PRECARIOUSNESS AND BAD FAITH
GIOVANNI JERVIS ON THE ILLUSIONS
OF SELF-CONSCIOUS SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract: Giovanni Jervis (1933-2009) was a prominent figure in the Italian intellectual landscape of the last fifty years. A student of the philosopher-ethnologist Ernesto De Martino, the main focus of his research was on social psychiatry and psychology, the foundations of psychology (especially of the psychodynamic theories), and the psychological aspects of social and political problems. This article explores his rethinking of the psychoanalytic criticism of the subject. I shall try to show that Jervis has given shape to the premises of a philosophical anthropology that originally aims to fit aspects of de Martino's phenomenological psychology of identity and the psychodynamic theme of defense mechanisms into the ontological framework of the cognitive sciences.

1. Introduction

According to Giovanni Jervis, Freud’s main legacy is the theme of bad faith, namely his exposing the systematic tendency toward self-deception within self-conscious subjectivity.

One of the most pervasive self-deceptions is the “natural idealistic” one. Contra Sartre, we have a spontaneous inclination to believe that essence precedes existence, i.e. that people have spiritual qualities that are primary, and hence essential, in comparison with the accidental nature of their bodily determinations. A homogeneous approach connects this intuitive dualism with other naïve distortions. For example, consciousness is conceived as a primary

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2 As Paul Bloom puts it, we are intuitive dualists. See his *Descartes’ Baby*, New York: Basic Books, 2004. Jervis reminds us that E. B. Tylor was the first to suggest that the natural tendency to a spiritualistic objectification of the mind (and hence the idea of soul) is due to universal rationalizing mechanisms. See G. Jervis, *Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993, p. 183, note 10.
quality of the mind, the foundation of all mental life. Or we have a natural
inclination (whose first manifestations can be discerned in the first year of life)
to “read” any behavior as deliberately, consciously goal-directed, in accord-
ance with an intention that we assume to be simple and identifiable.3

On Jervis’ view, the tools to unearth the mechanisms responsible for such
self-deceptive beliefs are to be found in some research traditions within phi-
losophy and cognitive sciences. Concerning this, however, he thought it
was necessary to make a distinction: “neurologists came first, psychologists
a wheel’s length behind, philosophers still more behind and often very late.
(And among psychologists I would not neglect social psychologists […] in
many ways they have been ahead of the experimental psychologists.)”4

At last, the revolutionary contribution of these investigations has led
to “a reinforcing overturning of traditional psychodynamic questions.”5
Consequently, Jervis argues, just as nowadays we start with asking how con-
sciousness, rather than the unconscious, is possible, or we ask not how behav-
iors that contradict our intention can exist but, on the contrary, if ever delib-
erate and voluntary behavior exists, so, in the same way, “in examining the
construction of the everyday life we need to explain not how and why some
‘defensive’ mechanisms exist, but rather how all the structures of knowledge
and action are by themselves, integrally, a matter of defenses.”6

The reflection on the implications of this radicalization of the psychoanalytic
criticism of the subject goes through all Jervis’ thought. From his collaboration
with Ernesto de Martino until the last writings on the psychological aspects of
social and political problems, a powerful effort of analysis of the self-illusory
mechanisms of self-conscious subjectivity unfolds, which never exceeds the
boundaries of the secular, rationalist, individualist culture of modernity. As
now we will see, from that exercise of demystification Jervis gains the premises
of an anthropological philosophy that uncouples the concepts of “presence”
and “crisis of presence” from de Martino’s culturalist approach, and places
them in the theoretical and experimental context of the cognitive sciences.

2. The Freudian Unconscious

Jervis has always criticized psychoanalysis as thaumaturgic myth to make the
most of its “critical” dimension, its being “aimed to the demystification of the

3 Ibid., p. 184. See also Id., Prime lezioni di psicologia, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1999, p. 89; Id., Pensare
5 G. Jervis, Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 301.
6 Ibid.
spontaneous illusions about the unity and the intrinsic strength of the mind.”

In this perspective, Freud’s theory of the unconscious is considered part and parcel of a materialist, pessimistic, anti-idealistic revision of the “classic” conception of human nature.  

In his reconstruction of Freudian theory, Jervis starts with noticing that the terms “subconscious” and “unconscious” were already in currency in the last decades of the 19th century, introduced to explain phenomena – e.g. convulsive “great” hysteria, dissociative fugue or multiple personality disorder – that could hardly be reconciled with the Cartesian consciousness-dependent conception of mind that was shaping the early experimental psychology. Freud’s originality, therefore, does not consist in the discovery of the unconscious, but in developing such a concept in two particular directions.  

