The Beginner’s Mind
The Complete Works of Milton H. Erickson
Volume 5 – Classical Hypnotic Phenomena, Part 1
Erickson Foundation Press

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Classical Hypnotic Phenomena begins a two-volume investigation of the phe-
nomenology of hypnotherapy, which has been extensively developed in recent
years by Jeffrey Zeig. This volume is the foundational work from Erickson and
includes his papers from the 1930s and ‘40s, and several from the ‘60s and ‘70s;
it is supported by current updates from Ernest Rossi and others. Similar to the other
volumes, there is rich use of detailed case studies.

In this volume, subjects range from amnesia to dual personality, but the recur-
ring concept is the functional presence of the unconscious in the process of ther-
apy. In the Preface we are reminded of how Erickson sought to “…allow se-
eredipity in the form of spontaneous unconscious responses to manifest them-

(p.1)

In Part I, Erickson investigates amnesia. At first, I considered some examples
to be just temporary memory loss, but it became clear to me that the inability to re-
member at a given time can have important implications and revelations about a
client. In Chapter 3, Erickson shares an intriguing story about a dog who was taught
a set of tricks, but was unable to perform those tricks outside of the house basement
(p.25). This same phenomena is discussed later (Chapter 4) in the case of a client
who, after a carefully placed suggestion, was unable to recall going into trance, or
even attending his appointment, until he entered Erickson’s office. While in the
waiting room, he was amnesic of his experience. This leads to the extraordinary
event of the man walking backwards out of the office, trying to resist the “out of
office” amnesia, only to be startled to find himself walking backwards into the
waiting room for no apparent reason (p.35-37). We have all had the experience of
walking into a room with some intent purpose, but once in the room, having no rec-
collection of that purpose.

These examples demonstrate that conscious awareness can vary in relation to
context -- be it environmental, emotional, or temporal -- and produce a unique
memory set, or, equally, amnesia set. Rossi called this, “state -- dependent mem-
ory, learning, and behavior.” That Erickson was considering these phenomena
nearly 80 years ago is inspiring.

Part II investigates “literalness,” where Erickson and Rossi discuss how con-
sciousness can often protect the neurosis, which “…means consciousness is in a
weak position relative to the forces of neurosis, and it [consciousness] needs help.”
(p.76) Part III addresses age regression, and Part IV, automatic writing. In Chap-
ter 12, Erickson describes a small meeting of college people, and he claims “…peo-
ple could perform an act consciously…but which could have another unconscious
meaning.” (p.127) The concept was effectively tested with automatic writing. This
phenomena is a central component of some therapies, for example, sandplay and
art therapy, whereby the intent is to enable the unconscious to be expressed and
brought into conscious awareness.

The investigation of mental mechanisms in Part V further discusses the un-
conscious mind: “Hypnosis is the induction of a peculiar state which permits sub-
jects to reassociate and reorganize inner psychological complexities…” (p.197) and
move beyond the constraints of an egocentric consciousness. Consciousness pro-
vides defense for inner dysfunction, and yet, is not in control; consciousness can
be driven by inner needs.

This led me to consider recent research that suggests consciousness does not
require a detailed sense of our emotional or biological needs. It only needs what
is “good enough” to maintain survival and social inclusion. For example, our re-
sponse to a complex biological activity that occurs several times a day produces
the simplistic conscious perception -- I’m hungry -- with little or no specific detail.

Rossi’s recent presentations and papers demonstrate how quantum mechanics
lies at the heart of everything in our classical experience. Our consciousness, how-
ever, is not able to be aware of quantum properties. Does this mean that the ideal
treatment is one that activates implicit, unconscious activity? If conscious control
is not the best way to create well-being, perhaps one of the most important things
we can do with conscious control is to voluntarily turn it off, allowing the complex
inner world to do its finest work. In their 1944 paper (Ch.17), Erickson and Hill
list a set of four therapeutic concepts of which the most astounding is the third: “An
unconscious conflict may be resolved unconsciously.” (p.206). The fourth concept
introduces something that we are only recently learning is the most im-
portant aspect of successful therapy: “Such unconscious activity can be influenced…by a
relationship with another person.” (p.206)

Part VI investigates dual personality, which is another way in which the un-
conscious sets up a protective mechanism. It is intriguing that Erickson was some-
times asked by the “other personality” to help the person who was ill. Dual
personality is a self-organized, protective relationship within the isolation, created
by the trauma. The client protects themselves with a fractured relationship with
the self, but they still seek out a therapeutic relationship with Erickson to find res-
olution. This makes me wonder whether unusual and dysfunctional behavior is
how the unconscious triggers others into shifting their attention -- to focus on a
deeper relational interaction, which enables therapeutic change. In short, we are not
meant to do it on our own. Relationships are the best healers, and symptoms stim-
ulate healing relationships.

In Chapter 21, Erickson and Rapaport use psychometric testing to examine two
dual personality patients. It is fascinating to read both the process and results of
tests used in the 1940s. This provides the introduction for Part VII, which explores
modern testing. The Indirect Trance Assessment Scale, developed by Rossi, is ex-
plained in detail, and two papers, based in the recent field of psychosocial
genomics, take readers to the cutting edge of current research.

This volume spans research and investigation from 1933 to 2004. We are chal-
genged, as usual, but also tested as we explore the unconscious. The reader will, no
doubt, experience conscious change and growth, but I suggest there will also be un-
conscious activity that may never be known -- only experienced as beneficial
change. That is the phenomena of the unconscious.