

# **The Phenomenal Ego and its World**

*in Gestalt Psychology and  
Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy*

Gerhard Stemberger, Vienna/Austria

# Gabriele Countess von Wartensleben

(1870-1953)

1913 Summary of Max Wertheimer's Gestalt theory

First application of Gestalt theory to problems of personality, drawing from the ideas of Max Wertheimer: The personality is a dynamic whole, a Gestalt, in its ideal case an accentuated whole well defined by its radix.

**Each person has a certain quality that Wertheimer called his radix – the Latin word for root. This quality will express itself in different ways: in his physiognomy; in his handwriting; in the way he dresses, moves about, talks, and acts; and also in the way he thinks, what kind of outlook he has, and if he is a scholar, in the kind of theory he builds or adopts...**

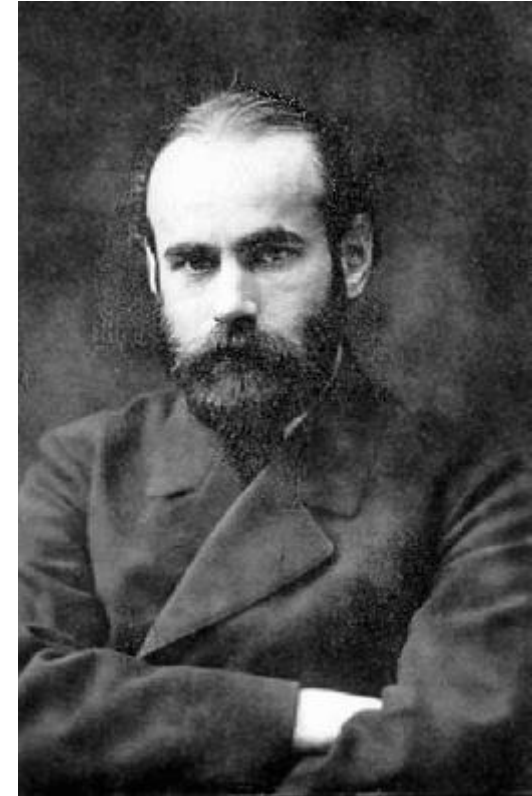
(from Fritz Heider's recollections of Wertheimer's seminars in Berlin, cited in King & Wertheimer, 169)



# Max Wertheimer 1924

The fundamental "formula" of Gestalt theory might be expressed in this way: There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves

determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes...



# Four examples

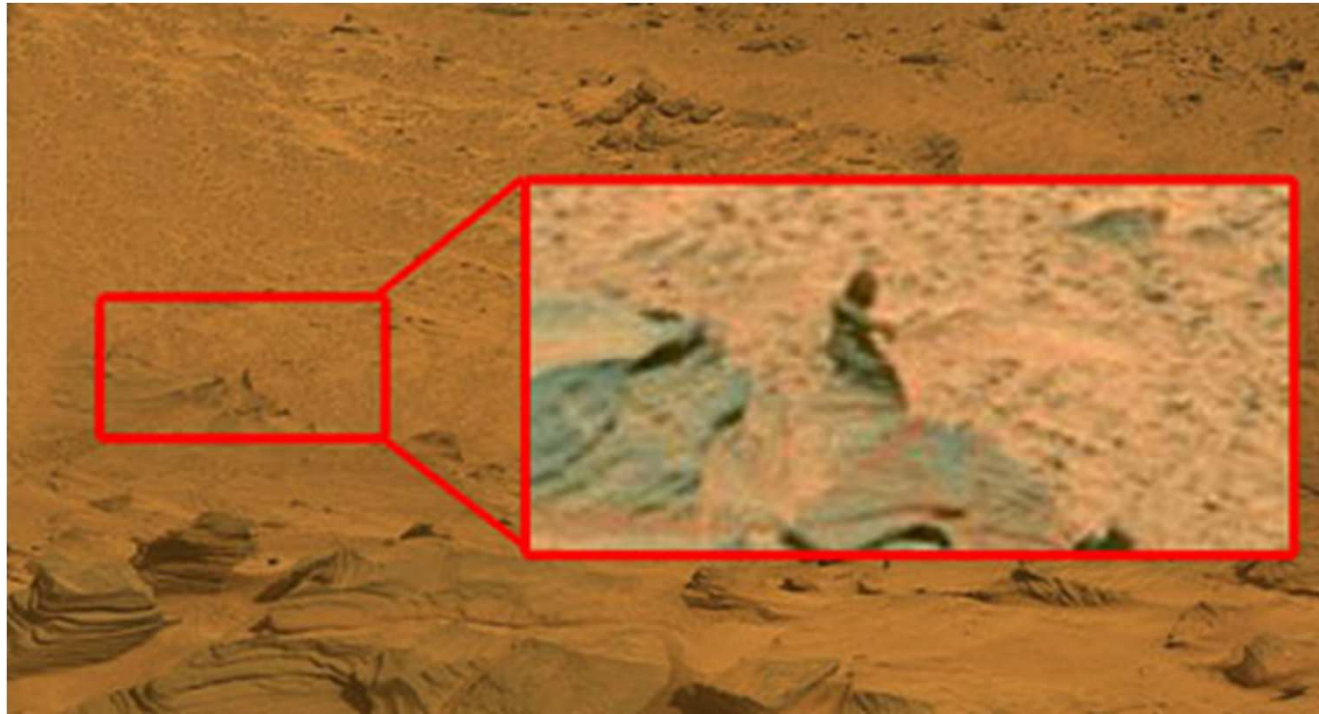
- The stuttering person
- The paranoid person
- The monopolizing (abusive) person
- The person with the ,eating-disorder‘