In the first place, Freud puts forward the idea of a sexuality of the unconscious. This claim is strictly linked to a materialist conception of human nature that has its ideological roots in, on the one hand, the Darwinian naturalism and the medical biologism of the 19th century and, on the other, in an anthropology of “the crisis of Reason” which, originated from Romanticism and the skeptical thought of the past centuries, had found its main theorist in Nietzsche. The subjectivity that we designate with the pronoun “I,” Nietzsche famously argues, is not primary but the effect of the sphere of corporeity, which dominates the human subject and determines its “ego” as illusion of being an undivided, self-legitimated and self-determined individual.

Freud’s theory of the unconscious, therefore, offers a psychological formulation of themes which up to that moment had been expressed mainly in philosophy and literature. In so doing, he not only takes sides against the “consciousness-centric” mentalism of the early experimental psychology and in favor of the reality of unconscious mental events, but also polemizes against the image of human being typical of the 19th-century middle class ethics, according to which the essence of the human being in its highest expression, that of “the civilized gentleman,” lies in the full control exerted by self-consciousness over mind and behavior.

The second idea that characterizes the Freudian concept of the unconscious is that the most relevant unconscious contents are such in that “repressed,” i.e. actively excluded from awareness through defensive mechanisms. This idea

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7 Ibid., pp. 300-301. See also Id., La psicoanalisi come esercizio critico, Milan: Garzanti, 1989, p. 7.  
9 Id., The Unconscious, pp. 147 ff.  
11 Id., Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 300.
introduces in the theory of the unconscious “a dialectic, or dynamic (and hereby also conflictual) component.” It is the theme of bad faith. People have a hidden, and indeed denied, interest to give potentially non-veridical explanations of themselves, their thoughts and actions. What is important here is not the pure and simple presence of mental structures and contents that are not introspectable, but rather the existence of “a self-apologetic defensiveness” and, more than that, “a systematic tendency towards self-deception within our everyday thought processes.” Jervis sees this critical theme – the tendency of the mind to forge self-serving illusions– as the “strength” of Freud’s concept of the unconscious.

Freud’s hypothesis is then that our consciousness somehow deceives us by providing us with illusory immediate beliefs about ourselves. In other words, “the consciousness of self flatters us with the quite apparent presentation of qualities that are additional to the reality of the way in which the mind works.” First and foremost, there is a mismatch between the composite, non-monadic character of the mind and its unitary phenomenology. In the Ichgefühl, Freud writes, the ego “appears to us as something autonomous (selbständig) and unitary (einheitlich), marked off distinctly from everything else (gegen alles andere gut abgesetzt).” But this appearance is deceptive: as a matter of fact the ego is heterogeneous, heteronomous and secondary. In fact, it is the organized part of the id, which is totally unconscious and unstructured pulsionality, with which the ego is in continuity without any sharp delimitation and for which it serves as a kind of façade. Consequently the ego is “both the organization of the psyche, or […] the (partial) structuration of the disparate functions of the mind, and the apparatus that has, inter alia, the function of presenting to consciousness the ‘immediate’ (but of course illusory) certainty of the existence of a mind that is fully conscious of self, integrated, unitary, rational, and controllable.”

Thus Jervis follows Ricoeur in portraying Freud as a great critical thinker, whose name should be associated to those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Darwin. What these thinkers have in common is the systematic doubt about “the

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12 Ibid., p. 213.
14 Jervis, Il mito dell’interiorità, p. 42.
16 Ibid.
17 Jervis, Il mito dell’interiorità, p. 43.
traditional claims of self-legitimation of consciousness.” A doubt that opens a crack in self-consciousness; a crack that – as now we will see – becomes a ruinous landslide in some research trends in cognitive sciences.

3. The Decentration of the Subject

Today, the cognitive sciences systematically invoke explanations of behavior in which mental processes are unconscious operations on as much rigorously unconscious representational states; and indeed, the theoretical appeal to the “cognitive” (or “computational”) unconscious has been so accentuated that it can be maintained that in the present day “the unconscious reigns over our whole mental existence.”

This approach to the mental – Jerry Fodor reminds us – would have not been possible in the pre-Freudian conceptual universe, where an inextricable link between consciousness and intentionality was in force. It is to Freud’s credit that he challenged this nexus; for he gave plausibility to the idea that the explanation of behavior might require the postulation of intentional but unconscious mental states. An idea that – Fodor concludes – has been amply vindicated, most especially in Chomskian linguistics and in cognitive psychology.

