Varieties of the "Unsaid"

in sustaining psycho-social community

Annex to Global Strategic Implications of the "Unsaid": from myth-making towards a "wisdom society"

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References

The following sections explore various threads relating to the "unsaid" that might be usefully interwoven.

The "unsaid" in politics and international relations

The term is frequently applied in evaluating an address by a politician -- and most notably in relation to any justification for the war on terrorism (for example, E J Dionne’s commentary, *President’s speech on Iraq left too much unsaid: Little candor about who will pay*. *Concord Monitor*, 10 September 2003).

The term may be used with reference to a highly asymmetric relationship between political factions or governments, such as the assumption of the equality of the largest and smaller member states of the United Nations.

With respect to the major UNCED Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, one critique was expressed under the heading of the *Unsaid Summit*. To what extent are intergovernmental initiatives systematically undermined by the unpublicized creation of bodies like the secret "Brussels group" of governments (Belgium, Germany, Italy, UK, USA) in 1971, with the objective of limiting the effectiveness of the UN environment conference that created UNEP (*New Scientist*, 5 January 2002) (more)?
There is an extensive literature on the "implicit assumptions" associated with international relations (see K.M. Fierke. *Links Across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations*. International Studies Quarterly, 46, 3, September 2002 *Thinking About Thinking*. Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency 1999). Implicit assumptions undergird the different ways in which peace is conceptualized, and these assumptions impact on the effectiveness of various strategies developed for realizing peace [more].

Iver B. Neumann (*The Double Arrival of Russia in International Society* International Studies Association, New Orleans 2002) has explored the role of the "implicit" in relation to the *corps diplomatique*:

The area of the *corps diplomatique* or society of diplomats at the court of a specific sovereign may serve as an example. It is true and central that, with the institutional breakthrough of the doyen, the representatives of sovereigns no longer needed to hustle for pride of place at every single function that they attended. Instead, one agreed on a technical solution to the question of precedence, so that pride of place was given to the longest-serving diplomat. But this, of course, in no way implied that questions of prestige emerged altogether. They were still tangible though often implicit facts of the informal social life of the *corps diplomatique*. To pick another example, with the expansion of international society, the question of a 'standard of civilization' quickly gained a central place in international law as a prerequisite of rights. Of course, the fact that it had not been formally central to international law before that time, did not mean that it had not been implicitly present.

The "unsaid" is often articulated in the political sphere in terms of "silence":


A useful discussion of the "unsaid" within the context of the French political system -- and with implications for global governance -- is provided in relation to the accusations against Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Director of the International Monetary Fund and potential French presidential candidate (Angelique Christakis, *France questions itself over Dominique Strauss-Kahn's 'open secret'*, The Guardian, 17 May 2011):

Everyone in French political and media circles knew Strauss-Kahn's achilles heel was his attitude to women. Even his closest political allies admitted he was an invertebrate seducer, an unashamed libertine.... It raises the uncomfortable question in the French media and politics of two parallel worlds: what is printed, and what is behind it, gossip, and what must officially remain "unsaid".

Johan Galtung (*US "Negotiation" Style -- and the six-party talks over Korea, 2007*) clearly identifies a policy of secrecy in diplomacy:

So there has to be a back channel. And it has to be secret that The Extraordinary One engages in such ordinary activities as negotiations; willingness to meet, yes, but with no details. The extent to which this happens is unknown. But some rules can be surmised from the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam war, Iran-hostages, Iraq I-Kuwait, Iraq II-Saddam and Iran-nuclear:

- keep negotiations secret, not necessarily that they take place but what is on the table;
- give the impression that the talks are about face-to-face communication of the US stand, supplemented by threat and possibly "incentives", little or no mention of any quid pro quo;
- keep what the Other demands and/or offers secret or general, referred to as rhetorical, efforts to deflect the issue, etc;
- present agreement and compliance by Other as a triumph for US diplomacy, keep any quid pro quo secret;
- present non-agreement and non-compliance by Other as proof that Other does not want any agreement = peace;
- conceal, play down US non-compliance, put all burden on Other;
- make the media willing parties through access to sources, stories and embedded journalism, and censorship if needed.

There is also a case for recognizing the extent to which relations within the international system are based on patterns of agreement and understanding -- the "giving of one's word". Reneging on such agreements, and derogating from treaties, may be seen as a form of "unsaying" of what has been said and agreed. The "unsaid" may then be seen as the result of the increasing practice of governments, notably the USA, to set aside international treaty provisions.

A related phenomenon of "unspeak" -- a mode of speech that "persuades by stealth" -- has been documented by Steven Poole (*Unspeak*, 2006), notably as a means whereby government its policy behind its language:

What is unspeak? It represents an attempt to say something without saying it, without getting into an argument and so having to justify itself. At the same time, it tries to unspeak - in the sense of erasing, or silencing - any possible opposing point of view, by laying a claim right at the start to only one way of looking at a problem. (*War of the words*, The Guardian, 18 February 2006)

**The Unconscious Civilization**
The "unsaid" in social systems

Aspects of the "unsaid", as experienced by many in social and political relations, have been usefully characterized by Johan Galtung under the term structural violence -- an unacknowledged form of violence that harms through social structures that produce poverty, death and enormous suffering. Structural violence may be political, repressive, economic and exploitative, it occurs when the social order directly or indirectly causes human suffering and death. [more | more]. It is the causing of harm by inflexibility and rigidity of the rules of the structure in dealing with difference -- without any given perpetrator, by the holding do rules that do not allow for differences [more]. For Susan James (Structural violence: the invisible violence in our communities, 2001) structural violence differs from the other types of violence in that power relations within structural violence are less visible and exist in various forms infused in the existing social hierarchies. For Robert Gilman (Structural Violence Can we find genuine peace in a world with inequitable distribution of wealth among nations?, 1983) its essence lies in the "the ease with which we acquiesce in injustice -- the way we all too easily look in the other direction and disclaim "response ability."

With respect to politicized issues, for example, Dave Duffy (Something unsaid about Timothy McVeigh's execution, 1998) writes:

> Now that McVeigh is about to be executed on closed-circuit TV in the first federal execution in 38 years, there is relative silence on the Internet. Very little e-mail, very little discussion pro or con. Why is that? We can't quite put our finger on it, can we, or we dare not express the horror in our heart at the coming moment, and the implications for freedom in this country.

The notion in some countries, especially the USA, of the "silent majority" may reflect an unexpressed aspect of public opinion. The voices of women may often be seen as smothered behind a wall of silence, even in industrialized countries (see Sandra Buckley Broken Silence: Voices of Japanese Feminism, 1997). A culture of silence at work, whereby conflicts are effectively silenced, can prove highly destructive to the organization (see The trouble with silence at work. Christian Science Monitor, 14 October 2003; In business, silence is not golden. Harvard Business Review, 3 September 2003).

Perhaps the most problematic forms of the "unsaid" arise from the fundamental arrogance with which some people, groups, nations or cultures view themselves as inherently and unquestionably superior to others -- as übermensch of some kind -- notably from a genetic, spiritual, or aesthetic perspective. Under the guise of human equality this cannot be "said", but this innate arrogance is a prime determining factor in social relations. This was the case with Nazi Germany, it remains the case for those peoples who consider themselves specially chosen by God (as repeatedly articulated by Johan Galtung). Any challenge to this is immediately conflated with a direct attack on their human rights -- to be resisted violently. Thus even the nature of this dynamic is absorbed into the zone of the "unsaid". Such attitudes underlie the persistence of the class system, notably governing selection of marriage partners. They underlie relations between government representatives and those of nongovernmental bodies. They ensure the marginalization of certain peoples such as the gypsies, indigenous groups, and the Ainu.

