



Body Memory and the Unconscious

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René Magritte:
“La reproduction interdite”



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

The problem of the “un-conscious”

Consciousness as the sphere of mere semblance (*Schein*)
or as the sphere of manifestation (*Erscheinung*)



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

“What I do not 'know', what in my experience, my imagining, thinking, doing, is not present to me as perceived, remembered, thought, etc., will not 'influence' my mind. And what is not in my experience, be it ignored or implicitly-intentionally decided, does not motivate me even unconsciously.”

(Husserl, Ideas II)



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Common starting point:

Cartesian view of consciousness as "clear and distinct perception"

assumption that consciousness is fully transparent to itself

"... a consciousness of which one knows nothing seems to me many times more absurd than a psychic unconscious" (Freud 1940).



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis and embodiment

“The ego is primarily a body ego” (Freud 1923)

Drives are not phenomena of the lived body, but objective-somatic quantities.

Psyche as an inner, hidden apparatus

The Ego is separated from important parts of the psyche through radical ignorance: the dynamic unconscious, according to Freud, is fundamentally different from the preconscious.



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Freud discovered a paradox, namely that one "knows something that one simultaneously does not know" and that "one is struck with blindness while the eyes see" (Freud 1957).

But then he dissolved the paradox by splitting the psyche into two parts.

Problem: How should the subject be in the position to re-appropriate such an alien meaning, unless it was always *his own meaning*?



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Phenomenological critique:

- 1) Sartre conceived the unconscious as bad faith or "mauvaise foi": The subject assumes an ambivalent relationship to himself, sliding into an "intentional inattention".

One doesn't know something and doesn't want to know it; one doesn't see something and doesn't want to see it, and in this way becomes the deceived and the deceiver at the same time.



Introduction: Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis

Phenomenological critique:

2) Ambiguity of the lived body (Plessner, Merleau-Ponty)

→ looking for the unconscious in bodily behavior, in day-to-day living and in the structures of a person's lived space

an unconscious not in the vertical dimension, in the depths of the psyche, but rather in the horizontal dimension of the lived body and its relation to others

Implicit or body memory



Outline

1. Body memory
2. Lived space
3. The embodied unconscious



1) Implicit or Body Memory

Body memory: totality of bodily capacities, habits, and dispositions as they have developed in the course of one's life

Well-practiced patterns of movement and perception have been embodied as skills or capacities that we apply in our everyday lives as a matter-of-course.

Body memory is not directed towards the past, but rather enacts it without conscious remembering.