Jervis, however, rectifies this historical note: the cognitive sciences have not simply vindicated Freud, but have gone far beyond. In fact, consciousness is taken by Freud as a self-evident, primary quality of the mind, although it is then criticized and “downsized” in comparison with the traditional idealistic view. And Freud’s notion of the unconscious is parasitic to this concept of consciousness. On the other hand, in Freudian psychoanalysis “the idea of the mind is still dominated by the model of the conscious elaboration of choices, and within it, here and there, the unconscious plays its tricks, but nothing more.” In short, Freud remains a Cartesian.

Things are very different in the case of the cognitive sciences, where the mind is conceived as a process of construction and transformation of representations; and a mental representation is an explanatory hypothesis in a computational theory of cognition, it is a structure of information (somehow encoded in the brain), which is individuated exclusively in terms of intra-

18 Id., Freud, p. 31.
19 Id., The Unconscious, p. 157.
22 Personal communication, March 4, 2009.
theoretical functional criteria, in which the phenomenological aspects play no role whatsoever.

As a result, the cognitive sciences open the conceptual space to build a consciousness-independent conception of the unconscious. As Dennett puts it, first one develops a theory of intentionality that is independent of and more fundamental than consciousness; a theory that treats equally of any form of unconscious representational mentality.24 And then, one proceeds to work out a theory of consciousness on that foundation. In this perspective, consciousness is an advanced or derived mental phenomenon and not, as Descartes wanted, the foundation of all mental. In short, “first intentionality, then consciousness.”25

In viewing consciousness no longer as something that explains, but rather as something that is to be explained, analyzed, dismantled, the cognitive sciences amend the Freudian thought on the basis of Darwinian naturalism. Differently from Freud’s introspective account of the unconscious, the cognitive sciences capitalize on Darwin’s anti-idealistic methodological lesson and proceed bottom-up, attempting to reconstruct how the complex psychological functions underlying the adult self-conscious mind evolve from the more basic ones.26 This attempt does not appeal to our introspective self-knowledge, but all those disciplines that investigate the gradual construction of human self-awareness: from the automatic and pre-reflexive forming representations of the external world (simple consciousness), through the bodily self-monitoring, to self-consciousness as introspective recognition of the presence of an “inner,” experiential space.27

In its disclosing the non-primary but derived, constructed and partial character of self-consciousness, the cognitive sciences’ bottom-up approach can be regarded as an anti-phenomenology, i.e. a critique of the subject, of its alleged givenness.28 The term “anti-phenomenology” is used by Paul Ricoeur to define psychoanalysis: the latter, he writes, is “une anti-phénoménologie, qui exige, non la réduction à la conscience, mais la réduction de la conscience.”29

25 Ibid.
26 In his Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 243, Jervis notes that this bottom-up perspective coincides with what Piaget calls “decentration of the subject.”
27 Id., The Unconscious, p. 152. See also M. Marraffa, “Jervis, de Martino e il mito dell’interiorità,” Rivista di filosofia, 102 (2011) 2, pp. 245-248.
28 Jervis, La psicoanalisi come esercizio critico, p. 36.
However, as we have just seen, Freud’s inquiry into the unconscious starts from a consciousness taken as a given fact; and this makes psychoanalysis “a dialectical variant of phenomenology.”\(^{30}\) In contrast, the cognitive sciences, fortified by a consciousness-independent concept of intentionality, have full right to qualify as an anti-phenomenology.

This allows us to estimate all the distance that separates the new cognitive-science mentalism from the “consciousness-centric” mentalism that characterized the early experimental psychology, and from which the Freudian theory of the unconscious failed to disentangle itself. Under the influence of positivism, the introspectionist psychologists reified subjectivity. In most cases the 19\(^{th}\) century experimental psychology did not understand consciousness in experiential or subjective sense, but as an objective field, within which it was to be possible to break down mental contents, viewed as measurable objects. Accordingly, every form of subjectivity was “stepped over” in favor of a positivistic descriptivity.\(^{31}\) As an antidote against the positivistic (and Freudian) attempt to reify phenomenological experience, the cognitive sciences provide us with a repertoire of tools to penetrate the nature of self-conscious subjectivity, making it possible to conceive phenomenological data not as tangible and measurable objects, but as the result of the self-presentation of unconscious psychobiological functions.\(^{32}\)

4. Troubles with Self-Consciousness

The cognitive sciences confirm and build on Freud’s hypothesis that the presentation to consciousness of the unconscious mind gives rise to self-deceptive beliefs.