The "unsaid" in security and the "war against terrorism"

The challenge of the "unsaid" in relation to security lies in how to prove or disprove any assertion or claim in a context of secrecy and deniable culpability (see Mapping the Network of Terror, 2002). How, for example, is it to be proven whether a sequence of events (such as the following) is the responsibility of an independent "terrorist group" such as "al-Qaida"? There is a demonstrated willingness of governments to act through subterfuge in defiance of international law (as conceded by Richard Perle with regard to Iraq, or in the case of the Anglo-French Suez invasion) to the point of planning for the loss of life of their own citizens (as in the proposal by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff for Operation Northwoods to engage in activities such as assassination, hijacking airplanes, blowing up ships, orchestrating violent terrorism in cities of the USA -- in order to pin the blame on opponents). In such a context, who could demonstrate that the following sequence had not been masterminded by a (rogue) security agency of a government whose strategic interests would be protected or advanced by focusing attention on such events (and away from other situations)?:

- detect strategic opportunity (or threat)
- manipulate pro-terrorist group or rogue security unit
- explode bomb or take advantage of any disastrous incident
- claim to detect that the incident has "all the markings of al-Qaida"
- attribute incident to "al-Qaida" in official public announcements and encourage such attributions by the media (omitting any use of pre-trial precautions such as "allegedly", ignoring accusations of "contempt of court") [more | more]
- arrange for possible claim/endorsement for the attack over phone/video from "al-Qaida" or a "pro-terrorist movement" (or from "Osama bin Laden" or "Saddam Hussein" ("former" CIA agents))
- whip up media on issue of loyalty and "fighting terror to the end"
- arrest "terrorist suspects" for interrogation (including those it is politically convenient to frame as "terrorists")
- ensure robust "interrogations" to produce appropriate "confessions", possibly with the assistance of false memory implantation (ignoring claims of duress)
- fail to release any hard evidence obtained from suspects -- "because of the grave threat to national security"
- seclude suspects indefinitely beyond reach of judicial due process -- whilst claiming to be acting in defence of human rights
- prevent access of defence lawyers to other suspects potentially able to offer exonerating evidence -- claiming that such rights "hinder ongoing interrogation efforts of other suspects"
- discredit independent critics as misguided (or traitors) -- perhaps later to be reframed as "terrorist suspects" and kidnapped for
interrogation
- use confusion to justify and ensure greater control of resources (such as oil)
- promote more repressive legislation
- frame any collateral damage as "destruction of terrorist strongholds" and "response to terrorist suspects resisting arrest"
- await (or provoke) next strategic opportunity

In this context the nature of the shadowy "al-Qaida" itself becomes the "unsaid". As with any bogeyman, maintaining its shadowy, menacing nature in the eyes of public opinion may serve both its adherents and those whose position is reinforced by fear-mongering. Substantive proof cannot be credibly supplied -- only devastating bombs whose purpose can be variously interpreted, irrespective of the specific false "claims" of responsibility (typical of many crimes). Even professionals in the intelligence community may be confused by the shadowy quality of the evidence on offer and may mistakenly infer the existence of "missing links" to complete the desired chain of evidence (see also Groupthink: the Search for Archaeoraptor as a Metaphoric Tale: missing the link between "freedom fighters" and "terrorists", 2002)

The status of the "unsaid" has also been admirably illustrated by US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld (DoD News, 12 February 2002):

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones

This much-cited remark has been reviewed in the light of its inadvertent wisdom (see Philip Stephens. The unwriting of Rumsfeld's unknowns. Financial Times, 12 December 2003). Whilst acknowledging that "The chaos in Iraq testifies to what happens when politicians substitute hubris for intelligent thought" he acknowledges the merits of Rumsfeld's statement: "Sometimes we can be certain about things; sometimes we know the direction to take but are aware of gaps in our knowledge; and sometimes we just stumble around in the dark". According to Stephens, compounding Rumsfeld's error in ignoring his own advice, his unstated error is his assumption that the present can be readily projected into the future.

The "unsaid" in business and the corporate world

John Ralston Saul (The Unconscious Civilization, 1995) provides a classic example:

Criticism is perhaps the citizen's primary weapon in the exercise of her legitimacy. That is why, in this corporatist society, conformity, loyalty and silence are so admired and rewarded; why criticism is so punished or marginalized.... In one eloquent example which has recently come to light, the executives of a major American tobacco company debated among themselves at great length, in the 1960s, whether they should inform the U.S. Surgeon General of the results of their own corporate research, which confirmed the health hazards of smoking. They decided, eventually, to say nothing and to stop work on a safer cigarette. After all, to develop a safer cigarette would compromise their silence by suggesting the need for one. Instead, they initiated a legal and public relations strategy of admitting nothing.

The "unsaid" in the legal system

Democratic countries pride themselves on their legal systems and consider that any miscarriages of justice are merely unfortunate exceptions. The systemic defects pass unnoticed -- except by those directly exposed to them -- and are not a matter of public debate. The extent to which this situation has gone unacknowledged in an industrialized country such as the UK, for example, has been usefully and extensively analyzed by Nick Davies (How a judge's death in country garden exposed fatal flaws in system, Guardian, 13 December 2003):

The Guardian's investigation into the criminal justice system has shown how the policing of volume crime is failing on a spectacular scale -- bringing to justice only 3% of offences -- fundamentally because it relies on the antique and failed tools of arrest and trial and punishment....

Each of these failures has its own detail and yet all of them spring from a common source: our systems for detecting and dealing with serious crime are unreliable. Sometimes they succeed but then again they fail, because, oddly, we do not train our detectives to detect; or because we now filter our forensic science through a privatised marketplace; or because we have left the most important decisions about death in the hands of coroners with ancient and arbitrary powers; or because, when things go wrong, we still rely on some of the most powerful institutions in the country to arbitrate on their own behaviour. Systems like these invite the manufacture of false evidence, they provoke guesswork and phoney logic, they stimulate the crudest of prejudices, because they fail consistently to deliver the most important element in any criminal justice system, which is the truth. It can happen even to a judge. [emphasis added]

The prevailing situation in many other countries falls within the zone of the "unsaid". In the same period the unacknowledged pattern of treatment accorded prisoners in the UK by prison officers was the subject of a further report by Vikram Dodd (Brutality of prison officers exposed, Guardian, 11 December 2003):
The "unsaid" in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy

In many respects, psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with the "unsaid" and the silences of discourse (for example, H Levitt. The unsaid in the narrative: Understanding silences in psychotherapy. 1997). As noted by Alfred Margulies (Commentary on Poland's "The Analyst's Witnessing And Otherness". Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association 48/1)

We are, of course, constantly up against our limits of articulation: Gadamer referred to "the infinity of the unsaid" surrounding our words; Hans Lipps to the "the circle of the unexpressed" (Gadamer 1976, p. xxxii). Moreover, this circle of the unsaid compounds itself relationally, in discourse: Gadamer (1976, p. 17) calls it the "infinity of the dialogue" -- the ongoing conversation that is only interrupted, never concluded. And so too with the psychoanalytic situation: both analyst and analysand actively engage their inarticulateness, ask themselves to express not-fully-known experience in an attempt that can only partially succeed, and one that never really stops. The psychoanalytic witness, then, functions as a special, designated Other, a bearer of, a placeholder for, that which is not fully speakable.

The secret quality of the preoccupations of psychoanalysis are reflected in interesting ways in the institutional secrecy of its origins, as explored by Paulo Soroka. (The said and the unsaid: Secret structures and ideology in psychoanalytic institutions. Revista Brasileira de Psicanalise, 5, 2001, 4), notably its "Secret Committee".


...for the psychoanalyst, the sense of self - subjectivity - does not derive from a hidden inner structure or entity but is constructed in an ongoing dialogue with otherness, including both the unsymbolized unconscious within, and other subjects who listen or speak... The speaking subject... always overflows his immediate constructions of self, which as 'incomplete texts' constantly refer to what is unsaid or unthought. It is as if the speaking analysand constantly attempts to enlarge and reestablish his 'I'... While the analyst cannot restore or bestow this virtual 'self,' by his nonobjectifying stance, he recognizes the desire 'where id was, there ego shall be' (Freud, 1933)...

The "unsaid" may also be understood from the perspective of depth psychology as the "shadow". This is the archetypal scapegoat present in everyone -- that unacknowledged part of the psyche normally the focus of blame or attack when the individual feels it necessary to vindicate some action or behaviour. It is not normally recognized as part of the self and thus the blame or attack is usually received by someone else who has sparked off the disquieting view of the shadow. It is postulated that the inability to accept the "enemy" is in fact one's own lower nature is the cause of all bias, discrimination and conflict. Acknowledgement of the collective shadow might well prevent nationalistic or racialistic over-reactions to atrocities and barbarism which effectively are merely responding in kind. By accepting that everyone, as a human being, holds within a collective responsibility for every development may well be the key to the next stage in human evolution

Recalling Donald Rumsfeld's insight (above), psychotherapist R. D. Laing (Knots, 1970) made a strong point about the experience of the "unsaid" in the form of a much-cited poem which included the lines:

If I don't know I don't know
I think I know
If I don't know I know
I think I don't know

The "unsaid" in personal relationships

The notion of the "unsaid" may be applied to relationships, especially those that stretch the conventions of a particular society. Thus it may apply to cases where people have a romantic "understanding" that is not expressed in words. This may also apply in the case of homosexual relationships (for example, in Duy Nguyen's play Things Unsaid). Sensitive issues may be avoided for years. Silence of one form of another may undermine relationships (see Silence about sexual problems can hurt relationships, 1999) or be significant in defining a relationship (see Arad Nir. Relationships as commitment devices: Strategic silence, 2002). It is a major issue in relationship to undisclosed domestic violence [more]. Silence may then itself be a form of abuse according to Paul Brands (Silence: Is It Abuse?).