# The stuttering person



Shift of attention from the content of the intended message to the process of speaking and in addition to one's own person:  
(Parts of) the Ego take(s) center stage

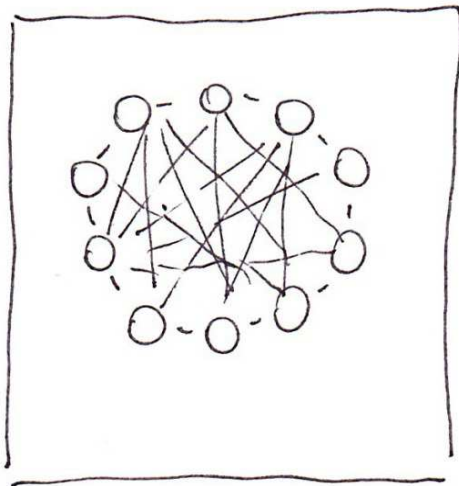
# The man on Mars



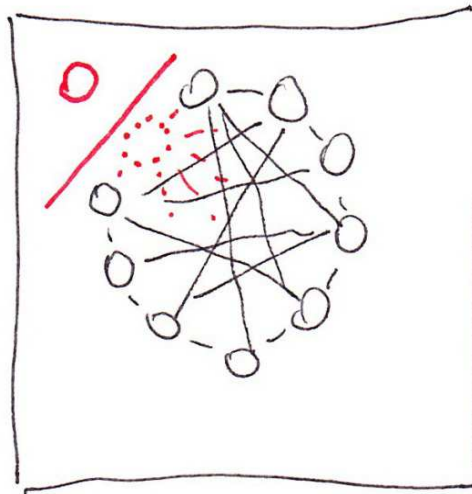
*On a panoramic foto which the robot „Spirit“ sent to earth one finds the alleged „man on Mars“ (Foto: AP Photo/NASA). The Prägnanz tendency in human perception favors the perception of ‚objects‘ which are existentially important for man. So here we find a phenomenal field accentuating another human being (even where there is none...)*

# The paranoid person

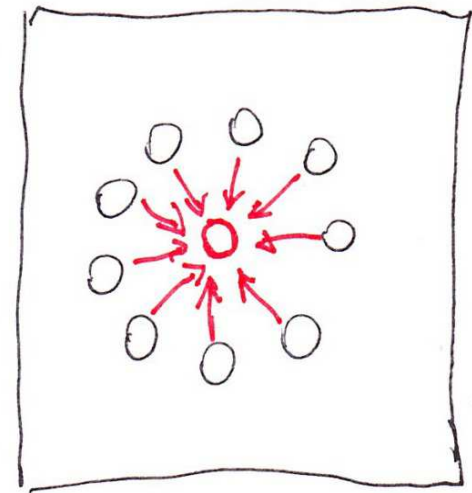
The case of the tartar – by  
Schulte(Wertheimer) 1924