Let us go back to Freud’s setting up a contrast between the heterogeneous nature of the ego and its deceptive unitary phenomenology. A large amount of behavioral, neuroimaging and computational investigations offers robust evidence for the heterogeneous nature of the mind-brain. To the point that the idea that there is, in some area of the brain, a place where “it all comes together” – some sort of central executive system that coordinates all the cognitive operations – has been almost unanimously rejected as a myth.

As it is well known, to dismantle this myth Dennett has developed the “Multiple Drafts Model,” according to which, at any instant, in any part of


\(^{31}\) Id., *Freud*, pp. 60-1; Id., *Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica*, p. 193.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., pp. 185-188.
the brain, a multitude of “fixations of content” occur. The conscious character of these contents is not referable to their occurring in a privileged spatial or functional place (i.e., the “Cartesian Theater”), and neither to their having a special format. It depends on what Dennett calls “fame in the brain” or “cerebral celebrity.” Like “fame,” consciousness is not an intrinsic property of the cerebral processes but it is more similar to “political clout,” i.e. the extent to which a content affects the future development of other contents distributed all over the brain.

Dennett’s Multiple Drafts Model fits very well with the most widely accepted neurocognitive theory of human consciousness, the Global Neuronal Workspace model. At least three features of this theory are relevant for Dennett. First, it assumes that the neurocognitive architecture underlying the unity of consciousness is a distributed computational system with no central controller. Second, it makes massive use of the recursive functional decomposition, an indispensable requirement to get rid of any homunculus who, nested in the umpteenth incarnation of the pineal gland, scans the stream of consciousness. Third, it allows Dennett to hypothesize that the aforementioned “political clout” is achieved by “reverberation” in a “sustained amplification loop” of the winning contents.

All this is fully congruent with Freud’s hypothesis: the mind-brain is heterogeneous, not monadic; and its appearing to consciousness as unitary is a primary self-deception. In the case of Dennett’s narrative theory of personal identity, the unitary consciousness of “self” is an ephemeral “virtual captain” that occurs when a small coalition of content fixations has temporarily prevailed over other coalitions in the contest for the control of such cognitive activities as self-monitoring and self-reporting. Each of these short-lived phenomena is the “me” of the moment, and they are connected to earlier fugacious selves by the autobiographical memory.

Freud’s idea of a pervasive presence of self-deception in our inner life has found a rich source of evidence in the experimental social psychology litera-

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33 A “draft” is a coalition of these contents, held together by a common topic.
36 See A. Brook and P. Raymont, “The Unity of Consciousness,” in E. N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity>, §7. The authors make clear that not any kind of autobiographical memory will be appropriate here; it must be “memory of the having, feeling, or doing of earlier experiences, emotions, actions, and so on” (§5.2).
Precariousness and Bad Faith

ture on cognitive dissonance and self-attribution. In the experiments examined in Nisbett and Wilson’s very famous review, the participants’ behavior was caused by motivational factors inaccessible to consciousness. However, when explicitly asked about the motivations (causes) of their actions, the subjects did not hesitate to sincerely affirm their plausible motives. Nisbett and Wilson explained this pattern of results by arguing that the subjects did not provide reports of real mental states and processes, due to a direct introspective awareness; rather they engaged in a “confabulatory” activity, i.e. they used *a priori causal theories* in order to develop reasonable but imaginary explanations of the motivational factors of their own behaviors, judgments or decisions.

Nisbett and Wilson’s article was published in 1977. In the following thirty years the experimental literature on introspection and self-knowledge has expanded considerably. And it can be said now that a large amount of data from social psychology and cognitive neuroscience makes a very strong case against a direct access to the *causes* of our behavior and attitudes. In everyday life explaining one’s own motives (“knowing why”) plays in most cases a *justificatory* role rather than a *descriptive* one. Let us take, for example, the most basic of questions: “Why are you here?” If a person finds herself in some place at a certain time, it is unlikely she can identify the complex chain of motivational factors that have led her to be in that specific place at that precise time. But she will certainly have no hesitation in providing convincing explanations to justify her actions. In short, Jervis concludes, people can seldom say why they are in a specific place, but can always assert that it is right for them to be in such a place.

