



GUY CLAXTON on the welcome return of the irrational.

# Why so wayward?

*The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it, and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead...*

Albert Einstein

**P**SYCHOLOGY seems to be in the process of rediscovering the wayward mind. In recent years *The Psychologist* has contained articles on cognitive theories of déjà vu (Brown, 2004), the neuroscience of aesthetic experience (Stafford, 2004), and the evolutionary functions of lovesickness (Tallis, 2005). We are told that our amygdala reacts to the subliminal registration of fearful eyes (Whalen *et al.*, 2004), and that our intuitions often have more validity than we thought (Bowers *et al.*, 1990). What is going on?

When I was an undergraduate, the image of the human mind that we were presented with was overwhelmingly rational. We had general problem-solving routines, generative grammars and short-term memories. The general adult population had ‘imagery’, but not much in the way of imagination – no intuitions, visions, sixth senses or creative inspirations – and we certainly did not hear voices or succumb to hypnotic trances. The irrational was largely airbrushed out of the mental picture, or it was confined to children, animals and people with neurological or psychological disorders. Where it did appear, it tended to do so in the form of weird ephemera: a range of rather exotic sideshows, like phantom limbs and Freudian slips, that puzzled and amused but did not add up to anything.

This rational default model of the mind was, of course, inherited from Descartes and had become what Gilbert Ryle (1949) called the ‘official doctrine’. Intelligence was conscious. There was no such thing as unconscious intelligence – the very idea

was an oxymoron. Reason was disembodied and dispassionate. Feelings were evolutionary accidents that got in the way. And ‘I’ was, essentially, the Chief Executive of the mind, sitting at the head of the table in the brightly lit boardroom of consciousness, weighing up reports and barking orders to merely menial glands and muscles. The mind was like a glass clock, with all its workings open to view, and I was in control. And if occasionally I wasn’t, that

was something to be worried about or – preferably – ignored.

In the light of human history, however, this Enlightenment model of the mind

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## ‘The mythological “underworld” turned into the dark catacombs of the mind itself’

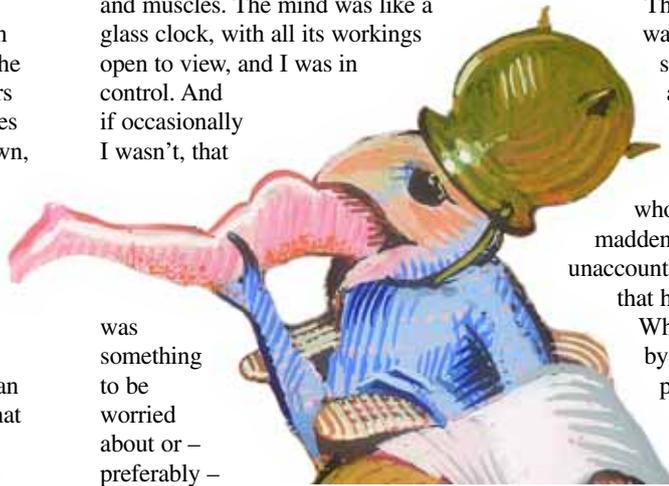
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looks pretty odd. It is perverse and Procrustean, simply lopping off all the inconvenient wayward bits in order to maintain a neat, inaccurate fiction. Most societies, instead of trying to amputate these inconvenient limbs, have at least tried to concoct some account of the bits that don’t fit with ‘common sense’. Just as ingenious explanations have been created that seem to offer some purchase on the waywardness of storms, plagues and droughts – to give at least a semblance of control – so have explanations been offered for the aspects of human experience that

have seemed most uncanny. In many societies, these have included lapses of memory, creative inspirations, dreams, intuitions, unexpected surges of courage, strength or passion, premonitions, visions and hallucinations, trance and possession, as well as whatever is classed, in that culture, as madness (Claxton, 2005).

Three kinds of account for waywardness have been around since at least the ancient Greeks, and all are still with us. The first relies on supernatural agents and forces. If you were mad with love, it was Aphrodite who, out of whim or spite, had maddened you. If you were unaccountably wise, it was the Holy Spirit that had graced you with its presence. When you dreamed, the Muse stood by your bed and whispered prophecies in your ear. And though Plato and Aristotle invented rational philosophy as an antidote to these supernatural fictions, it never banished them entirely. In the third century before Christ, the Athenians rejected the burden of having to think for themselves, and fled in their thousands into the magical arms of their own New Age (Dodds, 1951) – perhaps like many horoscope readers and fans of homeopathy do today.