We-situation

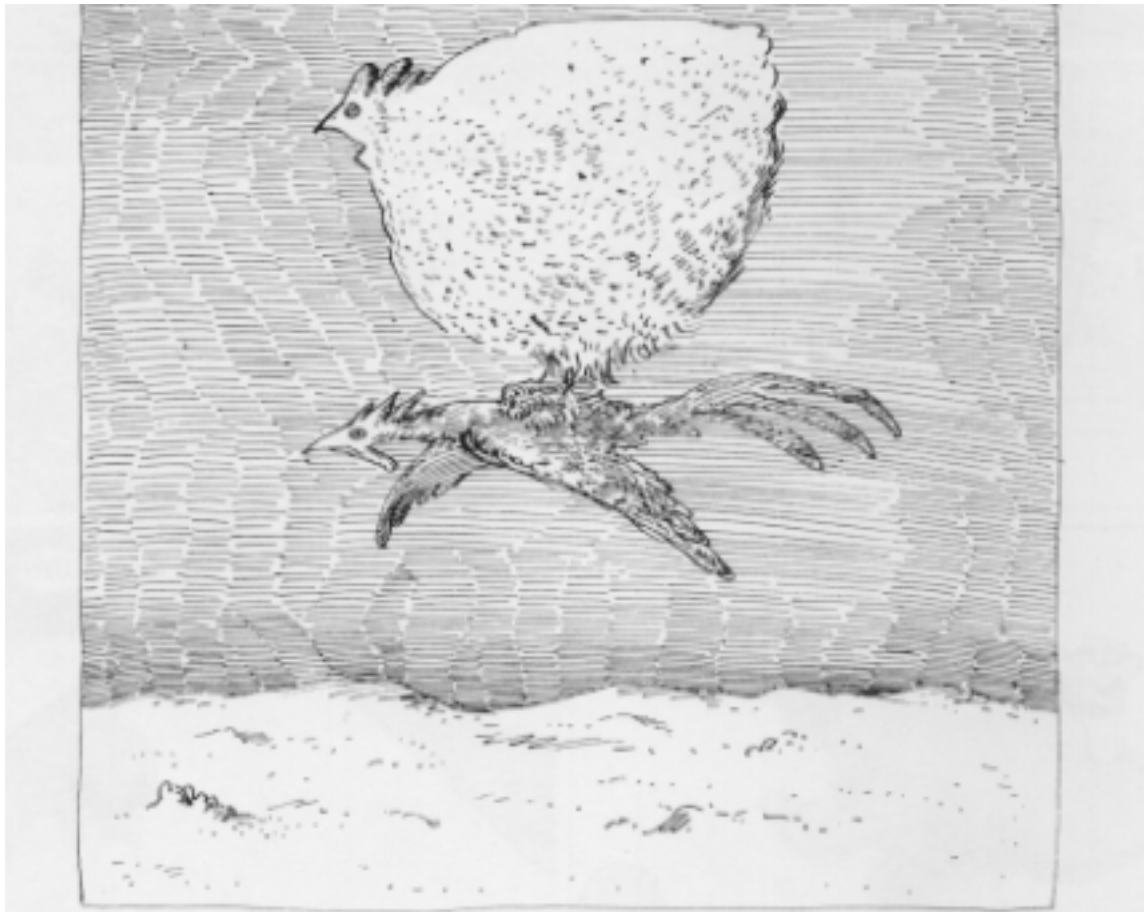


Situation of the tartar BEFORE  
and AFTER restructuring

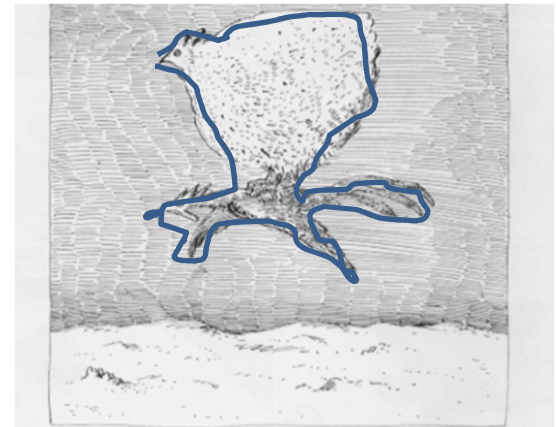




# The monopolizing person



**A case of extended ego**



**„Never forget the pains I had to suffer giving birth to you ...“**



## A constructive example of extending the ego

From Wolfgang Köhler's *Intelligenz-  
prüfungen an Menschenaffen* (1917;  
engl. ***The mentality of apes***, 1925)