Studies of communication have established that a very significant proportion of meaning is conveyed non-verbally, notably through body language (for example John Bittleston: What's left unsaid: Body language says a lot about a person if you know how to read it properly. 4 July 2003).

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski distinguished phatic communication from ideational communication, although their respective success may be mutually dependent. Phatic communication makes use of conventional messages (notably at the beginning and the end of a conversation) to establish rapport and community. This may include hugging, kissing, shaking hands, bowing, smiling, making eye
contact, and facing one another. Cliches may be used to exchange pleasantries -- having essentially lost their content they take on new relational meanings. In such communication, what is important is not what is said. (see V Zegarac, 1998, 1999).

At a particular moment in group processes, something may best be left unsaid knowing that later it will be said. In group creativity processes, if an idea is criticized too early it will be suppressed and often all new ideas will become unmentionable. Although the criticism may be valid -- the idea may be worth pursuing for a while before it is criticized.

The "unsaid" in the arts and aesthetics

By leaving things unsaid or unseen in art the hearer or viewer must construct their own reality creating a richness far beyond what the artist could do. The process of artistic creativity is often accompanied by a marked reluctance to discuss or show the work before its completion.

(a) Poetry: The "unsaid" features in a number of titles of poems (for example, Dana Gioia, Beverly Bremers and Rick Paul, Emily Guenther, Michaelette L. Romano). For Louise Glück (Disruption, Hesitation, Silence, In: Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry, 1994) aesthetics is rooted in a sense of a work of art as provocatively unfinished. Poets including Rilke, Berryman, Oppen and Eliot can then be understood as practitioners of "not saying," of leaving out so as to suggest:

I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary. ... It seems to me that what is wanted, in art, is to harness the power of the unfinished. All earthly experience is partial. Not simply because it is subjective, but because that which we do not know, of the universe, of mortality, is so much more vast than that which we do know. What is unfinished or has been destroyed participates in these mysteries. The problem is to make a whole that does not forfeit this power. (more)

The "unsaid" has a special relationship to what is "said" through a poem. There is a sense in which significance remains unexpressed or "unsaid" until it can be expressed aesthetically in poetic form. It then "makes no sense" and remains "unsaid" until it rhymes within an appropriate metric. The higher orders of significance-- or wisdom -- appears to call for aesthetic expression and require it for successful communication. Rather than rhyme, the emphasis may be on respecting a particular metric (as in haiku) to render it memorable. In this sense the unmemorable effectively remains "unsaid".

In this context it is intriguing how socio-political reality is made and unmade by rhyme. The challenge is most readily seen in the use of rap as a form of coherent expression emerging from the slums of the most industrialized country. Political protest is frequently articulated through rhyming slogans, chants and song -- as was the case with Vietnam, and now with Iraq. War chants have a long tradition. The political will is in this sense unexpressed -- "unsaid" -- until it takes rhyming form.

Given the importance of this form to cultural identity in the case of epic poems (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Odyssey, Edda, Nibelungenlied, La Divina Commedia, Kalevala, etc), it is surprising how fundamentally unaesthetic are the major strategic constructions of modern civilization: political manifestos, constitutions of nations, charters of intergovernmental organizations, universal declarations, and global plans of action. It is no wonder that statements such as the Earth Summit's Agenda 21 do not engender the political will to change. The intentionality they seek to express remains effectively "unsaid". It can be argued that until political action can be articulated through rhyme and metre it will remain incoherent, unmemorable and ineffectual (see Structuring Mnemonic Encoding of Development Plans and Ethical Charters using Musical Leitmotifs, 2001; also Knowledge Gardening through Music: patterns of coherence for future African management as an alternative to Project Logic, 2000).

In the light of this claim, it might be useful to explore questionable cases where some attempt has been made towards coopting aesthetic expression to articulate values and a sense of direction: political parties, communist regimes, national socialist regimes (notably Goebbels), and other national movements. Poems have been used at the inauguration of some US presidents: Robert Frost (The Gift Oatright) at the 1961 inauguration of John Kennedy; Maya Angelou (The Rock Cries Out To Us Today) at the inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993; Miller Williams (Of History and Hope) at Clinton's 1997 inaugural. What remains "unsaid" in these cases might be contrasted with what is "said" at events such as the Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Frenhinol Cymru (Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales) [more] with its explicit druidic traditions [more] -- and the socio-political significance that carries.

Such ceremonies are valued when they are aesthetically "magical". But they may also be understood as modern echoes of traditional magical operations. They are in part designed to "cast a spell" -- now known in its most degraded form in the commercial advertising jingle. Inauguration, or explication, of a pattern of action through a manifesto, declaration or legal constitution can be understood as the grounding "Word" articulating a new reality -- but as such it is also a "spell", a "making", and a drive to action. In this sense, the "unsaid" is both the strategic intent and potential, which has not yet been given appropriate form -- as well as any form which has effectively been displaced or "unmade". In some cultures, such as that of the Australian Aborigines, psycho-social reality is "sung" into being and sustained through such "song". But it can also be "unsung" and "unmade". Historically recent efforts by colonial powers and their religions to suppress systematically the traditional modes of aesthetic expression can be seen as efforts to "unmake" traditional cultures and collective identities. They were forbidden from singing their songs.

Individual identity can also be understood as driven to self-expression -- to "make a statement", or to "say" something. Unless that expression has an aesthetic dimension (style, look, etc), the identity may be felt to be unexpressed, unstated, inadequate and "unsaid". It is in this context that character assassination and identity theft can be usefully explored. Whilst personalities may be "built up" and heroes may indeed be "sung", the reputation and integrity of others may be destroyed, "unsung" and "unsaid". They then have no "song".

These aesthetic considerations raise the question of the nature of the higher order of meaning or identity with which they are associated. What is the additional meaning carried by rhyme? Is it an articulation of the semantic links -- the systemic pathways -- that constitute...
In a remarkable study of silence, Ulrich Schmitz (Clifton D. Healy (Habits of Mind: An Introduction to Clinical Philosophy, 2000)) has been very attentive to the nature of the colonialism as remembering and imagining have been systematically suppressed in decision making, although it is the will that makes decisions, not reason. Also "unsaid" is that reason reduces complex situations into veridical ones (of the simplistic form: yes/no, good/bad, true/false, etc.). Also unrecognized is the extent to which human faculties such as remembering and imagining have been systematically suppressed in the educated Westerner, and variously distorted in others through the colonialism of the English language (see Antonio de Nicolas. Habits of Mind: An Introduction to Clinical Philosophy, 2000).

A critique (In Custody of the Unsaid) of Anita Desai's novel In Custody, suggests that the "unsaid" functions to create meaning in the otherwise meaningless life of her character. By setting up a more concrete binary of meaning and the meaningless, the "unsaid" forces the reader to reevaluate the purpose of communication in an individual context.

(c) Visual arts: The role of the unstated is particularly evident in the use of shadow effects in Japanese interior decoration. Louise Glück also suggests of the "unsaid":

It is analogous to the unseen for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied. There is no moment in which their first home is felt to be the museum.

(d) Media: The term "unsaid" is used as a name for a popular musical group and for a film.

The "unsaid" in philosophy and theology

The "unsaid" in philosophy takes the form of presuppositions, namely whatever hides behind the statements of philosophers or their methods. The greatest "unsaid" is perhaps that in philosophy reason accounts for everything. And yet never is will mentioned as trainable in decision making, although it is the will that makes decisions, not reason. Also "unsaid" is that reason reduces complex situations into veridical ones (of the simplistic form: yes/no, good/bad, true/false, etc.). Also unrecognized is the extent to which human faculties such as remembering and imagining have been systematically suppressed in the educated Westerner, and variously distorted in others through the colonialism of the English language (see Antonio de Nicolas. Habits of Mind: An Introduction to Clinical Philosophy, 2000).