Thus it comes to light the deceptive character of the aforementioned folk-psychological inclination to “read” any behavior as deliberately, consciously goal-directed, in accordance with an intention that we assume to be simple and identifiable. Actually, Jervis argues, the agent is not a primarily quiescent organism, who “then” invariably moves toward some goal; rather it is a primarily self-propelled structure. Therefore, one can really say neither when one starts an action, nor when an identifiable goal-directed behavioral plan begins. It is more correct to say that since ever we are embedded in a system of cognitive-motor schemes which we have started to articulate since when we exist as individuals, and which we restlessly modify and repurpose according to the circumstances and the stimuli that modulate them. And embedded in this flow of actions, we sometimes tell ourselves: “This is just the thing I want to do;” or “What I did is the thing that I really wanted to do;” and

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again, “This thought is just what I feel like thinking.” In short, we consider some piece of behavior as deliberate all the times that we are able to justify it in accordance with some socially shared explicative theory. Thus introspection, insofar as it is construed as a direct access to the causes of our behavior and attitudes, is largely an illusion. In its stead we find “the capacity to explain one’s actions \textit{ex post},” i.e. our continuously “praising” what we are doing.

Furthermore, Peter Carruthers has recently argued that the literature on self-confabulation shows that people confabulate not just in reporting the causes of their attitudes but also in reporting the \textit{attitudes} themselves. He takes as neurocognitive architecture the above-cited Global Neural Workspace model of consciousness, in which a range of perceptual systems broadcast their outputs (e.g., sensory data from the environment, imagery, somatosensory and proprioceptive data) to a complex of conceptual systems (judgment-forming, memory-forming, desire-forming, decision-making systems, and so forth). Among the conceptual systems there is also a multi-componential “mindreading system,” which generates higher-order judgments about the mental states of others and of oneself. By virtue of receiving globally broadcast perceptual states as input, the mindreading system can easily recognize those percepts, generating self-attributions of the form “I see something red,” “It hurts,” “I am hungry,” and so on. But the system receives no input from the systems that generate propositional attitude events (like judging and deciding). Consequently, the mindreading system cannot directly self-attribute propositional attitude events; it must infer them by exploiting the perceptual input (together with the outputs of various memory systems). Thus, Carruthers concludes, “self-attributions of propositional attitude events like judging and deciding are always the result of a swift (and unconscious) process of self-interpretation.” In this perspective, therefore, we do not introspect our own propositional attitude events. Our only form of access to those events is via self-interpretation, turning our mindreading faculty upon ourselves and engaging in unconscious interpretation of our own behavior, circumstances, and sensory events like visual imagery and inner speech.

Finally, data from cultural psychology show that introspective consciousness is not an all-or-none phenomenon. In almost all normal adults in primitive pre-agricultural or pre-literate agricultural cultures it can be observed the incompleteness of the capacity to conceptualize the existence of an inner space of the mind. The main reference here is A. R. Luria’s psychological expedi-

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tion to Central Asia in 1931. But at the end of 1950s Jervis himself recorded this phenomenon in the context of a team study of the ecstatic healing cult of tarantism in the Salentine Peninsula of southern Italy: “It is common experience to observe that illiterate farmers have considerable difficulty to express and describe psychic symptoms like anxiety, depression, worry, neurasthenia in appropriate terms, especially if abstract ones. On the contrary, they have a clear tendency to somaticize these disorders (most of all anxiety) in complex psychaesthesias or hysterical dysfunctions of some part of the body.” Because of their objectification in some part of the organism, all these disorders are “almost ejected out of the subject’s personality and anyway expelled from the sphere of the voluntary control: the psychic disorder takes a bodily ‘representation,’ which is often symbolic and not infrequently in contrast with logic; it is experienced in the body, acted outside, and mimed in a showy restlessness or in a helpless motionlessness with no apparent justification.”

In presence of these forms of incompleteness of self-consciousness, the strong emotions and the sudden (amorous or aggressive) passions, being experienced as objective and not subjective events (i.e. things that “happen,” that are not produced by the mind), are directly ascribed to chance accidents of the body, or are perceived as the effect of “being possessed” by some force or entity that comes from the outside. Anyway, these events are always discontinuous, i.e. disconnected each other in so far as they are not unified in the unitary mental space of the individual, and the agent feels only very partially responsible for them. This gives rise to two interesting and typical phenomena: “A facility in producing mechanisms of hysterical splitting, so that the body ‘does things’ (or other times it refuses to do them) with no identification of the ‘mental’ dimension in which the intentions governing the body are elaborated; and a facility in inducing magic-religious rationalizations about themes of influencing, like jinx or possession.” But note: as to these

