

Poem Link - [Two Theories of the Unconscious by Charles Baxter |... | Poetry Magazine](#)

In “Two Theories of the Unconscious” by Charles Baxter, Baxter gives two interpretations as to how the human unconscious behaves. His first interpretation claims that humans are inherently kind, selfless people whose benevolent interests are coerced into selfishness by societal endeavors, such as the increase of wealth, and thanatos, or the human proclivity to death. Baxter’s second theory speaks to the idea that humans aren’t inherently kind or selfless, but instead commit kind actions unto one another inadvertently, as a byproduct of “certain dreams / whose childish joy flows / formally out of nowhere,” (Baxter, lines 14-16). In this interpretation, Baxter also introduces the idea of a rank system, in which society “builds pedestals / and puts / pedestals on top of them,” implying that humans aren’t innately kind as a consequence of social class and positioning (21-23). In both notions, Baxter claims that reproduction is not integrated into the human mind, but rather is a concept that has been abstracted from its primal nature; in the first it’s held as something humans merely know of, while in the second it’s treated as a “sublimated play,” or the abstracted version of its instinctual origin (19). At first glance, Baxter establishes a dichotomy with these notions, citing that the first is the idea that humans are intrinsically benevolent beings while the second is the idea that humans are inadvertently kind beings, focused on position. However, it can be argued that both theories are functionally equivalent.

Baxter treats humans as naturally selfless creatures in his first theory and unintentionally selfless in his second. While this may seem like contrasting ideas, they are actually identical. The fact that a human can perform kindhearted deeds “accidentally” implies that humans, by nature, are good-willed (11). As such, it logically holds that humans, to some degree, are altruistic, even in his second theory of unconsciousness. This immediately establishes a parallel between the two

theories, which is carried on in Baxter's views on human reproduction in both. As aforementioned, both theories treat human reproduction as a secondary thought or unnecessary process in the personal unconscious. The first theory simply treats reproduction as nothing more than additional human knowledge, and the second treats it as gratuitous ideal humans can seek once at a higher status. Furthermore, both theories promote the idea that society detracts from human benevolence, using the idea of social comeuppance as a rationale for human selfishness. These ideas portray the fact that both of Baxter's theories occur in parallel and, despite their seemingly disparate interpretations, bring forth the ideas of natural altruism and the implicit goodwill of the human unconscious mind.