Daniel Fidel Ferrer (Martin Heidegger and the new other beginning (Anfang), 2003) comments on the thinking of one philosopher who has been very attentive to the nature of the "unsaid":

Thinkers can try to overstep their own limitations. Heidegger said, "This again consists in the fact that the thinker can never himself say what is most of all his own. It must remain unsaid, because the sayable (Word, German=Wort) receives its determination from what is not sayable (inexpressible)" (Recollection in Metaphysics, et. p. 77-78)...

What does this mean? Is this some sort of mysticism or it is just another one of those connections between Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Heidegger is driving the point toward the "unsaid" which he uses as a way to get at what thinkers were right on the edge of saying but did not actually say. If we want to say what Heidegger or any other philosopher said, then it is philosophy and not philosophy. If we want to have a live dialogue with another thinker, another philosopher then we bring them into our thinking, our dialogue, our critical confrontation and encounter with the issues for thinking. Not as what is dead and long dead in a thinker, but rather to bring their thinking in close with us. Heidegger wants us to think about the first beginning and the new, other beginning; but we need to see what is also unsaid in Heidegger's thinking. Heidegger started a movement away from the first beginning which started with the Greeks and Platonism, and now on to a new and entirely different beginning. How are these two beginnings related? What is unsaid in Heidegger that points to this relationship? We are attempting to bring out the unsaid in Heidegger and to name this relationship. Although Heidegger is hesitant on this point because as he remarks, this is up to Being and not in our "heads". The unsaid drives us to "speak" but in some ways there are limitations on what we can say, because some part always remains unsaid - we must always attempt to say the unsayable.

Clifton D. Healy (Deconstruction: Derrida, Theology, and John of the Cross, 1994) argues that:

Theology is expressed in fallen language. Philosophy can never attain complete knowledge. Therefore when it comes to God-talk, reverence and humility seem the safest attitudes. Theology needs always to be in encounter with the unsaid, even if only to contradict/correct the said. God is necessarily larger than our understanding of him -- and certainly of our ability to speak accurately of him.

In a remarkable study of silence, Ulrich Schmitz (Eloquent silence, 1994) states:
Symbols can take the place of what is missing. There is even something to take the place of missing symbols: silence becomes their sign. For this reason, there is sometimes something violent about speaking in contrast to silence. ("the said must be torn from the unsaid", remarks Barthes (1985:318) regarding the beginning of discourses, and Gadamer (1986:83-85) describes philosophy as "contindual suffering from a crisis of expression"). But also for this reason, silence cannot be destroyed, despite Marquis de Sade's program to the contrary (to say everything). "For everything could not ever possibly be said." (Ortega y Gasset 1958:338)....

Silence is the path and the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious mind. "Without a doubt, we must open our ears to the unsaid which rests in the gaps in discourse; but this is not a matter of listening to someone knocking on the other side of a wall." (Lacan 1973:152)....

More generally, the degree of ambiguity of a silence is inversely related to the extent to which the context is decoded. If we know the whole context, that is, the exact way in which the border between said and unsaid was drawn, then we know the exact meaning of the individual silence....

"The magnificence of silence in interpersonal relationships is its very ambiguity." (Arlow 1961:51) This observation, said or unsaid, runs through the entire literature on silence....

When one disregards the single instance, that is, the profane, a theoretical problem arises which is never really a problem in the practical use of language. This is the problem of distinguishing between the said and the unsaid, the sayable and the unsayable. At that very point where sacred and profane are to be communicated, Denis Areopagite deals with it as a problem of a dual tradition; on the one hand unsayable and inaccessible, on the other hand logical and demonstrable.

An interesting analysis of philosophical presuppositions is that of W T Jones (The Romantic Syndrome; toward a new methodology in cultural anthropology and the history of ideas. 1961) who explores the unstated pre-logical biases that determine the direction and structure of debate -- before anything is said (see summary in Axes of Bias in Inter-cultural Dialogue, 1993)

The "unsaid" in research

Institutionalized research is almost entirely dependent on the "unsaid" in that explicit reference can seldom be made to the conceptual implications of the rationale of the ideologies through which research funding is approved. Some disciplines have embodied the mindset of their funding sources to a degree which isolates their discourse from those not dependent on such funding.

Increasingly commissioned research may have built into it the "unsaid" requirement of producing the results desired by the sponsor as reinforcement to their ideology and strategy.

Variants of the "unsaid" from other cultures

(a) Non-dit (French): The "non-dit" is a commonly used French term applied both in the arts (for example, Stefan Pollan. How to Say the Non-dit: Disclosing World in Neo-Realist Film. 1999), personal relations, but especially in political and strategic analysis (for example, Stéphane Rozès. Le non-dit de la question sociale, 2003; Alberto B Mariantoni, et al. Le non-dit du conflit israélo-arabe: les clés cachées du problème, 1997; or Abderahmane Hadj Nacer on the origin of capital).

With respect to the strong position taken by Chirac and Schröder on Iraq against the USA, the Nouvel Observateur (L'Irak: la semaine du bras de fer, 13 février 2003) speaks, for example, of the explosive nature of the "non-dit":

La question n'est pas seulement de méthode, puisqu'en moins d'une semaine elle a conduit à des débordements insensés. On a vu de respectables ministres américains invectiver leurs collègues européens, l'Europe se déchirer, l'Otan se bloquer, le Conseil de Sécurité hésiter devant des choix impossibles. Curieuse histoire révélatrice d'un non-dit explosif.

Jérôme Frenkels (La politik du non-dit. 2002) argues:

La politique du non-dit est certainement commode, au sens où elle semble dispenser les responsables politiques des arbitrages populaires toujours incertains. Cependant, la politique reste la politique, et la démocratie impose un certain niveau d'interactivité entre le peuple et le gouvernement. Ce n'est pas seulement une question de principe : c'est aussi la garantie qu'une politique, si elle est acceptée sur le principe, pourra être menée à son terme. Rien n'est plus bête que de voir échouer une bonne réforme, simplement parce qu'on aura omis de la préparer avec ceux qu'elle concerne... et de la présenter pour ce qu'elle est.

For Lucien Poirier (La Crise des Fondements) of the Institut de Stratégie Comparée:

Contraire aux idées reçues, le débat stratégique a donc eu lieu en France. Qu'il ait nourri les équivoques, que le non-dit ait brouillé la critique et obscurci le discours, cela est indéniable.

Céline Gaudin (L'Eloge du Vide) of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, argues with respect to the Japanese understanding of emptiness:

Il y avait dans le vide, tel qu'il est pensé dans la culture nipponne, un espace qui n'est pas chaos. Le vide est élément d'un ordre global,
admis, respecté, bref apprové. “Les parois irisées d'une bulle forment la bulle au même titre que le vide qu'elle contient”, selon Mishima qui modernise ici avec bonheur l'exemple de la cruche immortalisée par Laotsé. Ainsi, un haïku porte toujours en lui le silence, le non-dit, (la forme est pour le moins laconique) mais ce vide nourrit le poème au même titre que ce qu'il dit explicitement.

Edmund Pascual (Le pragmatique de l'échange diplomatique. International Conference on Language and Diplomacy, Malta, 2001) reviews the role of the "non-dit" in diplomatic speech, where he distinguishes between presupposition and sous-entendu:

Une autre approche de l'acte de parole consiste à s'interroger non seulement sur ce qui est dit, sur la manière de le dire, mais aussi sur ce qui n'est pas dit, et qui a parfois autant d'efficacité que ce qui est dit.

Un premier élément, qui est indispensable pour rendre efficace un acte de parole dans une communication est la notion de présupposé. Les présupposés sont tous les faits, les notions, les réalités que l'émetteur et le récepteur du message ont en commun et qu'il n'est pas nécessaire de répéter ou de rappeler pour que la communication ait lieu.

Le sous-entendu est, au contraire, le résultat d'une interprétation de ce qui vient d'être dit. On peut considérer qu'il rejoint la notion d'acte perlocutoire dans la mesure où il traduit une intentionnalité qui n'est pas clairement affichée. On comprendra que cette nécessaire interprétation du sous-entendu soit toujours plus ou moins aléatoire. Elle fait partie de ce que toute communication comporte de problématique, de subjectif. Ne reposant sur l'examen d'aucun trait objectif observable dans ce qui vient d'être dit elle est toujours sujette à caution. Il n'est pas abusif de dire que le déchiffrage de la parole diplomatique nécessite plus que toute autre un recours à l'interprétation des sous-entendus, le danger étant qu'on en vienne au procès d'intention, qui attribue à l'interlocuteur des intentions qu'il n'a pas.