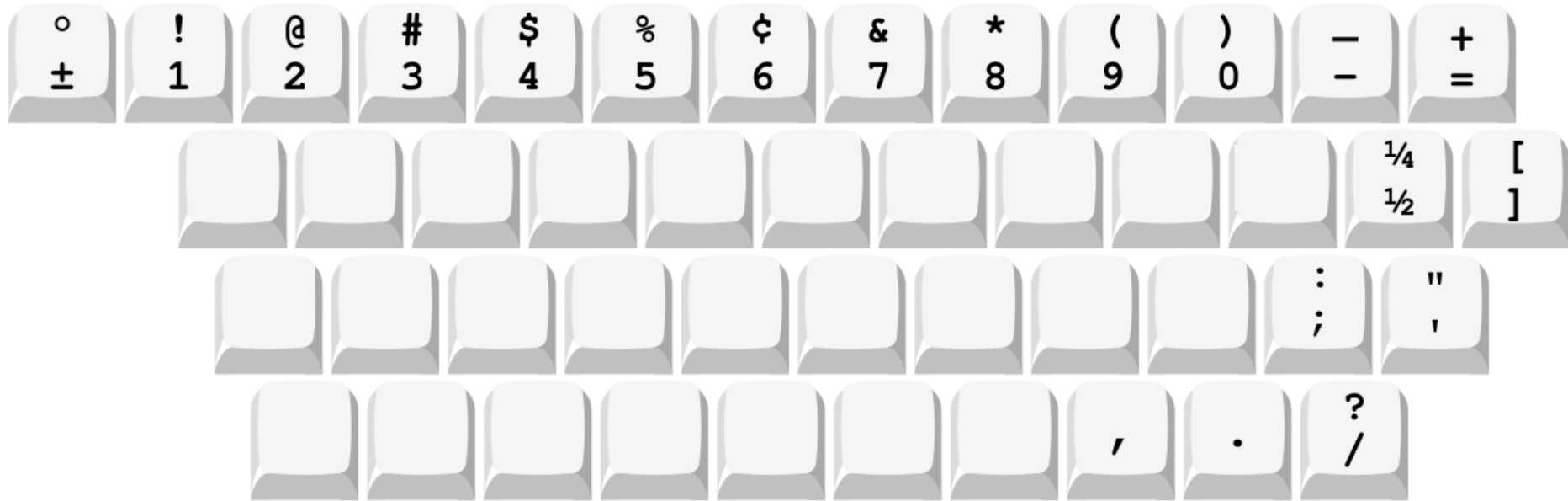


1) Body Memory

The lived body is thus the ensemble of acquired and organically developed capacities to perceive, to act, to desire and to communicate.

