

A phenomenological perspective on the unconscious

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Abstract

This paper uses the focus on the unconscious of classical psychoanalysis to bridge the theoretical perspectives of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. To this end Freud's theorizing of the unconscious is dialogued with phenomenological understandings. The paper is built around a number of seminal phenomenological concepts: Heidegger's view of man as embedded in his relatedness to his world, Fischer's research on self deception, and Merleau-Ponty's conceptualizations of man as both the subject of experience and the experience itself. Self-awareness is characterized by a central 'blindness' due to experience being initially lived pre-linguistically. As a central feature of the dynamic unconscious, repression, a form of self-deception, is based on our need to keep unknown to ourselves that which is already known through our symptoms and lived experience. A phenomenological understanding highlights that the unconscious is both the ground of experience and that through which experience is known. These concepts convey that we live embedded in already given meanings due to our relatedness to a shared world, but these meanings cannot always be authentically faced. Despite our defensive attempts to deny or negate these meanings we inevitably live these in the pre-reflective foundation of our experience. A clinical vignette is provided to illustrate this phenomenological understanding.