45 Ibid.
46 Id., Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 215. See also Id., “Contributo allo studio dell’isteria: psicopatologia della crisi di possesionne,” Il lavoro neuropsichiatrico, 37 (1969) 3, pp. 555-572. Jervis subtly notes some affinities between the typical rationalizations of the members of some contemporary preliterate communities and some aspects of the ideology of passions of archaic Greek civilization. He refers to E. R. Dodds’ well-known studies on the conception of the individual in archaic Greece (The Greeks and the Irrational, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), pointing out that they are likely to capture an intermediate cultural and historical
phenomena the distinction between the “primitive man” and the “civilized one” is only a matter of degree. For it is easy to note that also the assumption of responsibility for strong emotions and sudden passions that we ourselves, as “educated” subjects, produce is often incomplete: “With ease, sometimes also we say ‘I have been taken by…’, and believe to immediately obtain a sort of absolution from this.”

All this delivers us a drastically downsized picture of introspective consciousness. Although Carruthers admits that we can introspect conscious experiences like those that arise in perception and imagery, this perceptive and quasi-perceptive information is nothing but the raw material for an interpretative activity. Here the access to the inner world largely consists in the access to a fictitious dimension, where there are accredited explanatory systems that draw on a mentalistic ideology originating from mechanisms that lie within the province of neuroscience and psychology. And thus, there where Descartes saw a given essence (the self-transparent consciousness-substance), now we find something constructed, the product of an apparatus that allows us to partially describe, and above all narratively justify – “with the aid of conventional mental constructs” – mental processes all fundamentally unconscious.

5. Precariousness and Bad Faith

The conclusion of the preceding section is that self-consciousness as introspective reflexivity is largely an activity of narrative reappropriation of the outputs of the unconscious cognitive processing. Now, what Jervis invites us to do is to focus on the self-defensive nature of this activity, and precisely in Freud’s sense: “Basically, introspection is subordinate to exigencies of compromise: the description of one’s own inner life gets organized so that it can harmonize with other people’s expectations, as well as […] with the image of oneself that one loves to cultivate.” Here we find again the critical theme of bad faith: the construction of inner life is marked by a self-apologetic defensiveness, a systematic tendency towards self-deception. But in view of cognitive sciences stage, characterized by the objectivation and autonomization of the passions from the bodily experience, but still without a full conceptualization of the space of the mind. Here is the example of a significant phase of cultural transition from the primitive difficulty to conceive the subjective or “inner space” dimension and the modern conception of consciousness and inner life.

48 Id., The unconscious, p. 157.
49 Id., Il mito dell’interiorità, p. 28.
the way in which Freud, and after him the psychodynamic tradition, have
dealt with the study of defense mechanisms, must undergo a radical revision.

He begins to distinguish between two theories of error. The first theory,
part and parcel with the Cartesian model of the mind, traces the errors of
judgment and conduct back to the emotional, visceral, impulsive-instinctual,
“animal” sphere of the body. This allowed to safeguard the assumption of a
primary (and in Descartes, transcendent) principle of human rational aware-
ness. In contrast, the second theory, originating from Francis Bacon, imputes
such errors to the forms of doing and knowing “that are peculiar to the psy-
chological essence of human beings.”50

It is this Baconian perspective that has been taken by research traditions
such as psychology of thought and social psychology. Thus, for example,
social psychology tells us that stereotypes, the dynamics of prejudice, the
structurally unreliable or diverting nature of many programmatic and prin-
cipled avowals, are structures of bad faith which originate from cognitive
mechanisms underlying the etiology of social attitudes. In such a perspective,
then, self-deception can no longer be conceived as the temporary crisis of a
fundamentally rational agent, a momentary défaillance that can be explained
only in terms of a non-rational psychological sphere, consisting of passions,
instincts, emotions, and which can be clearly demarcable from the workings
of our self-conscious rationality. Now self-deceiving is a natural inclination
towards error of the human mind, an original property of the mechanisms
through which we build knowledge.