The implication of the "non-dit" with respect to colonial exploitation of North America is explored by Elise Marienstras (Le Traité de Paris de septembre 1783: traité international ou naissance d'une nation? 2001)

On verra surtout que s'amorcait dans le non-dit du traité une nouvelle formule coloniale (la spoliation faite aux Indiens) dont on oublié trop souvent qu'elle fut elle-même le résultat de la première des indépendances coloniales. Ce non-dit, il joua, non sans mal, mais à l'encontre de toutes les valeurs proclamées, en faveur de la croissance de la jeune nation dont l'avenir était déjà tracée dans les trois étapes de sa naissance

With respect to the construction of the European Union, M. Arkoun (Pour une politique de l'espérance dans l'Union Européenne) argues (provisionally) that:

La construction en cours de l'Union européenne (U.E.) n'utilise pas encore toutes les ressources historiques, scientifiques, philosophiques, spirituelles dont elle dispose pour dépasser les préoccupations gestionnaires limitées à l'espace européen. Il n'y a pas encore de discours européen capable de soulever l'âme des peuples non seulement de l'Europe elle-même, mais également tous les peuples de l'espace méditerranéen en quête de salut politique depuis 1945. La responsabilité politique et culturelle de la nouvelle Europe (U. E.) ne pourra être pleinement assumée que si la page coloniale et celles des États-nations nées après les libérations des années 1950 sont écrites et vécues comme des parcours historiques indissociables des souverainetés européennes depuis le 19e siècle. Nous sommes très loin de cette exigence qui est d'abord scientifique et éducative puisqu'il s'agit de réécrire et d'enseigner une histoire jusqu'ici fragmentée, idéologisée, travestie, refoulée dans le non dit, l'impensé, l'incompatible aussi bien dans les discours officiels que ceux des historiographies nationales qui nourrissent les manuels scolaires. Cet usage de l'histoire et des cultures est largement confirmé par la prédominance des échanges polis, sentimentaux, syncrétiques dans les dialogues des religions et des cultures.

And with respect to the emergence of a post-Kosovo, reframed version of NATO, a text of the Institut de Stratégie Comparée (Un second système otanien verra-t-il le jour ?, 20 avril 1999) indicates:

Deuxième niveau, un reste de méfiance, plus ou moins sourde, que l'on s'efforce pourtant de ne pas déclarer pour éviter de mettre en péril l'Europe commerciale, financière, économique et monétaire. Mais le non-dit accumulé ne permet pas de faire progresser ce qui ne peut et ne veut avancer de concert.

(b) Honne (Japanese): Considerable attention has been given to the contrast in Japanese culture between "tatemae" as the explicit stated reality of a situation, and "honne" as the unspoken reality of that situation. The latter may be skillfully and deliberately concealed behind a façade [more]. Honne is deep motive or intention, while tatemae refers to motives or intentions that are socially-shaped, encouraged, or suppressed by majority norms. The former would only be expressed privately (if at all), whereas the latter may be expressed openly. Aspects of international relations have been reviewed in the light of these contrasts. Covering up self-interest with lip service is a global, time-honored tradition practiced by statesmen [more | more]


The terms honne (real intention) and tatemae (open statement) are mutually exclusive. Honne is the information that is left in the background, and that is only accessible to those in whose personal interest it is to keep it within their own group. Informal, if
nonetheless institutionalized, bargaining belongs in this category. Homme sometimes reveals itself to the outside world by the eruption of a högen (irresponsible utterance) or a shitsugen (slip of the tongue). The results of bargaining, together with official documents, mostly represent tacitae. Tacitae is thus what is openly shown.

To convey homme, the Japanese use a means of communication called haragei or ishin-denshin (mind-to-mind communication)...

Although haragei implies saying one thing but meaning another...[it is claimed] that those who understand Japanese culture will also understand the difference

(c) "Non detto" (Italian): According to Gianni Tibaldi (private communication) the Roman Law connects the meanings of "unsaid" to the problem of "showing the will". The will, in fact, may be:

- "shown" by behaviour (like "action") but not "expressed"
- expressed directly by words, signs or gestures
- "tacit", that is expressed indirectly by an attitude meaningful
- "implicit" when we are able to infer unequivocally the will from the content of an expression that doesn't shows directly the will.

"Silence" is considered a lack of any form of expression, meaning an "absolute void of will". Unless an agreement or a law attributes to the silence a meaning, in which case the silence represents a form not of tacit but direct expression. From a global-psychological context the meanings of "unsaid" and "silence" appear broader. "Usaid" then refers to a kind of action (negative) to which corresponds the Latin word "tacere" that originally meaning "to hide" or "to secrete" while the 'silence" refers to a condition of quietness or noiseless. "Unsaid" is a category of language; "silence" is a category of the body and the environment (time and space). Both "unsaid" and "silence", in any case, belong to the communication world and so the value and effectiveness of the messages depend not only on the intention (conscious or unconscious) of the subject who expresses or is silent, but on the disposition or attitude of the subject to whom the message is addressed and whose interpretation is conclusive. Exactly for this raison the Roman Law defines the "tacit expression" as a "conclusive attitude".

As might be expected, Italian poetry also addresses the "unsaid" (see La poesia del non detto; Giuseppe Signorelli Non detto e dintorni). With respect to humanism:

È quell'immensità di "non detto" che mi attira magneticamente da sempre, come un pericoloso abisso di verità, che è mio compito esplorare. In quell'abisso di "non detto" e "non scritto" sono sepolti gran parte dei pensieri, delle parole, dei sentimenti delle donne: delle mie compagne. Quando penso a tutto ciò che scrivo non potrà mai recuperare quel mare di silenzio che tace nella mia anima, eredità di tutte le donne che sono state prima di me. (In risposta a Perché non mi piace "Umanesimo", di Emilia Sonni Dolce)

And in the arts with respect to music: "L'attenzione fluttuante va affinata in senso musicale per raccogliere le comunicazioni sonore ma non verbali che veicolano preziosi frammenti di non detto" (see Antonio Di Benedetto. Prima della parola: L'ascolto psicoanalitico del non detto attraverso le forme dell'arte)

With respect to secrecy (Mario Ricciardi. La rilevanza etica del segreto):

Gli usi di 'segreto' cui indulgono alcuni per alludere a qualcosa di ineffabile, impossibile da formulare, sono impropri e hanno al massimo una funzione evocativa. Spesso chi confonde profondità e oscurità tende anche a confondere il non detto nel senso di "ciò che non si vuole dire" col non detto perché non dicibile. Un segreto è sempre "nei confronti" di qualcuno. Ciò detto, è il caso di precisare che, perché possa esser tenuta segreta, non è necessario che la comunicazione sia diretta a una persona in particolare.

(d) Other sources: "umgesagt" (German) notably explored by Heidegger; "Offenes Geheimnis" (German); "non dice" (Italian); "Secret de Polichinelle" (French).

Non-verbal knowledge

(a) Tacit knowledge and implicit learning: Tacit knowledge has been defined as that which enters into the production of behaviors and/or the constitution of mental states but is not ordinarily accessible to consciousness. Tacit (silent) knowledge (Polanyi, 1958/1974) and implicit learning (see Berry [ed.] 1997) have in common the idea of not knowing what you do know or have learned. Although the expression "tacit knowledge" appears to have been introduced by Polanyi, the idea that certain cognitive processes and/or behaviours are undergirded by operations inaccessible to consciousness -- by a cognitive unconscious, as Reber (1995) calls it -- goes back at least as far as Helmholtz's work in the 19th century (Reber 1995, p. 15). A more recent and influential formulation of this basic idea can be found in Ashley (1956). It has been claimed that "tacit knowledge" has been all but hijacked by management gurus, who use it to refer to the stock of expertise within an organization which is not written down or even formally expressed, but may nevertheless be essential to its effective operation. [more | more | more]

(b) Traditional ecological knowledge (or TEK): This is a system of understanding one's environment typical of indigenous peoples. As with tacit knowledge, it may be characterized to a high degree by non-explicated, non-verbal "know-how" rather than explicit "know-of". It is built over generations, as people depend on the land and sea for their food, materials, and culture. TEK is based on observations and experience, evaluated in light of what one has learned from one's elders. People have relied on this detailed knowledge for their survival -- they have literally staked their lives on its accuracy and repeatability.[more]
Implicit and unstated obligations

Relations between people may be characterized, or governed, by unstated obligations, as indicated by these quotations:

> It is the implicit obligations which sometimes are not voiced and which are at least as important. These are in the realm of moral responsibility -- our psychological contracts with one another. Here we enter the door to friendship and love. There is the expectation that we will be honest with one another so that trust can develop. There is the tenor of respect, of accepting one another's differences. (On Partnership)

In a collaborative partnership, any formal contractual obligations are supplemented by a set of implicit obligations (e.g. the Gricean maxims [Grice, 1975]). For example, it is implicitly assumed that a group of peers collaborating on producing a poster will not hit each other! (Whether these obligations are respected by all parties can be very problematic). (Models of Collaboration)

While male persons acquire their identity as 'men' in some black South African communities through circumcision, they acquire their masculinity--and through this, their 'respect'--through sex. They also acquire a set of diffuse, usually unstated, obligations to 'support' their woman by giving them gifts such as clothes, food, and other benefits. [more]

These implicit obligations may be recognized during an adjudication process as unexpressed terms of an agreement. Courts often determine that there are implicit obligations between contracting parties that are not explicitly set forth in writing. [more]

Of great importance in Japanese culture, is the unstated moral debt of gratitude understood by the term giri -- whether in relationships such as master-subordinate, parent-child, husband-wife, brothers-sisters, friends, and sometimes even enemies and business associates. It may involve a self-sacrificing pursuit of the happiness of the other. When acting towards a person to whom one feels giri, one must not take into account one's own suffering when alleviating or helping the other out of a difficult situation.