Secondly, there were the various versions of the unconscious. Instead of being projected outward into angels and demons, the mysterious cause of waywardness could be internalised: reified in a bit of the mind that was beyond both introspection and control. The mythological ‘underworld’ turned into the dark catacombs of the mind itself. The person-like gods became internal person-like agents that would mature over time into the superego, the id and other ‘sub-personalities’. Sometimes transitional objects were invented that were both inner and outer. Possession in many cultures was caused by something that had wormed its way inside you, and in exorcism it was



often 'ejected' in the form of a small creature like a rat, or a nasty little package of foul-smelling rags. Alternatively, the mysterious or troubling 'inner' could be made 'outer', as in the fascination of many 19th-century writers – Poe, Dostoevsky, Stevenson – with the idea of the evil double or the doppelgänger.

History has bequeathed us not just one but several versions of 'the unconscious'. Most of them are either place-like or person-like in form, and the metaphors of both 'down' and 'dark' recur again and again. The mental underworld, the place of sleep and death and madness, runs from the Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt, through the Christian Hell and the Satanic mills of Blake, to the subterranean home of the Morlocks in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. The familiar notion of the wild, selfish 'beast in the basement' – the primitive energy that must be restrained by Reason – begins with Plato and culminates with Freud. The idea of the Unconscious (often capitalised) as the mystical pipeline that connects the human individual with the sustaining, animating life force of Nature joins Aristotle with the Romantics and on to Jung. The 'soul' is the hypothetical spark of divinity that accounts for the times we surprise ourselves with bursts of wisdom, generosity and forgiveness, and remains as popular a notion today as it was when it was first mooted by Xenophanes and Heraclitus 2500 years ago.

There is an unconscious that is the gloomy archive of memory, serviced only by a harassed and inadequate librarian: a notion invented by St Augustine to account for embarrassing recall failures, and constantly redesigned by cognitive psychologists over the last 50 years. When Shakespeare had Antonio admit that he had 'much ado to know myself', or Rosalind declare that her affection 'had an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal', he was neither the first nor the last to look for an image of the unconscious that would capture the fallibility of introspection. And in Leibniz's famous model of the mind as iceberg lay the beginnings of modern cognitive science's increasingly ubiquitous acceptance of the 'intelligent unconscious' as the true engine room of the mind: the invisible motherboard that does the work, while the deluded LCD screen of consciousness tries to take the credit.

Lastly, of the three main kinds of explanation for waywardness, there was the body itself. Maybe weird experiences arose

simply from a material malfunctioning. Perhaps the nightmare reflected an excess of black bile. Perhaps the power of the hypnotist was explained by the effect of his 'animal magnetism' on his subject's own physical system. Perhaps the inexplicable depression was nothing to do with a buried early experience, but was caused instead by an unfortunate dearth of serotonin in the brain. Perhaps there is no Muse, and the sudden inspiration, the thought that seems to come as a gift 'out of the blue', is a reflection of the kind of pattern-seeking

### **'The irrational was largely airbrushed out of the mental picture'**

and pattern-making that the cortex does by itself, when freed of the online need to monitor events and plans. Perhaps hunches and inklings are visceral concomitants of cognitive processes. Perhaps the sixth sense is just an intimation from the brain that summarises a range of largely subliminal perceptions (Mangan, 1993).

We might now ask whether cognitive neuroscience has got to the point where all the supernatural places and beings should now be pensioned off. There is no point in looking for 'God' in the brain (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999); God *is* the brain (or even, these days, the brain is God). Many psychologists and neuroscientists would think so. And perhaps, at a scientific level, they are right. But maybe there is a sociocultural function for the mythic and the supernatural that human societies still need. The public discourse of gods and demons may be able to help regulate a community (for good or ill) in a way that the language of neurotransmitters does not, and perhaps cannot. (As Dan Brown, of *The Da Vinci Code*, observes, 'When we as a species abandon our trust in a power greater than ourselves, we abandon our sense of accountability.') After all, public explanations are to be judged by their functions and effects, as well as by the narrower canons of scientific validity, and while it is clear that supernatural accounts have serious cons as well as pros, it is wise to remember that so do the brain-based ones (Rose, 2005).

For example, anthropologist Victor Turner (1978) recounts the story of an indigenous healer in the Zimbabwean Ndemu tribe who was called to treat a man

suffering from what we might call paranoia and agoraphobia. The healer diagnosed possession by a malign spirit, and prescribed an elaborate social ritual in the course of which the man's extended family were indirectly encouraged to reflect on their relationship to the man. This family was composed largely of the patient's in-laws, many of whom had been highly critical and rejecting of the incoming husband. There seemed to be two positive results of the ritual: the spirit was exorcised, and the family started to treat the man more kindly. Which was the active ingredient in the man's recovery? One might see this as a highly skilful piece of 'family therapy' on the part of the healer, making use of the shared language of spirit possession to achieve a resolution, suspecting, quite plausibly, that more direct, 'psychologised' methods might have met with greater social resistance from the family.