This gives rise to a “reinforcing overturning” of the psychodynamic ques-
tioning about defenses. In fact, now “the aspects of ambiguity, self-deception,
and […] sufferance of human life” can no longer be conceived as “interferences
that are restrictively connected to affective and emotional factors (and hence
negatively affecting a self-conscious rationality safeguarded as primary);” they
are to be seen as aspects “globally constitutive of the mind and behavior.”51
What we must explain, then, is not “how and why some ‘defensive’ mecha-
nisms exist, but rather how all the structures of knowledge and action are by
themselves, integrally, a matter of defenses.”52

However, Jervis emphasizes, “defenses can be explained only by placing
them within a more general ideological theme, which is that of the fragility
of the subject.”53 At first his reference is to the clinical topic of “the fragility

122-123.
51 Ibid., p. 302.
52 See above, note 5.
53 Jervis, Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 295.
of the ego,” and thus to concepts like Ronald Laing’s “ontological insecurity” and Michael Balint’s “basic fault.”54 But then the theme becomes wider, taking the size of a hypothesis about human nature, in which comes in the foreground de Martino’s notion of “presence.”

Then let us ask ourselves: who is the subject of a dynamic psychology based on the cognitive-science ontology of unconscious psychobiological functions? After undergoing the “reinforcing overturning,” the ideas of the unconscious and defense mechanism “have no longer the function of diminishing (or, if you like, weakening) the traditional image of a subject with a primary identity and force: but, on the contrary, they tend to show that a human subject of that kind never existed.”55 What, more than anything else, defines the real human subject is its intrinsic fragility. And consequently what we must try to understand is how the human subject, notwithstanding its fragility, is able to construct itself: “Today’s scientific psychology wants to understand how the human subject comes to exist and survive, and to be conscious, and to create culture, despite the fragility of the biological premises from which it starts.

It may be said that the problem is no longer to know how human beings can ‘come down’ from the level of nobility at which they were placed, but on the contrary, how they can ‘rise’ up to self-consciousness and culture in spite of the lack of an identity and a strength that guarantee them; notwithstanding, therefore, their ontological insubstantiality, and indeed, still more radically, a sort of their original ‘non-being.’”56

The precarious nature of the subject’s self-construction is well captured by the concept of “presence” of the philosopher-anthropologist Ernesto de Martino.57 Presence is the finding oneself again at the center of a one’s own orderly and meaningful subjective world, and hence at the center of an historical and cultural environment to which one feels to belong. But this finding oneself again is a precarious acquisition, continuously constructed by the subject and constantly exposed to the risk of the crisis (the crisis of presence):

“The feeling of existing, that is, the primary feeling of the presence of self to itself, or if you like the feeling of the unity of the ego, or also the self-consciousness as full certainty on which the experience and the order of everyday living rest, is not a psychological faculty guaranteed once for all, but it is a precarious acquisition, arduously constructed by culture every day.”58

De Martino’s theory of presence contrasts with Kant’s conception of self-consciousness. Kant thought that the consciousness of self could be captured in

54 Ibid., p. 309; Id., La conquista dell’identità, p. 30.
55 Ibid., Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 301.
56 Ibid. (italics added).
58 Jervis, Il mito dell’interiorità, p. 92.
a pure state, independently from the consciousness of existing in a certain way: “I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am,” he writes in the first Critique.\textsuperscript{59} But according to De Martino, self-consciousness cannot be conceived as a \textit{primum}, a self-awareness that is primary, elemental and simple, preceding any other form of “knowing.” There is no \textit{Bewußtsein seiner selbst} without \textit{Erkenntnis seiner Selbst}: “The being-here as the subject’s primary feeling, open to the world, obtains meaning only as a being here in a certain way, i.e. as bodily and affective self-image, in representing to itself one’s own person as a person of a certain type. There is no feeling of self without some form of representation of self: contrary to what Kant thought, there is no consciousness of self without knowledge of self.”\textsuperscript{60}

In other words, we know that we exist insofar as we know that we exist “in a certain way,” as describable identity, constant through changes. If for some reason this self-description becomes uncertain, the subject soon feels that the feeling of existing vanishes. This can occur for various reasons: because of a sudden breakdown of self-esteem; on the occasion of unexpected emotional upheavals; in some cases of psychoses or loss of memory; when the continuity of the tissue of our sociality is broken, as it can happen when one is suddenly thrown in some dehumanizing total institution.\textsuperscript{61}

Thus self-consciousness is not a primary given, but rather a construction, a description of self. And it is in the precariousness of this description of identity – “the primary, and universal, existential risk of the\textit{ loss of presence}”\textsuperscript{62} – that it is to be seen the ultimate root of the primary defensiveness of the self-constructing subject. Without the ontological guarantee on which the Cartesian consciousness–substance can count, the human subject constitutes itself as a repertoire of “composite psychological manoeuvres,”\textsuperscript{63} which try to cope with its “ontological insubstantiality,” its “original non-being.” It could be said that the mind achieves its unity – or better, appearance of unity – in the act of mobilizing tricks against the menace of its breaking down. Such a defensive activity has two dimensions. At the individual psychodynamic level, it consists in the intrapsychic defenses and the interpersonal manoeuvres to which we appeal in the relationship with other people and our environment to defend our self-describability and, indissolubly, the cohesiveness of our self-conscious being. At the collective anthropological level, such activi-

