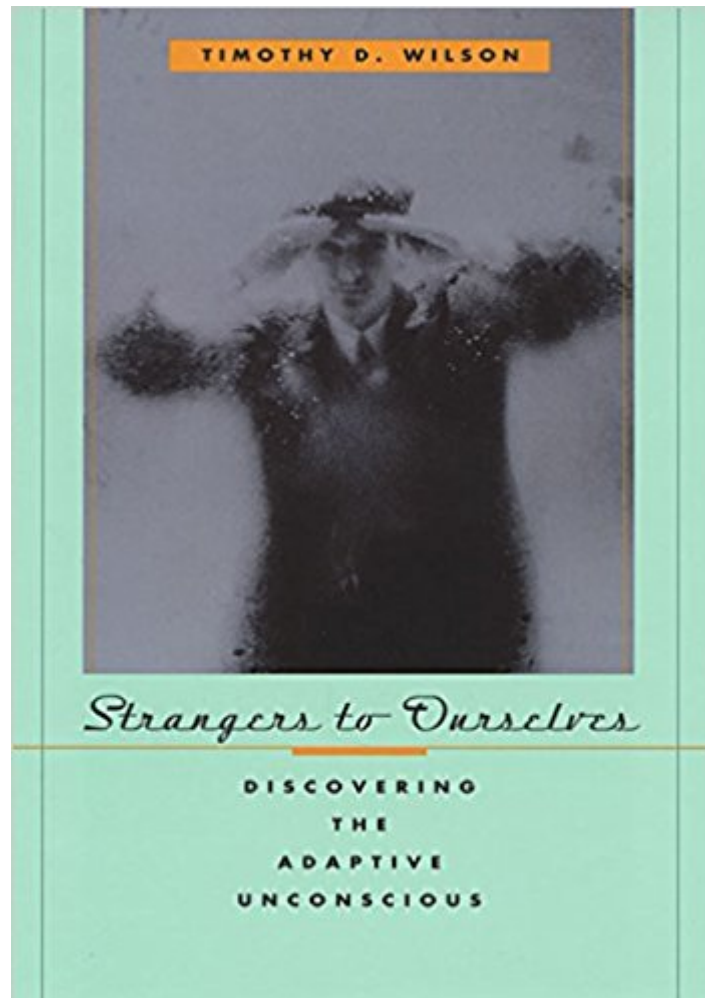




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Strangers To Ourselves: Discovering The Adaptive Unconscious



Synopsis

"Know thyself," a precept as old as Socrates, is still good advice. But is introspection the best path to self-knowledge? What are we trying to discover, anyway? In an eye-opening tour of the unconscious, as contemporary psychological science has redefined it, Timothy D. Wilson introduces us to a hidden mental world of judgments, feelings, and motives that introspection may never show us. This is not your psychoanalyst's unconscious. The adaptive unconscious that empirical psychology has revealed, and that Wilson describes, is much more than a repository of primitive drives and conflict-ridden memories. It is a set of pervasive, sophisticated mental processes that size up our worlds, set goals, and initiate action, all while we are consciously thinking about something else. If we don't know ourselves--our potentials, feelings, or motives--it is most often, Wilson tells us, because we have developed a plausible story about ourselves that is out of touch with our adaptive unconscious. Citing evidence that too much introspection can actually do damage, Wilson makes the case for better ways of discovering our unconscious selves. If you want to know who you are or what you feel or what you're like, Wilson advises, pay attention to what you actually do and what other people think about you. Showing us an unconscious more powerful than Freud's, and even more pervasive in our daily life, *Strangers to Ourselves* marks a revolution in how we know ourselves.