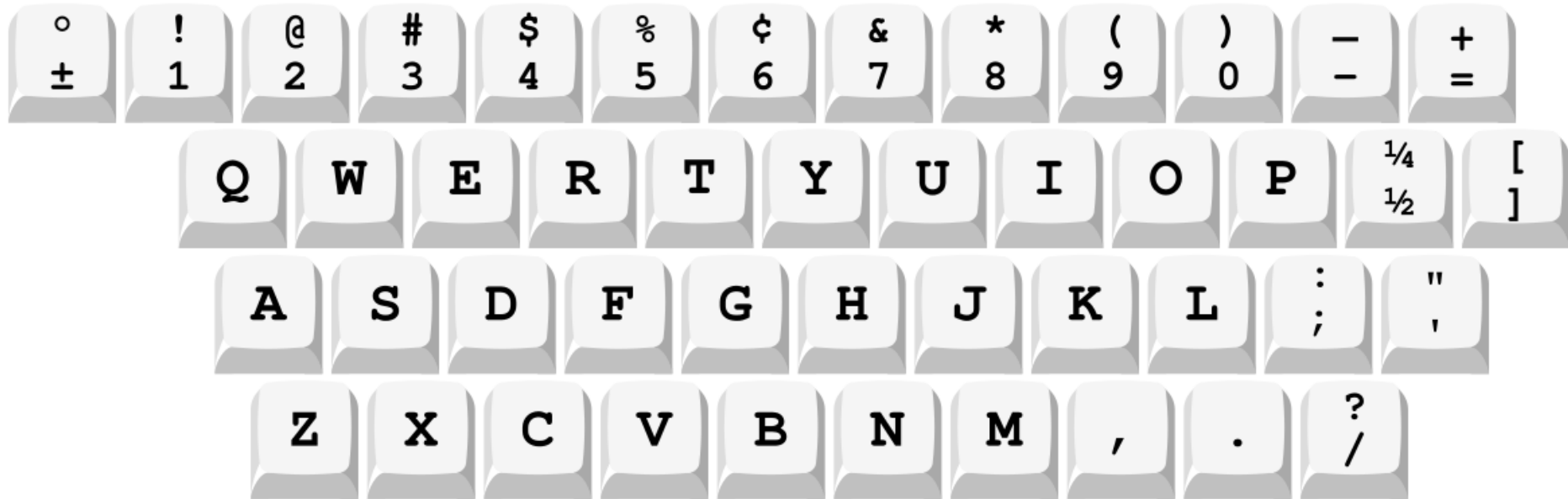


Embodied Knowledge





Embodied Knowledge





1) Body Memory

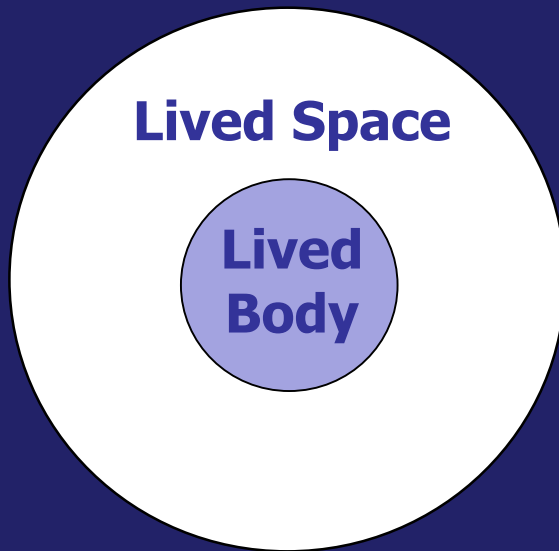
Intercorporeal memory: In the structures of bodily experience and resonance, the others are always already included.

"I do not have to search very far for others: I find them in my experience, lodged in the hollows that show what they see and what I fail to see (...) We are in no way locked inside ourselves." (Merleau-Ponty 1973)



2) Body Memory and Life Space

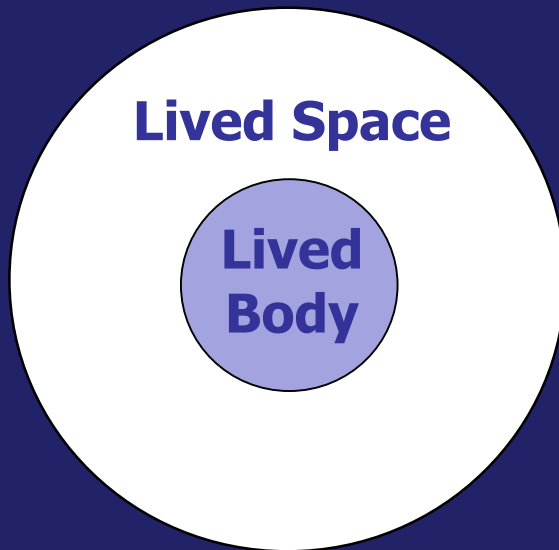
Kurt Lewin (1936):
Topological or field psychology



- totality of the space that a person pre-reflectively inhabits and experiences
- centered on person and body
- qualities: vicinity/distance, wideness/narrowness, connection/separation, attainability, etc.
- structured by physical or symbolic boundaries



2) Life Space



- domains, territories
- permeated by „field forces“, for example attraction – repulsion
- conflicting tendencies or possibilities
- shows effects of „gravitation“, „radiation“, „curvatures of space“





Lived Space and Body Memory

Field structures are based on body memory

From birth on, body memory incorporates an extract of typical experiences with others, thus acquiring dyadic patterns of interaction or “schemes of being-with” (Stern 1985)

→ “implicit relational knowing” (Stern, Lyons-Ruth 1998)



Lived Space and Body Memory

“The burnt child dreads the fire” or “once bitten twice shy”

pain memory, leading to unconscious avoidance

zones of prohibition and interdiction

Psychopathology:

zones of avoidance (anxiety disorders),

zones of impurity or taboo (OCD)



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Unconscious in the *horizontal* dimension of the lived body and the lived space

Such an unconscious would be found "... not in our innermost sphere behind the back of 'consciousness', but before us as the structure of our field" (Merleau-Ponty 1986).

It would be the unrecognized reverse side of our embodied being-towards-the-world, its hidden tendency or meaning.



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Field structure of a repressed wish: Heinrich von Kleist, "*Der Brantweinsäufer und die Berliner Glocken*" (The brandy drinker and the bells of Berlin)

An alcoholic soldier, after insistent preaching and punishment, had solemnly resolved to become abstinent from now on. Yet after only three days he was found completely drunk again. Asked how this relapse could have happened after all his good resolutions, the soldier justified himself by saying that ...



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Field structure of a repressed wish: Heinrich von Kleist, "*Der Brantweinsäufer und die Berliner Glocken*" (The brandy drinker and the bells of Berlin)

... the devil must have had his hand in it because while walking through the town he began to hear the names of various brandies and liquors in the tolling of the bells - for example "*Kümmel! Kümmel!*", in the ringing of the town hall bell, "*Pommeranzen, Pommeranzen*" in the ringing cathedral bell, and so on. In the end, he could not help being defeated by these insidious sounds.