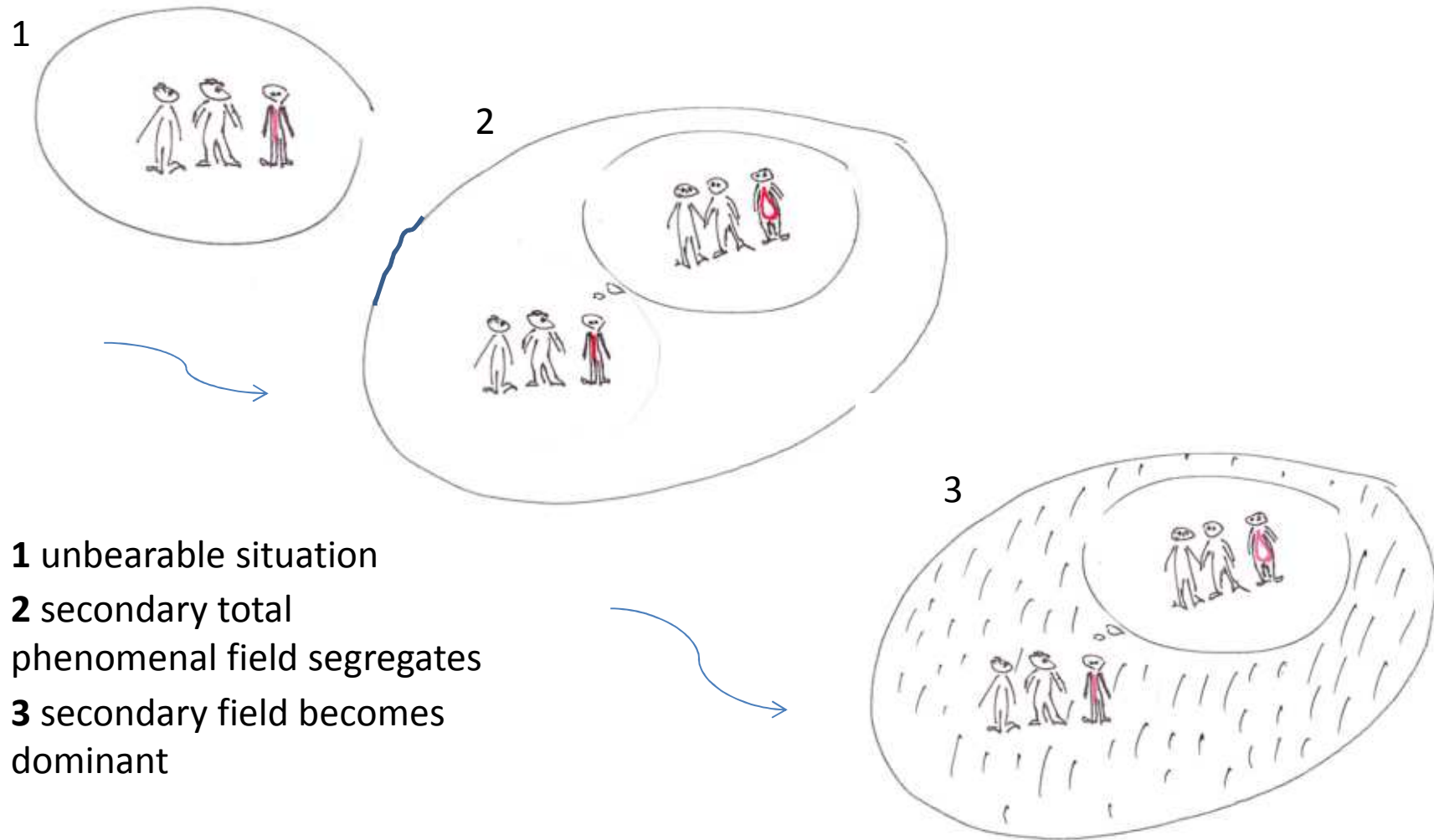
Again we see the role of  
„disturbance“, „gap“,  
„fitting“, „being just needed“,  
„being required“, as parts in  
a consistant whole.

(Max Wertheimer, *Productive Thinking*  
126f)



# The person with the ,eating disorder‘

Thomas Fuchs 2010: „Ich weiß, wie dünn ich bin, aber ich fühle mich dick“  
Gestalttheoretisches Modell der wahrgenommenen Welt einer magersüchtigen Person



Why are the objects of the phenomenal world perceived as before us, outside of ourselves, even though today everybody knows that they depend upon processes inside of us, in the central nervous system?

