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The relationship between existential phenomenology and Freud’s conception of psychoanalysis in the contemporary literature is an undeniably neglected one, and the reasons are not so hard to determine. Both Freud, the inventor of a novel and monumentally influential treatment method, and existential phenomenology, a philosophical perspective and methodology that dominated the better part of twentieth-century European thought and culture, are perceived by many to be in a state of irreversible decline. Structuralism, post-structuralism, social constructivism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism have, in successive waves of intellectual fashion and influence, both challenged and usurped the central role that existential philosophy and phenomenology once enjoyed in both Europe and North America, whereas Freud’s contributions to psychoanalysis and contemporary cultural mores have been under attack by competing forms of psychotherapy outside the psychoanalytic corpus as well as from recent trends within the psychoanalytic community itself. In the hey day of both Sigmund Freud and existentialism—beginning in the post-World War Two era and culminating more or less in the late 1970s, many psychoanalytically trained psychiatrists, psychologists, and kindred practitioners such as Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, Eugene Minkowski, Erwin Straus, Roland Kuhn, Victor Frankl, R.D. Laing, David Cooper, and Rollo May avidly sought to fashion an existential-based method of psychoanalytic practice that made generous use of the dominant existential phenomenologists of their day. The principal philosophical influence was Martin Heidegger, but included in the conversation was a legion of existential philosophers including Jean-Paul Sartre, Miguel Unamuno, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Ricoeur, Henri Ey, and even Edmund Husserl, whose more arid conception of phenomenology has only occasionally been embraced by clinical practitioners. Their papers filled the pages of myriad existential journals, nearly all of which have long since disappeared, devoted to the application of existential philosophy to clinical practice. Yet the dominance of Freud’s most basic ideas, despite his many detractors, has not diminished, and the influence of and surrounding debate concerning the nature and significance of Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s most radical views about the human condition persist as a cottage industry on the shelves of virtually every college campus book store in the Western world.

Since the 1980s the literature on the interface between existential phenomenology and psychoanalysis has steadily waned, as the intellectual excitement once
afforded to phenomenology has been usurped by the emergence of postmodernism, whose principal representatives are hostile to a body of literature they allege is locked in a modernist and outmoded way of thinking. In similar fashion, the contemporary psychoanalytic literature is dominated by efforts to put Freud in his proper “historical” context while citing relevant passages from the increasingly popular postmodernist critique of Freud’s biological perspective. Recent publications (Marcus and Rosenberg, 1998; Frie, 2003; Reppen, Tucker, & Schulman, 2004; Mills, 2004) have attempted to address the clinical implications of these developments while incorporating some of these ideas into the contemporary psychoanalytic conversation. At the heart of this debate is the status of Freud’s—and by extension, the psychoanalytic—conception of the unconscious. Whereas the phenomenological literature has traditionally rejected the Freudian unconscious, postmodernism has embraced it and in so doing established alliances with the psychoanalytic community that were never firmly established with the existentialists. Today, those clinical practitioners who embrace existential phenomenology are almost unanimously hostile to psychoanalysis and, with it, Freud’s conception of the unconscious.

It is thus a welcome departure from this trend that a new book by Richard Askay and Jensen Farquhar endeavors to reconcile Freud’s notion of the unconscious with existential phenomenology, a project that has traditionally been deemed impossible. This is an ambitious book that endeavors to trace the philosophical influences on Freud’s most fundamental ideas about human nature. The authors review the evolution of Freud’s notion of the unconscious, the role he assigns to the body and the instincts, and the place that free will enjoys in a theoretical perspective that is presumed to be rooted in a deterministic world view. This is a huge task by any measure, so the authors decided to limit its scope to the publications of Freud himself and ignore the vast psychoanalytic literature left in his wake. They also elect to not cite the many psychoanalytic practitioners who have, with varied success, endeavored to bridge existential phenomenology and Freud (e.g., Betty Cannon, Roger Frie, Jonathan Lear, Stanley Leavy, Hans Loewald, William J. Richardson, Anthony Wilden, to name a few). Theirs is a narrow scope indeed and the result suffers accordingly as the authors are left more or less exclusively to their own devices without benefit of a significant literature that may have served to buttress their valiant efforts.

Despite the self-imposed limitation in source material for this project, this book is over 400 pages long, so this review could not possibly do justice to the arguments employed with anything other than a cursory resume of the salient points addressed. Divided into three sections, the first seeks to review those philosophical influences—both acknowledged and unacknowledged by Freud—on Freud’s most basic ideas. These include Freud’s relationship with Greek philosophy,