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Hidden role of the lived body in Polanyi's (1967) terms:

The lived body and its desires are the *proximal component* of the perceptual or affective field, and the perceived situation is the *distal* component; the proximal component recedes from awareness in favour of the distal.

→ We perceive the situation through the medium of the body.



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

The experiential field is, so to speak, permeated by a suppressed bodily desire which finally becomes crystallised around certain perceptions.

Mechanism of displacement (Verschiebung):

What is actually desired is fulfilled in the perceptual field through something similar but less prohibited.



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

"Freudian slips“:

mishearing, misplacing, misspeaking, forgetting, etc.

"...slips are the result of two different intentions which interfere with one another, of which one can be called the disturbed and the other the disturbing intention."

(Freud 1940)

In all these cases, a latent intention wins through in spontaneous bodily enaction – in a reversal or a chiasm which is expressed by the prefix "mis-".



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

"If later we present it [the intention on which the mis-speaking was based] to the speaker, he may either acknowledge it as something familiar, so that it was only temporarily unconscious, or he may deny it as alien to himself, which means that it was permanently unconscious." (Freud 1940)

→ categorical distinction between the preconscious and the dynamic unconscious which is repressed or excluded from consciousness "by living forces" (Freud 1943).



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Does this justify establishing a special intrapsychic space for the dynamic unconscious?

Analogies in the bodily or lived space:

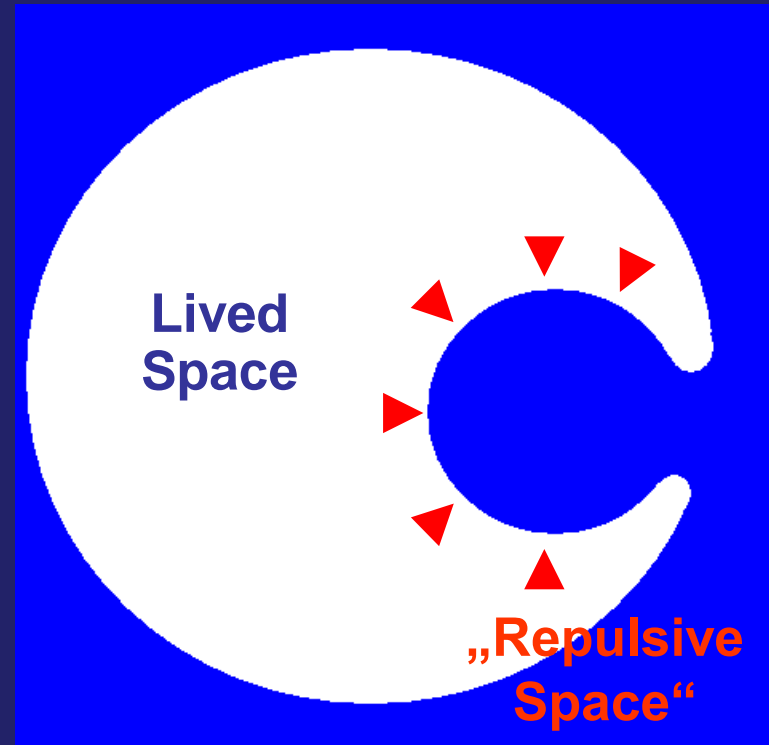
- Relieving posture after bodily injuries: avoidance incorporated in body memory
- Zones of prohibition
- Zones or objects of taboo: negative curvature of the shared life space around what is excluded



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

The repelling forces remain co-extensive with the experiential field, but as its negative.

