

The Spiritual Unconscious

Marshall H. Lewis, Ph.D.

As depicted by the cylinder, part of the human spirit is unconscious. The spiritual unconscious has a dynamic energy (that is, noodynamics) created by the difference between what a person is and what a person is capable of becoming.¹ To contrast his model of the unconscious with that of Freud, Frankl calls Freud's concept the *instinctual unconscious*.² Just as Freud associates the instinctual unconscious with libido, or unconscious sexual energy, so Frankl associates the spiritual unconscious with *religio*, or unconscious religiosity.³ Frankl further defines this unconscious religiosity as a "latent relation to transcendence."⁴ By this, Frankl means an inherent human capacity to relate to something greater than oneself. Frankl does not view this capacity as a drive, however, like Freud's notion of libido, but rather as a "pull" from a noetic dimension, from a place where a transpersonal awareness can perceive the potentials of the human person.⁵

Frankl expands on his notion of transcendence when he writes, "The essentially self-transcendent quality of human existence renders man *a being reaching out beyond himself*. Therefore, if Martin Buber, along with Ferdinand Ebner, interprets human existence basically in terms of a dialogue between I and Thou, we must recognize that this dialogue defeats itself unless I and Thou transcend themselves to refer to a meaning

¹ Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 63-64.

² Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 31-32.

³ Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, 6-7; Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 54-55.

⁴ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 68.

⁵ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 60; Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 77-78.

outside themselves.”⁶ He further explains: “If one prefers, one might conceive of this relation in terms of a relationship between the immanent self and a transcendent Thou. However one wishes to formulate it, we are confronted with what I should like to term ‘the transcendent unconscious’ as part and parcel of the spiritual unconscious.”⁷

This *transcendent unconscious* gives rise to the conscious experience of *conscience*. Conscience, for Frankl, is essentially the tool by which meaning can be discovered. He explains, “Conscience is that capacity which empowers him [the human person] to seize the meaning of a situation in its very uniqueness, and in the final analysis meaning is something unique.”⁸ Frankl understands the existence of conscience to imply the existence of a transpersonal agent just as the existence of the navel implies the existence of a mother.⁹ He explains, “Conscience is fully understandable only against the background of a transhuman dimension. To explain man’s being free, the existential quality of human reality would do; however, to explain his being responsible, the transcendent quality of conscience must be considered.”¹⁰

To the extent that a person chooses to respond to this pull of *religio*, the conscience becomes conscious. Unlike Freud’s superego the conscience, as a function of the human spirit, remains free to take a stand for or against any given cultural norm or moral.¹¹ The purpose of the conscience is to inform the human person of the one, right thing required by any unique situation.¹² One purpose of logotherapy is to make the

⁶ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 8. Italics original.

⁷ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 68.

⁸ Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, 19.

⁹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 59-61.

¹⁰ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 61.

¹¹ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 63-65. For Freud’s association of the superego with conscience, see also *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, 62.

¹² Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 40-41.

spiritual unconscious conscious.¹³ This leads to a refinement and development of the human conscience.¹⁴

Frankl believes that evidence of *religio* can be found through the use of tools common to psychodynamic practice such as dream interpretation and word association.¹⁵

An example of *religio* may be found in the following dream interpretation:¹⁶

The dreamer works in the American health care industry. He dreams that people are forced to go into space once a year on a rocket as part of the government's attempt to reform the health care system. Rockets have been prepared for the first batch of patients. A capsule is set on top of a rocket and a parachute attached. This tall, white rocket with black accents is unusually bright against the blue sky. This procedure is too dangerous, thinks the dreamer. He and his mother are in an elevator. She is going to the rocket, but the dreamer knows it is not yet time. She tells him she is scheduled for 1:30. He is scheduled for 5:30. The vivid, white rocket is then launched. As the rocket lifts off, the billowing plumes of smoke become clouds and the white rocket becomes Christ in vivid white robes.

Whereas a Freudian interpretation of this dream might focus on the rocket as a phallic symbol and a Jungian interpretation could focus on the Christ figure as a symbol of the Self, Frankl might interpret the dream in light of the *religio*. In this case, the ascent of the health care rocket latently manifests the idea of spiritual healing. As the dreamer had been reading Jung, it is likely that the mother image was chosen to represent the unconscious (with reference to what Jung calls the *anima*).¹⁷ The fact that she is “going first” suggests that spiritual healing is taking place first in the spiritual unconscious, but that the dreamer must wait for some period of time before becoming

¹³ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 43-44, 47.

¹⁴ Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 183.

¹⁵ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 47, 69.

¹⁶ Existential dream analysis with healthcare worker.

¹⁷ Carl G. Jung, “Aion,” in *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1958), ¶ 26.

fully aware of it. The spiritual unconscious is preparing him for departure to spiritual health.

The transcendent aspect of the spiritual unconscious demands responsible action. Frankl states what he calls the *categorical imperative of logotherapy* as: “Live as if you were already living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now.”¹⁸ By this Frankl challenges the human person to view conduct in a larger frame, or to consider how a given behavior may be viewed at a future point. Unlike Freud, who defined the conscience as a psychological process determined by childhood experiences (i.e., the superego), Frankl refuses to reduce the conscience to something determined by anything else. For Frankl, conscience is a matter of irreducible transcendence, a function of a free and transcendent human spirit.¹⁹ This is an example of how Frankl rejects reductionism and psychologism and, thus, transforms psychotherapy from an applied science to an understanding of being human.

¹⁸ Frankl, *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, 89.

¹⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 63.