Revising the Boundaries of the Unconscious

A Phenomenological (Re-)Conceptualization of the Unconscious in the Tension between Depth and Height Psychology

Abstract

Sigmund Freud developed foundational models of the unconscious that continue to shape the understanding of human existence to this day - within psychoanalysis as well as in psychotherapy, phenomenology, and psychiatry. Viktor Frankl takes up this understanding but shifts its anthropological premises and expands it, within the framework of his dimensional ontology, by introducing a noetic dimension that includes a spiritual unconscious. Phenomenology, too, has critically received the Freudian concept of the unconscious and reinterpreted it from the perspective of its own methodological assumptions.

The present study employs phenomenological approaches both methodologically and substantively to revisit the still not fully clarified debate between Freud and Frankl at the boundary between consciousness and the unconscious, and to develop from it an integrative, non-reductive understanding of the unconscious. The study is based on a phenomenological-hermeneutic re-reading of central writings by both authors following Hans-Georg Gadamer.

This theoretical line of inquiry culminates in an existential-phenomenological analysis of the experience of limit situations in the sense of Karl Jaspers, which become increasingly relevant in practice. Using the example of separation, processes of self-assurance, failure, repression, and the struggle for self-respect become visible for the subject across all levels of the anthropological three-dimensionality of human existence (somatic, psychic, noetic). The presentation introduces part of the author’s ongoing dissertation at Heidelberg University under the supervision of Thomas Fuchs.