\textsuperscript{59} I. Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, translated by N. Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan, 1929, B 157. In B 158 Kant writes that “[t]he consciousness of self is […] very far from being a knowledge of the self.”
\textsuperscript{60} Jervis, \textit{Presenza e identità}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{61} Id., \textit{Il mito dell’interiorità}, pp. 131-132.
\textsuperscript{62} Id., \textit{La conquista dell’identità}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{63} Id., \textit{Il mito dell’interiorità}, p. 25.
ties consist in the construction of a system of references, in part symbolic and ritual, which give perspective to living, domesticity and meaning to one’s own being in the world.

And so, at the end of this reconstruction of Jervis’ reflection on the self-deceptions of human consciousness, we find out that behind the “classic” conception of the subject, behind the myth of the interiority as pertinacious reference to an (imaginary) entity, viewed as unitary, coherent, compact, self-justified and somehow “noble,” is concealed the very “uncomfortable” truth that we are not at all sure of being here, of being able to say “I.”

6. Conclusions

In Jervis’ thought, therefore, we find a hypothesis on human nature that rests on the notion of presence construed as the primary feeling of being-here as “being here in a certain way.” However, in formulating such a hypothesis as an anthropology congruent with the cognitive sciences, Jervis resolves a tension present in de Martino’s thought. On one hand de Martino was strongly culturalist, and thus far from thinking that there are universal structures in the human mind – Croceanism and Marxism drove him in that direction. On the other hand, however, the study of the universal structures through which people defend themselves from anxiety led him to investigate the mental mechanisms as general mechanisms of human species. This explains his interest in psychopathology and, in the last years of his life, in structuralist anthropology. However, Jervis surmises, if de Martino had lived in the 1970s and 1980s, he would have realized that just during those years a new revision was in progress, which went in the direction lato sensu of structuralism, i.e. a revival of Darwinian studies, and hence of the importance of the universal structures of the mind as a trait of human species. It is, therefore, in the sense of Darwinian naturalism that Jervis resolves de Martino’s tension; and in Jervis’ hands the thematic of the presence and its crisis is a matter certainly historical but still more biological and psychological.64

It would be difficult to overrate the significance of Jervis’ effort to outline an anthropology congruent with the ontology of the cognitive sciences. In the philosophical culture still reigns a considerable incomprehension about

64 “This life of ours, not abstract but real, our life, is not only social biography, and construction of culture, and world of ideas; on the contrary, it is in the first place, and much more strongly, the history of a body [...]. The body determines our being-here, it dominates our life, precedes our consciousness of existing, influences our mental experiences, it imposes itself with its needs and limits, resists to all the attempts of sublimation: in synthesis, it maintains its primary character.” (Id., La conquista dell’identità, p. 129).
how “the question of the subject” can be tackled by means of the findings of
the cognitive sciences. It can often be heard that such a question goes beyond
the naturalistic horizon and lies exclusively within the province of non-scient-
ifically or even anti-scientifically oriented philosophies. And however Jervis
has shown us how precisely the cognitive sciences provide us with the tools
to “remove frills from the idealistic image of the person”65 without endors-
ing that tradition which, by distorting the criticism of the model of a rational
and unitary mind, has spoken of “dissolution” or “subversion” of the subject.
Such a tradition, incarnated by authors like Deleuze, Foucault and Lacan,
“puts forward a criticism of the subject but also does something more, i.e.
preaches and recommends a multiplicity of the self, a decentralization of the
ego, a polymorphism of identities, and in short the end of a cohesive image
of the mind.”66 But nothing could be more in contrast with the conception
of the human subject that Jervis sees emerging from the cognitive sciences, a
subject for whom the construction of an identity that is “valid” as far as pos-
sible is something rooted in the primary need to subjectively subsist, and thus
to solidly exist as “ego.” If we accept this perspective, where what has been
traditionally termed “self-consciousness” is replaced by the concept of iden-
tity, any project of weakening of the self, or worse disintegration of identity,
shows itself in its true light, i.e. as “mental suffering.”67

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65 Id., Fondamenti di psicologia dinamica, p. 300.
66 Id., Il mito dell’interiorità, p. 174.
67 Ibid., p. 177.