Implicit requirements for respect

Major significance may be attached in personal relations to a requirement for respect and avoidance of disrespect -- a want of respect or reverence, esteem, civility or courtesy. This may be mutual or asymmetrical. It may only be a mental attitude -- possibly expressed in an impatience of bearing, recognized in the military as "dumb insolence".

Whether in the case of diplomatic protocol, rules of precedence, or interpersonal relations (notably between family or community members), great attention may be given to the phatic communications that are indicative of a level of respect or disrespect -- that may seldom be rendered verbally explicit. This concern is not confined to particular social classes. It may be extremely important in articulating relations amongst gang members and between gangs. [more | more | more].

Conversational implicature

In a series of influential and controversial papers on "conversational implicature", Herbert P Grice (1957, 1968, 1969) has argued that the meaning of a word (or nonnatural sign) in general is a derivative function of what speakers mean by that word in individual instances of uttering it. Conventional theory discourages inquiry into what a particular speaker might mean by a word in a particular utterance -- to understand the utterance it is held to be enough to know what the word "means". But Grice argues that what a word "means" derives from what speakers mean by uttering it -- and he further holds that "what a particular speaker or writer means by a sign on a particular occasion... may well diverge from the standard meaning of the sign" (Grice 1957: 381). [more | more]

In this sense what is implied may well be effectively "unsaid" and highly dependent on contextual implications.


Hidden agendas and conspiracy theories

Reference to "hidden agendas" is a common feature of international relations and conspiracy theories [more | more | more | more | more]:

- Wayne A. Edis, The Hidden Agenda: Negotiations for the Generalized System of Preferences (Brandeis University, 1985, doctoral dissertation) Helen Dwight Reid Award Winners
- John Pilger. Hidden Agendas (New Press, 1999) and Hidden Agenda Behind War on Terror (Mirror, 29 October 2001) [see also website with other writings]
- Sarah Left. Conspiracy theories: From crop circles to politics (Guardian, 21 October 2003)
- Ed Lewis. Hidden Agendas Of The War That Is Not a War, 2001
- Jim Marrs. Rule by Secrecy: The Hidden History That Connects the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons, and the Great Pyramids (Peremnal, 2001)
- Anatoly Verbin. The hidden agenda of Nato's expansion to the east (Contribution to the 8th International Communist Seminar, Brussels, 1999)

(Perennial, 2001)
Deception and lies

Whereas a lie is necessarily explicit, deception is a much broader practice that can include all kinds of deliberately misleading omissions, suggestions, and nonverbal implications. (see Complementary Truth-handling Strategies: Mediating the relationship between the "Last class" and the "Liar class". 2003)

Deception may be especially significant in the case of self-deception, whether in the case of an individual, a professional group, a social class, a nation, or even the international community. An interesting phenomenon in this connection is that of goupthink, notably as it relates to the unstated attitudes governing recognition and evaluation of evidence (see Groupthink: the Search for Archaeoraptor as a Metaphoric Tale: missing the link between "freedom fighters" and "terrorists". 2002).

A classic form of deception gave rise to the notion of "Potemkin Villages". These derive their notoriety from a grand tour by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, of the newly conquered Crimea in 1787. The tour was organized by Prince Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin who is purported to have ensured that Catherine was only exposed to the prosperous villages along the route. Potemkin's critics in the Imperial Court labeled these villages "Potemkin Villages" and claimed that they were actually inhabited by actors (see also Globalization within a Global Potemkin Society. 2000). Some might see a parallel in the US presidential visit to London in November 2003 when the first lady Laura Bush told reporters she had barely noticed the opposition to her husband's state visit: "We've seen plenty of American flags. We've seen plenty of people waving to us -- many, many more people in fact than protesters," she said [more].

In his frustration with Saddam Hussein, George Bush has himself declared: "I'm sick and tired of lies and deception". But the world has subsequently been dismayed to discover that, in the words of Ray McGovern, co-founder of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (USA): "No President has lied so baldly and so often and so demonstrably" (Independent on Sunday, 9 November 2003).

• Front organizations
• Illegal or "black flag" operations

Secrecy and codes of silence

Secrecy ensures that much of relevance to participative, democratic, international policy-making remains "unsaid" -- whether widely rumoured or not. Employment in many organizations, notably governmental and intergovernmental organizations, requires signature of contracts preventing disclosure of information that it is believed should remain "unsaid".

Intelligence gathering: This may be understood as an investment in the unsayable -- for security reasons. The most ambitious national program in democratic societies to this end is that of the US Defense Department's Total Information Awareness program. It has ironic similarities to the invasive surveillance programs deplored by the US in totalitarian societies -- notably the East German Stasi who maintained files on up to 6 million East German citizens, namely one third of the population [more]. The most ambitious international program is Echelon, a global surveillance network that can eavesdrop on every single phone call, fax or e-mail, anywhere on the planet [more | more | more]

Classified information: Extremely large quantities of information are treated as "classified", namely secret, by intergovernmental organizations, national governments (especially their security services), and corporations -- despite different attempts to ease the criteria requiring classification or the length of the period prior to their declassification [more] [more]. Documents may be so held by governments for periods up to 50 years prior to release, although they may be deliberately shredded in anticipation of the release date. The Vatican has maintained secret for centuries its archives relating to the Inquisition [more]. The degree of concern with official secrecy is a clear indication that governance is to a very large degree based on the "unsaid" -- information that is not open to public debate. Valid arguments in justification for such secrecy in particular cases are improperly extended to other cases.

The degree of deception under which national and international politics is conducted is illustrated by the classic case of Daniel Ellsberg who in 1971 acquired notoriety with his release of the 7,000-page Pentagon Papers, a Defense Department study of the USA's sordid involvement in Indochina. [more | more | more]

Codes of silence: according to James E. Lukaszewski (Overcoming Codes of Silence, 1999): "In many situations where reputations are at stake, where serious damage is threatened or has already occurred, there is a human tendency or institutional expectation that silence will be maintained. Ironically, codes of silence become obvious quickly and fuel relentless attacks by outside forces to pierce the veil of secrecy and bring down those responsible. Codes of silence are institutional hiding places." Lukaszewski distinguishes

• A "blue wall" of police silence which only crumbles with enormous public pressure [more].
• A "white wall" of silence cultivated by the medical community when the public or the victim's interest may need and demand disclosure [more] [more].
• A "green wall" of silence among military professionals in relation to civilians deemed to be unworthy of respect.
• A "stone wall" of silence characteristic of the corporate practice to initially deny events and consequences, even when both are readily evident. When forced to confess, the practice is then to say little or nothing.
• An "editorial wall" of silence practiced by the media in response to criticism. Basically if the media decide not to cover an event, it does not exist.

This categorization does not include:

• Codes of silence relating to free speech on campus or within the academic community [more]
• Codes of silence relating to membership of secret societies, whether legal (as in the case of the freemasons) or illegal (as in the case of the mafia code of omerta)
• Codes of silence relating to computer mediated communication [more]
Ignorance, unknowing and nescience

The "unsaid" may be intimately associated with a sense of ignorance of what might be meaningfully said -- rather than with knowledge deliberately withheld. According to David Gray (Wanted: Chief Ignorance Officer, Harvard Business Review, November 2003) ignorance (that he terms nescience) is a new form of knowledge -- and a resource in its own right (see review by Lucy Kellaway. In case you don't know, ignorance is the new knowledge. Financial Times, 1 December 2003). In particular knowledge encourages people to think in well-worn ways, whereas ignorance encourages continual questioning and creativity. To complement approaches to knowledge management, Gray identifies four steps in managing nescience: deferment, prematurity, irrelevance and waste.