On a wider scale, we might wonder about the overall place of the various forms of waywardness in contemporary 'folk psychology'. While they have been treated as isolated curios, and largely ignored, the 'official doctrine' has remained the central image of the psyche. But if we line up together all the myriad forms of waywardness, we begin to see how central a role they have played throughout history in the lives of both individuals and societies. And we might ask more general questions about the functionality of waywardness.

For example: if our folk psychology were to give a more honourable place to those aspects of experience that come unbidden and uncontrolled – as many other cultures seem to have done – would it make any practical difference? If we reinstate the wayward mind – whether we put it down to supernatural, subconscious or neurological forces – so what? Or, to put it the other way round, could a more welcoming attitude towards unreason mitigate some of the problems, psychological and social, that an over-estimation of deliberate reason seems to cause?

Perhaps two things follow from a greater hospitality towards that which is mysterious about our own minds. First, we could allow ourselves to make greater use of cognitive processes that proceed with a degree of autonomy, or require a kind of patient unknowing – those involved in creativity, for example. Most people say

their best ideas ‘just occur to me’, they ‘pop into my head’ or come ‘out of the blue’. Yet the worlds of business, education and the law, to name just three, seem to function as if we did not know about the value of passive, receptive thinking (as the complement to more focused and controlled thinking). Some authors have suggested that knowing how to balance controlled and uncontrolled cognition, each of which can mitigate the pitfalls of the other, may well be a key ingredient of ‘intelligence’ (e.g. Sternberg, 1996).

And secondly, we might meet our own waywardness with greater humour and less anxiety. Some people are thrown by a violent, incomprehensible dream; others are more able to enjoy it, as they enjoyed a thriller or a horror movie the previous evening. Those who are

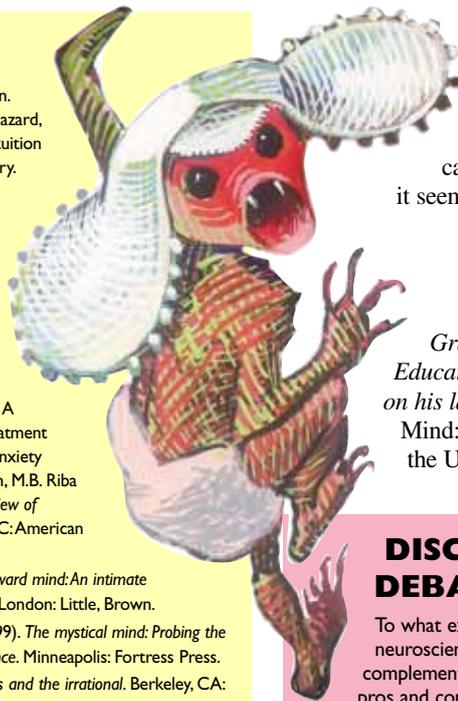
thrown are more likely to be at war with their own waywardness. And so are many patients whom the clinical psychologist sees. It’s not the lusty or unworthy thought that causes them trouble so much as their doomed attempts to control, deny or rationalise such thoughts. We all commit crimes of passion in our hearts from time to time. It seems, from clinical psychological research, to be the people who are least able to let such blips and glitches come and go, to view them with a degree of equanimity, even of amusement, who are most likely to turn against themselves, and thereby exacerbate their own distress (e.g. Bentall, 2003; Clark & Wells, 1997).

Admitting and accepting that our minds are inherently wayward and unfathomable seems to expand both creative playfulness and peace of mind. As the poet Baudelaire noted (deftly combining neuroscience and the supernatural), ‘a populace of Demons cavorts in our brain’. And it seems healthy that, up to a point, we let them.

■ *Guy Claxton is with the University of Bristol Graduate School of Education. This article is based on his latest book The Wayward Mind: An Intimate History of the Unconscious.*

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## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

To what extent is it legitimate to see neuroscience and the supernatural as complementary ‘languages’ each with pros and cons?

Can it be helpful to work within patients’ belief systems as if you accepted them, even though you don’t?

‘It’s sane to be zany – up to a point.’ Do you agree? And where is the point?

Could a more welcoming attitude towards unreason mitigate some of the problems, psychological and social, that an overestimation of deliberate reason seems to cause?

*Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. Send letters to the Leicester office or to [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute to our online forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).*