responding, sustaining and transcending matrix that is itself the very internal system of subjective spirit " (p.33) - situates Hegel's dynamic thought in a more than approachable manner. Likewise Mills' explication of Sartre is perceptive and his appreciation of Sartre's disagreements with psychoanalytic thought are instructive. Sartre's concept that consciousness is nothing in itself - it is only consciousness of something - is very close to my own reflections that consciousness is simply observation (Gargiulo 2013).

Mills' chapter on Freud is sophisticated and, in particular, his study of and acceptance of the death drive is cogent and cause for reflection; it

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has been dismissed by many analysts - unfortunately in Mills' judgement. Mills takes Freud at his word and explicates those words in a convincing and enlivening manner. He limits his discussion to Freud's texts and gives a convincing argument for his understanding of how best to conceptualize the Id and the Ego. Mills knows German and does not perpetuate the mis-translations to which we English language readers have been subject. Consequently his reading of Freud escapes the somewhat simplistic readings current in many American psychoanalytic models. Enigmatic and, at times, obtuse Lacan is presented in a manner that is inviting. Lacan's reading of the unconscious as simply language - the place we are born into and wake up in...is both explained and appreciated as another locus for the hidden, for that which forms and informs us. This chapter was one of clearest presentations of Lacan that I have read in many years. The same is true of Mills' treatment of Jung - which is a textual study and critique of Jung's understanding of Archetypes. Mills is both respectful and yet probing in his analysis of Jung's thought.

Perhaps, since Whitehead's thought is not known to many clinicians, Mills offers an extensive presentation. He explains, in detail, Whitehead's process philosophy and his idiosyncratic terminology - a terminology that many readers may find difficult to grasp. Whitehead's dis-

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tinctive philosophy was influenced by the findings quantum physics, his terminology, however, is not easily accessible even to the seasoned reader in philosophy. Consequently I found this chapter somewhat difficult to be comfortable with. Notwithstanding this reservation, however, anyone who has an interest in encountering Whitehead's philosophical edifice and his particular understanding of the hidden - will find Mill's detailed explication illuminating.

I can only hope that I have avoided the danger and simplification of Cliff's Notes. Behind his discussion of these thinkers, the primary issue that Mills' text reflects is the struggle to find words for that which is beyond words - how does one talk about that which one cannot talk about. We cannot know the depth in itself, we cannot know what we name as unconscious - we are children of consciousness - language only points to, but that is all - by definition anything we know is conscious. The unconscious is not some mystical realm; it is not some "place" - it is not a noun - the depth is, as far as we can see, simply the most basic dimension of existence - a dimension that need not eclipse but rather deepens and informs. The question is how to know and/or name such a dimension; how the particular thinkers, mentioned above, have addressed this reality, is, basically, what this text is all about.

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Mills is not a materialist in any sense. He criticizes such a reductionistic and simplistic approach. He does not entertain, however, any notion of the soul's immortality or a belief in a transcendent other. Whitehead does leave open the possibility of a transcendent "something." Edwin Schrodinger, one of the geniuses of quantum physics, does speak about the necessity for an all encompassing consciousness - or something that serves a similar function - as an explanation for the reality of both the quantum and the macro worlds. Such a consciousness is not the equivalent of Western theistic formulations. The depth, what we name as unconscious, is not the private confines of individuals - it is a dimension of reality that we are still struggling to find words for. Mills' text testifies that it is more than a worthy struggle and his text is more than worth the read.

References

Gargiulo, Gerald. J. 2013. *The Psychoanalytic Review*. "Some Thoughts About Consciousness From a Quantum Mechanics Perspective." Vol, 100 #4 August, p. 543.