For Alexander Schatten, et al (Closing the Gap: From Nescience to Knowledge Management, 2003), there is a case for enhancing the knowledge management process by accentuating the importance of nescience in information and knowledge-centric processes. When knowledge is generated and applied, society proceeds one step higher in system complexity; the nescience, the insecurity increases, new problems arise, and the system risk generally grows. Following Helmut Wille (Dystopia: Studien zur Krisis des Wissens in der modernen Gesellschaft. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 2002), the authors suggest that the "The crisis of knowledge is cognitively driven by the new relevance of nescience". They call for a new concept that accepts the fact that growing knowledge always produces nescience and the management of nescience is the factor of future success. For them:

Following these prepositions, the core idea of the suggested concept is to put the management of the nescience into the center of interest, or in other words: nescience can be expressed in the form of a question. This question shall be the starting point of the knowledge acquisition and management.

Concern with nescience has arisen in relation to environmental sustainability (see Richard C. Bishop and Antony Scott. Nescience and the Safe Minimum Standard of Conservation): "Under nescience, surprises can happen and decision-makers know it. More formally stated, under nescience, alternative future states of the world and associated probabilities are not fully defined. Economic theorists have yet to address choice under nescience.". The authors stress the need for a theory of choice under nescience -- given that nescience is a much more realistic assumption than uncertainty. Their examination of ignorance, ambiguity, unforeseen contingencies, and the precautionary principle showed a rather consistent tendency toward choices that stress caution, guarding against extreme adverse outcomes, and keeping options open.

As a philosopher, Manuel de Diéguez (Science and Nescience) explores the notion of intelligibility and the reasons why the invariant is considered intelligible: "Il s'agissait donc ici, par une spéléologie de la compréhensibilité, de démasquer l'idole fondamentale qu'est 'arbre de la connaissance' en sa copie baptismale et magique de la constance. Peut-être le moment est-il venu de placer, par de modestes moyens, l'humanisme comme la théologie en face d'une critique radicale de leur re-présentation, afin que, par-delà l'univers pléthorique de la prévisibilité, resurgissent la vocation, la tension et le tragique de la transcendance."

The classical philosophical study of ignorance was however that of Nicholas of Cusa (De Docta Ignorantia, 1440) of which Jasper Hopkins has provided a recent translation and appraisal (Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance, 1981/85). For Nicholas such learned ignorance involved "embracing the incomprehensible incomprehensibly". The unknowing which Nicholas discusses has been understood to be not so much an erudite or a wise unknowing (i.e., an unknowing which confers a kind of erudition or wisdom on the one who does not know) as it is simply a recognition-of-limitedness that has been achieved (i.e., an unknowing which has been learned, so that the one who has learned of his unknowing is now among the instructed, rather than remaining one of the unlearned). The emphasis of Nicholas is upon instruction in the way-of-ignorance and that the man of learned ignorance is not thought by Nicholas to be a man of erudition. Nicholas does mainly understand "docta ignorantia" as an ignorance which has been acquired and which distinguishes its possessor from those who are thus uninstructed. Yet, it is equally clear that "the more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be" and that Nicholas also sometimes understands "docta ignorantia" as an ignorance which renders its possessor wise.

At the first UNESCO Philosophy Forum (Paris, 1995) 71 philosophers and specialists from various fields engaged in dialogues to explore the question, "What don't we know?" (see Ayyam Sureau (Ed). What We Do Not Know, 1996)

From a pedagogical perspective, Academia Vixen (The Emperor's Nakedness: Undressing Ignorance in the Classroom, 2003) asks how students might be instructed in ignorance: "This is not to promote stupidity -- something, as we all know, vastly different from ignorance -- but to argue that respect for that which we do not know or think we do is a continuing prerequisite for learning, both in the classroom and beyond". The author criticizes the perspective of Shoshana Felman (Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and
Interminable, *Yale French Studies*, No. 63, 1982) on the issue of teaching and ignorance in psychoanalytic terms where ignorance is likened to an analysand’s “repression” or “resistance” to knowledge -- although ignorance is not not seen as a lack of knowledge, unknowing is characterized in a negative light as “an active refusal of information.” Her question remains as to whether it is possible to teach students not to know, or is knowledge too great a temptation for them, and for us?

A political perspective on the Middle East crisis is offered by Miriam Reik and Fouzi Slisli in terms of *Unknowing what is known* (Al-Ahram, No. 657, 25 Sept. - 1 Oct. 2003).

Stimulated by the challenge of ignorance in relation to health care, the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center (*What is ignorance?*) explores a variety of positive understandings of ignorance. The co-founder, Marlys Witte, indicates there:

> "Ignorance represents all that we have yet to learn and discover -- from an individual or collective viewpoint and shifting over time. You cannot learn what you already 'know' -- although you may have to unlearn some things, and you cannot discover something you've already found - although you may occasionally rediscover something you've misplaced or forgotten. Also, ignorance -- i.e., unanswered questions -- is the raw material of knowledge, and (current) knowledge is the raw material of (future) ignorance, i.e., answers and questions shift with time and the accumulation of answers.

The value of ignorance in a group dynamic situation has been explored in the *International School of Ignorance*, meeting occasionally since the 1980s (see also Anthony Blake. *A Self-Organizing Group in Dialogue*, 1994). This process was also associated with the emergence of a *School of Unknowing* -- in the light the medieval mystical treatises grouped under that name [more]. An online agnostic *International University of Nescience* has also emerged.

According to spiritual traditions, nescience is the "force which prevents wisdom shining from within, that is that which holds it in latency." (see Ramjee Singh *From Nescience to Omniscience*) For Singh, from a Jain perspective, for example: "In short, nescience or avidya is at the root of all evils and the cause of worldly existence". In the *Bhagavad Gita* (5, 15): "When, however, one is enlightened with the knowledge by which nescience is destroyed, then his knowledge reveals everything, as the sun lights up everything in the daytime", [Vedanta perspective on *avidya*]. But for Dionysius the Areopagite (*Mystical Theology*):

> Unknowing, or agnosis, is not ignorance or nescience as ordinarily understood, but rather the realization that no finite knowledge can fully know the Infinite One, and that therefore it is only truly to be approached by agnosis, or by that which is beyond and above knowledge.

Again, poetically expressed by T S Eliot (*Four Quartets: East Coker*, 1940):

> In order to arrive at what you do not know  
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
> In order to possess what you do not possess  
> You must go by the way of dispossession.  
> In order to arrive at what you are not  
> You must go through the way in which you are not.  
> And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
> And what you own is what you do not own  
> And where you are is where you are not.

Much of this poem is recognized to be a literary borrowing -- expressed in poetic form -- from maxims formulated by St John of the Cross [more].

**Via negativa and mysticism**

The whole range of mystical experience in the period of Dionysius the Areopagite, Master Eckhart et alia is characterized by what theologians have termed the *via negativa*, that can also usefully be understood as one way of responding to the "unsaid". This is the approach to God through negation, a commonplace of all mysticism, whether Eastern or Western. From this perspective, no predicates attach to God; no words may legitimately be used to describe him. In stripping from the mind all its delusions about God it is prepared for the truth, and in eliminating all that is not God, there is a penetration to the heart of the mystery. An analogous approach is recognized in relation to the *Upnishads*, as in the expression neti-neti (not this, not this) in response to the reality of all that is affirmed. In this context the "unsaid" is the ground of mysticism. It relates also to the expression of St. John of the Cross as the "silencio sonoro" (sounding silence) and the beautiful Dark Night (see Antonio de Nicolas. *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, 1995). San Juan de la Cruz called this poem "Songs of the soul delighted at having reached the high state of perfection, the union with God, by way of spiritual negation."

As reviewed by Nicholas Colloff, Michael A. Sells (*Mystical Languages Of Unsaying*, 1994), explores how selected mystical writers use language to body forth that inexpressible reality and its contours. Each language demonstrates a use of patterns of 'apophasis' (namely 'speaking away'). Apophasic theology has been described as a way of 'negation' and in this has been set opposite 'kataphatic' theology as a way of 'affirmation'. 'Apophasis' may however be understood not as a direct negation of prior affirmative statement but as a way of 'unsaying' them. 'Kataphatic' theology is then the necessary context in which 'apophasis' can take place. Apophasis is then a language of double statements, although each of the writers explored recognises the tendency to fix only upon the single statement to the neglect of
its twin -- so each double statement must be placed within further statements in order to achieve an infinite regress, a referential openness rather than defining the referent. This referential openness in the text evokes the openness and vulnerability to the ultimate necessary to practice the 'perpetual transformation'. As Colloff concludes, texts of this kind are performative. They are designed to 'trigger' in the reader a comprehension of the way of being that the text itself mirrors.