Book Information

Paperback: 262 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press; New Ed edition (May 15, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674013824

ISBN-13: 978-0674013827

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (82 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #25,575 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) [#45 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Psychotherapy, TA & NLP](#) [#66 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Psychotherapy, TA & NLP](#) [#110 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Cognitive](#)

Customer Reviews

This is not a self-help book in the 'pop-psychology' vein, as I perceive it. This book is less about

easy answers and more about deeper hows and whys. After all if you know how and why, answers become self-evident anyway, but the reciprocal is not always true. It's easier to determine answers but they usually don't tell you why and how. Though I admit I approached this work in a recreational mindset - you know, that 'this looks like a fun read'...boy was I wrong in some respects! This little book will kick your notions of consciousness and just who or what is in charge of you right on their head. You get to face the concept that it's not always the conscious you that is at the helm (even when you're sure it is)...in some respects the conscious you is often just a spectator. Weird, but true I feel. How many times for example somebody will ask you something and you know the answer the instant they have finished speaking? You haven't even had time to work out the answer and there it is (I'm not talking about automaticity or simple stuff)...then you have to check the answer with your conscious mind to see that it is right (which it is: often my conscious mind takes much longer to arrive at the same answer when checking). That is your adaptive unconscious! And this thing is far more pervasive and in control than we may imagine or realize. Ok, this isn't a massively scholarly work that is so arcane as to be unapproachable by most. Indeed it is simply written exposition of a particular philosophy of mind than, while not heavily evidenced, is rather commonsensical. As Richard Feynman suggested you can describe virtually anything in simple terms if you understand it well enough, and both I and my unconscious both agree that Timothy D Wilson has a firm grasp on this concept.

This book asserts that we rarely know much about our own minds, what we do know is sometimes wrong, and moreover, that introspection is often powerless to help us to better self-knowledge. Not only that, but perfect strangers can sometimes tell us things about our personality that we didn't know. Wilson, a psychology professor, is not really going out on a limb here, but rather reporting the strong results of recent research (some of which is his own) on the "adaptive unconscious". The new view of the mind that is gradually being built up by controlled experiments is often at variance with Freud's compelling but fanciful views on the unconscious and repression. The current model has the mind composed of a conscious part and, perhaps, several unconscious parts, each of which has a special ability, like recognizing faces, responding to emergencies, or selective remembering and forgetting. The author normally lumps these specialized parts together for purposes of discussion, since his intent is to contrast our conscious mind with our unconscious, and to re-evaluate what it is we can know about ourselves through examining our conscious motives, thoughts, and feelings. Anyone who has ever been surprised at an emotion that has come over him, seemingly from nowhere, or by his actions in a new situation knows how disconcerting it can be. Are

one's conscious emotions just fake - placeholders for real feelings that well up when one isn't looking? Are one's firm intentions just flimsy self-deceptions that are blown away by the right circumstances? It's probably not that bad (usually!), but we should know just how much of what we feel and think and think we remember is under our conscious control.

Every once in a while you read a book whose ideas you know will stay with you in varying degrees the rest of your life. Congratulations: you are presently reading about one of those such books. Buy this book, read it, and thank me later. So you think you know yourself fairly well, huh? Read this book and then see what you think. The author's thesis is that we all have what he calls an "adaptive unconscious" which really "runs the show" in our lives. Now, I am far from being a determinist and the author, if I am correct, doesn't see himself as a determinist. I have always believed in free will--still do I suppose (I'm not sure because I just finished reading this book today.) However, I am convinced now that "free will" resides as much in the adaptive unconscious as much--if not more--than it does in my conscious mind. This is mind-boggling for me--and it will be for you if you read the author with an open mind. Timothy Wilson writes a solid, engaging book that refuses to condescend into pop psychology. In other words, he's a good writer who is able to put across complex psychology into words most laypeople can understand--a daunting task. One would have to read through dozens of psychological papers and books (and subsequently, take several naps) in order to figure out what he says very succinctly yet accurately in this book. I have worked with people in a "helping profession" for over twenty years. I have longed believed, though I am not a psychologist, in "the power of the unconscious mind." "Just think on it"--"Give him some time to think about it" are phrases I have said numerous times.

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