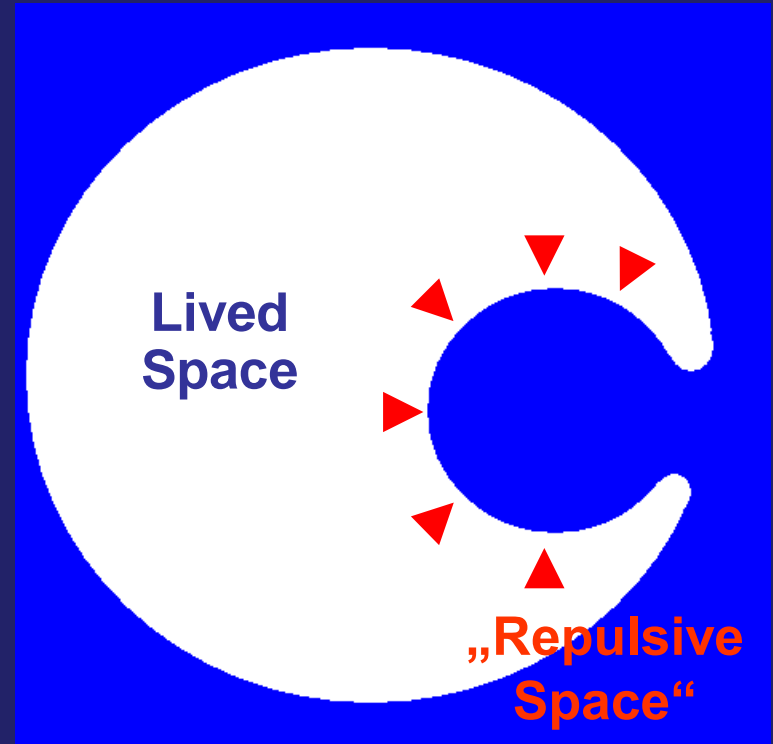
The manifest feelings of fear, guilt or shame which arise on stepping beyond the barriers were already latently present before, endowing these barriers with their unpleasant affective loading.





3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

This means an *ambiguity or duplicity of consciousness itself*; in such a way that the subject at least has an inkling of it, as “her own otherness” (Hegel).





3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

The unconscious "... cannot be a process 'in the third person', since it itself selects what will be admitted to official existence, since it circumvents the thoughts and situations which we resist, and is thus not a *non-knowing* but rather an unacknowledged, unformulated knowledge that we do not wish to tolerate – an *ambiguous perception*."

(Merleau-Ponty 1963)



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

Ambiguity of consciousness in *projection*:

One perceives in others the impulses and motives against which one has built defences in oneself.

The blind spot in self-awareness results not from a mere neglect, but from active and emotionally charged repression.

Nevertheless, this repression remains the work and the latent effort of the subject himself, not of a mechanism outside him.



Traumatic Body Memory

Merleau-Ponty: unconscious aftereffect of trauma

- resembles the phantom limb in amputated patients: it constitutes an “empty space” of lived subjectivity
- invisible trace of a past experience that permeates each novel situation unnoticed



Traumatic Body Memory

“... this fixation does not merge into memory; it even excludes memory in so far as ... [the trauma] does not leave us but remains constantly hidden behind our gaze ... The traumatic experience does not survive as a representation in the mode of objective consciousness ... [but] as a *manner of being and with a certain degree of generality.*“ (Merleau-Ponty 1962)

"The resistance is directed to a certain area of experience, a certain category, a certain type of memory."



Traumatic Body Memory

"More than fifty years have passed since the end of the war. I have forgotten much, even things that were very close to me – places in particular, dates, and the names of people – and yet I can still sense those days in every part of my body. Whenever it rains, it's cold, or a fierce wind is blowing, I am taken back to the ghetto, to the camp, or to the forests where I spent many days. Memory, it seems, has deep roots in the body."



Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life* (2009)

Traumatic Body Memory



“The cells of my body apparently remember more than my mind which is supposed to remember. For years after the war, I would walk neither in the middle of the sidewalk nor in the middle of the road. I always clung to the walls, always staying in the shade, and always walking rapidly, as if I were fleeing (...)

Sometimes, just the aroma of a certain dish, or the dampness of shoes or a sudden noise is enough to take me back in the middle of the war (...). The war has infiltrated my bones.”

Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life* (2009)



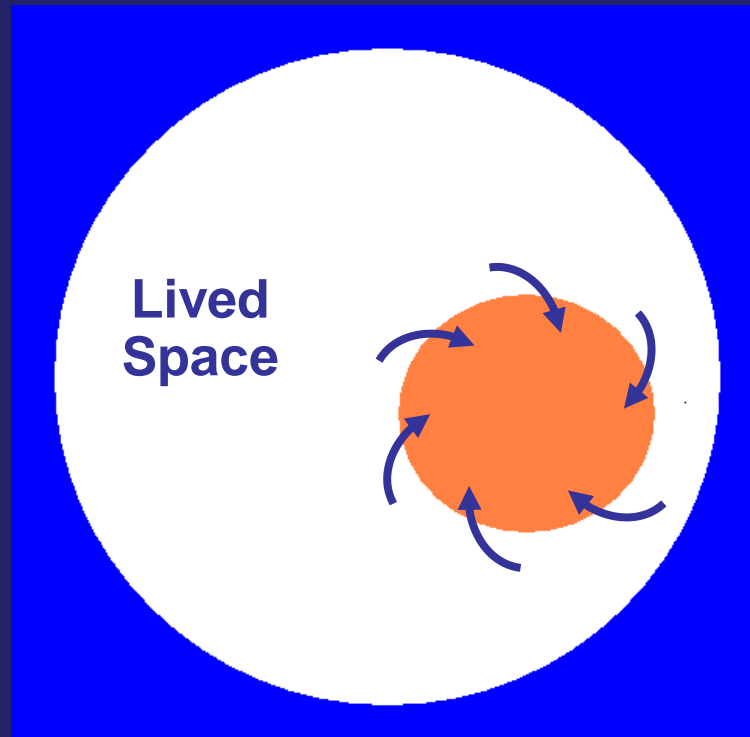
Traumatic Body Memory

Trauma as a deformation of lived space:

- 1) unconscious avoidance behaviour towards anxiety-provoking or "*repulsive zones*"
- 2) lived space is also permeated with *similarities* through which the trauma approaches the traumatised person from outside



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious: Repetition Compulsion



„Attractive
Space“



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious: Repetition Compulsion

We must "... say in analysis that the analysand remembers nothing at all of what has been forgotten and repressed, but he acts it out. He does not reproduce it as a memory but as action, he repeats it, naturally without realizing that he is repeating it. For example, the analysand does not say that he remembers being defiant and incredulous towards the authority of his parents, but he behaves in this manner towards the doctor."

(Freud 1946)



3) Phenomenology of the Unconscious

The "blind spot" in the centre of consciousness can thus be regarded as the other side of the intersubjective relationship: In the lived space, the others dwell "... in the hollows that show what they see and what I fail to see" (Merleau-Ponty 1973).



Summary

From a phenomenological point of view, the unconscious is not an intrapsychic reality, located in some depth “below consciousness” (“depth psychology”).

Rather, it invisibly surrounds and permeates conscious life similar to a picture puzzle where one only sees the foreground, but overlooks the important structure in the background.



Summary

It is an unconscious which is not located in the *vertical* dimension of the psyche but rather in the *horizontal* dimension of lived space, most of all lodging in the intercorporeality of dealing with others, as the hidden or reverse side of intersubjectivity.



Summary

Unconscious fixations are like certain restrictions in a person's space of potentialities produced by an implicit but ever-present past which declines to take part in the continuing progress of life.

Its traces, however, are not hidden in an inner psyche but manifest themselves as "blind spots" or curvatures in the lived space.



Summary



The unconscious is thus absence in presence, the unperceived in the perceived, the reverse side of conscious life.



Summary



As such, it does not remain fully concealed but expresses itself in reversals, chiasmatic entanglements, in an ambiguity of consciousness itself:

One does not know something and does not want to know it; one overlooks something and does not want to see it. Consciousness is not fully accessible to itself because it hides itself from itself.



Summary



This duplicity of consciousness corresponds to the ambiguity of the body whose modes of appearing fluctuate between the thematic and the unthematic, between the physical (Körper) and the lived body (Leib).



Summary



It also corresponds to the ambivalent, contradictory nature of our existence itself where we, precisely as natural, embodied beings, can always confront our own instinctive and natural side as well.

This is what constitutes the contradictoriness or the "eccentricity" of our existence (Plessner 1928).



Thank you very much for your attention!