The unmentionable and the unsayable

- **Humour:** Explaining a joke takes all the fun out of it. It is widely recognized that it is impossible to explain why something's funny to people who don't get it. They focus on elements which to them seem meaningless, but are indeed the very fabric of the joke. The explanation may convey why it was, in fact, a joke, and what the point of the joke was, but it takes much longer than the joke did, and it rarely helps someone appreciate the joke as fully as they would have if they had just understood it in the first place. As argued by Isaac Asimov: "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a live frog. The exact workings are discovered but the thing dies in the process".

- **Quality of affection:** Even poets have struggled vainly to express the quality of affection they feel, whether for people or for aesthetic experiences.

- **Euphemism:** To avoid use of expressions which are harsh, blunt, or offensive, a mild, indirect, or vague term may be used instead, namely a way of describing an offensive thing by an inoffensive expression. In some circles the offensive expression may be considered inappropriate and therefore unsayable.

- **Political criticism:** Many countries have some degree of censorship regarding political criticism deemed to be inappropriate (notably of the leadership in a dictatorship). The content of such criticism thus is effectively unsayable in public, whether or not it is acceptable in private.

- **Unsayable words:** The media are attentive to the circumstances under which offensive expressions must be censored.

- **Unnamed God:** Some religions avoid naming their god, or only permit the name to be used by special people under appropriate circumstances. The Taoist classic the Tao Te Ching starts with the phrases: "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name"

- **Secret personal name:** People may be given secret names in certain cultures, possibly after appropriate rites of initiation. That name can then only be used under special circumstances.

- **Unsayable nature of the sacred:** The sacred may be understood as being part of the unsayable dimension of human experience and, according to Gregory Bateson for example, must remain such. This is in part a way of indicating what it is -- as something which is beyond facile descriptions [more].

Unasked and unanswered questions

Social and other pressures, including secrecy, ensure that many questions remain unasked or unanswered that pertain to what is "unsaid" (see, for example, Questions to which Many deserve Answers, 2000; 911+ Questions in Seeking UnCommon Ground and protecting the Middle Way, 2001). Political, and other forms of, discourse may be structured to avoid drawing attention to those questions.

This phenomenon has been particular evident in the case of events associated with the "war on terrorism" (see for example Harry Browne. The Unasked Questions. 29 January 2003; William Raspberry. Unasked Questions. The Washington Post, 30 September 2002).

It was also evident in the case of Kosovo (see for example, Philip Hammond. The Unasked Questions: Reporting of the war in Yugoslavia has been strong on rhetoric and short on genuine attempts to get at the truth. Times, 9 April 1999).

It has also applied in the case of other sets of issues (see for example David C. Korten. UNCED: Unasked Questions. 15 April 1991; Alex Kirby. Foot-and-mouth: the unasked questions. BBC, 21 January 2002)

Repression of memory

1. **Historical memory:** Collective memory of past tragedies and shameful massacres, possibly interpreted by some as acts of genocide, may be subject to repression and denial by later political forces (as, for example, with Central America and Armenia) -- or because it is too painful for people who have to live with those who may have been involved in their perpetration (as in post-francist Spain) [more].

2. **Individual memory:** In this case the focus is on the tendency of people who have experienced abuse in their early childhood to be subject to repressed memory syndrome under which they deny having been exposed to such abuse. Misguided exploration of this phenomenon, resulting in false accusations, has led to recognition of False Repressed Memory Syndrome.

Open secret: partial acknowledgement of the "unsaid"

Much that is "unsaid" publicly may take the form of rumour, anecdote and corridor gossip. This may be referenced under the French term (Secret de Polichinelle) or the German term (Offenes Geheimnis):

- **Curtailment of human rights:** The response to terrorism has resulted in a major curtailment of human rights and liberties in the name of those same rights and liberties

- **Torture:** According to Joan Simalchik (The Politics of Torture: Dispelling the Myths and Understanding the Survivors, 1995): "There remains a perception that torture is practiced randomly, that it is punishment carried to an extreme, that it is performed by psychopaths or sadists, that it exists outside of governmental responsibility and is practiced by "less civilized" societies. Compounding the problem is a wall of sustained disbelief that prevents full comprehension of the enormity of this gross human rights violation. Most people simply try to avoid the topic entirely... However, the intentional use of terror generates defensive
reactions in people and "cognitive dissonance" develops. When torture is practiced as official policy with the calculated purpose of precipitating fear, social reality becomes distorted. Because torture is practiced in secret and its use is always denied, truth is perverted and devalued. Ignacio Martín-Baro, the Jesuit psychologist who was assassinated by the Salvadoran military in November 1989, described the phenomenon of "circles of silence" that are created as a direct consequence of the social denial surrounding massive repression. A progressive distancing occurs which transposes the authentic situation from immediate overt consciousness.”

- **Problematic aspects of progress:** There is a marked tendency to avoid any reference to the problematic aspects of initiatives that have been presented as singularly positive. This "positive" attitude may result in the suppression of information on problems that later prove to be disastrous (as with the Challenger space shuttle disaster).

- **Questionable progress:** In 2002 the UNDP Human Development Report indicated that 54 countries were poorer than in 1990, life expectancy had decreased in 34 countries in that period, whilst hunger had increased in 21 countries.

- **Censorship:** Despite efforts at censorship, some projects endeavour to point to items of news whose dissemination has been curtailed. These include: Index on Censorship and Project Censored (a media research group out of Sonoma State University which tracks the news published in independent journals and newsletters). The UK member of the Save the Children group was subjected to gagging measures by its USA counterpart concerning constraints on the group's activities in Iraq (see Kevin Maguire. How British charity was silenced on Iraq, Guardian, 28 November 2003).

- **Unaccountable power mongers:** Concern has been expressed at the undue influence of bodies of whose existence and role few are aware (eg Club of Rome, Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission, Davos Forum, Pinay Circle, etc). In the case of the Carlyle Group, known as the Ex-Presidents' Club, because of the number of former world leaders it employs (including George Bush Sr, John Major, James Baker, Afsaneh Masheyeckhi), among the companies it owns are those which make equipment, vehicles and munitions for the US military. The first president Bush is understood to have visited the Binladins in Saudi Arabia twice on the firm's behalf. [more | more].

- **Corruption:** This is widely and unofficially acknowledged to different degrees in many countries, although the level of corruption may not be publicly or officially reported as assiduously as Transparency International (Global Corruption Report, 2003) has been able to do. It was long (and falsely) claimed by industrialized countries, and intergovernmental organizations, to be primarily confined to developing countries.

- **Slavery:** The extent of the continuing existence of slavery in a variety of forms (see L'esclavage, un secret de Polichinelle. L'Humanité, 16 avril 2001)

- **Delayed reporting:** Information may be made publicly available long after the issues described were known to some, thus ensuring that it is effectively "unsaid" during a period when this omission can be best used to advantage. This is typically the case with reports of public official inquiries.

- **Usurping democratic processes:** The questionable procedures associated with the election of the current president of the USA, have been matched by the contortions of the UK government with regard to consulting the population concerning adoption of the euro.

### Denial of the "unsaid"

A widespread response to any attempt to draw attention to the "unsaid" is through denial. This is notably evident with respect to:

- **environment policy** as, for example, in the State of Denial.

- **denial of responsibility** as, for example, argued by James Henry Graf (A Nation in Denial, 2002): "America is a nation in denial, the dominant force in a world that daily closes its eyes to the hard realities of corruption, discrimination, and outrageously specious rationalization. There are things no major publication dares to print, no major broadcaster dares to discuss". (See also: Willima Blum. Myth and Denial in the War on Terrorism. Counterpunch, 12 August 2003; Justin Raimondo, Necons in Denial: It's a 'conspiracy theory' to blame neocons for the war - even though they spent the last decade agitating for it. 30 April 2003); Paul Krugman. Denial and Deception. New York Times, 24 June 2003; Fiachra Gibbons. US 'is an empire in denial'. Guardian, 2 June 2003)

- **genocide denial** and notably holocaust denial [more | more | more]

- **disease denial** and notably holocaust denial [more | more | more]

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