**Wolfgang KÖHLER**

An old pseudoproblem  
(Die Naturwissenschaften 1929)

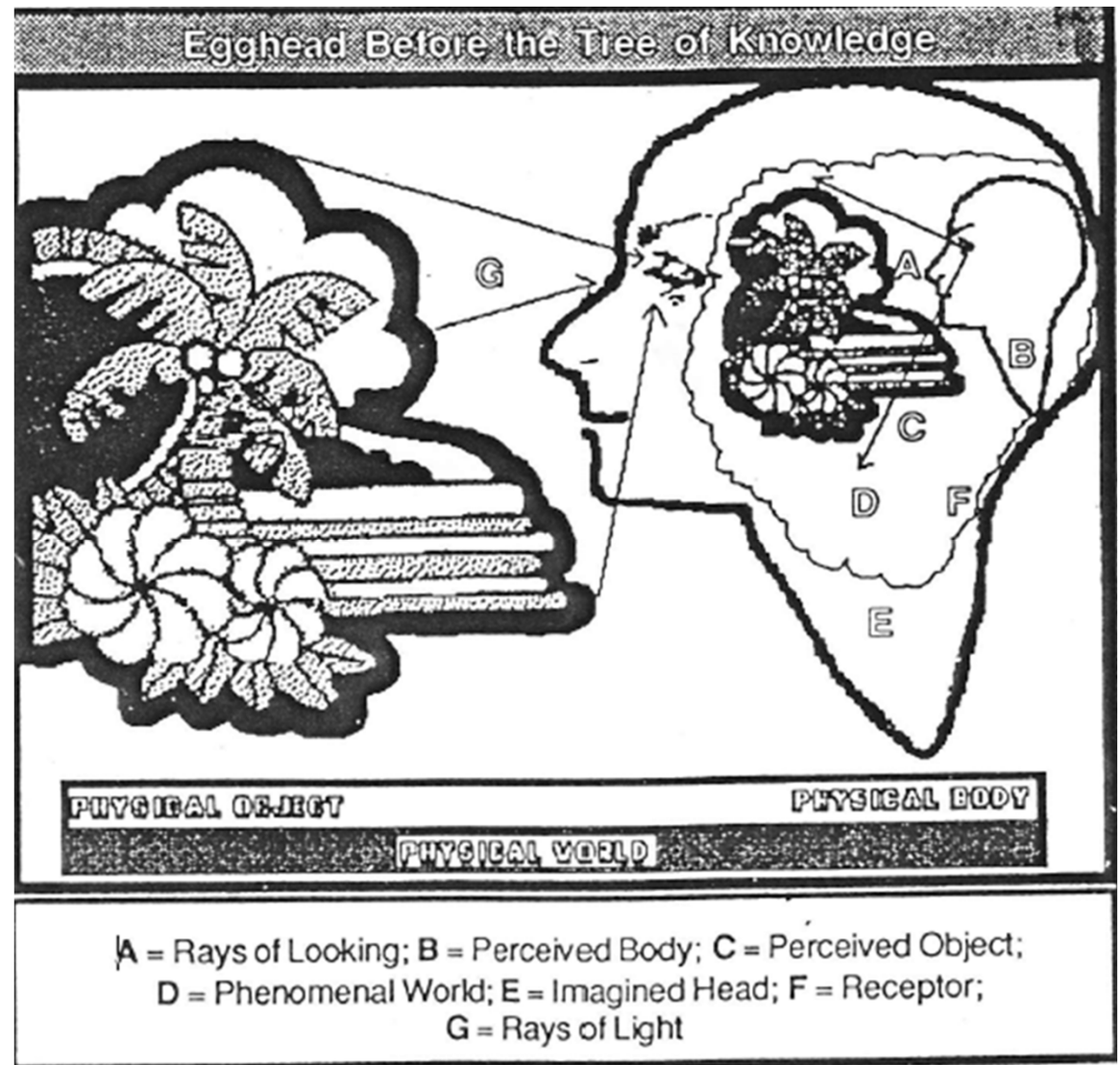


Fig. by Paul Tholey

# „I had a new idea...”

Kurt Koffka to Molly Harrower March 1933

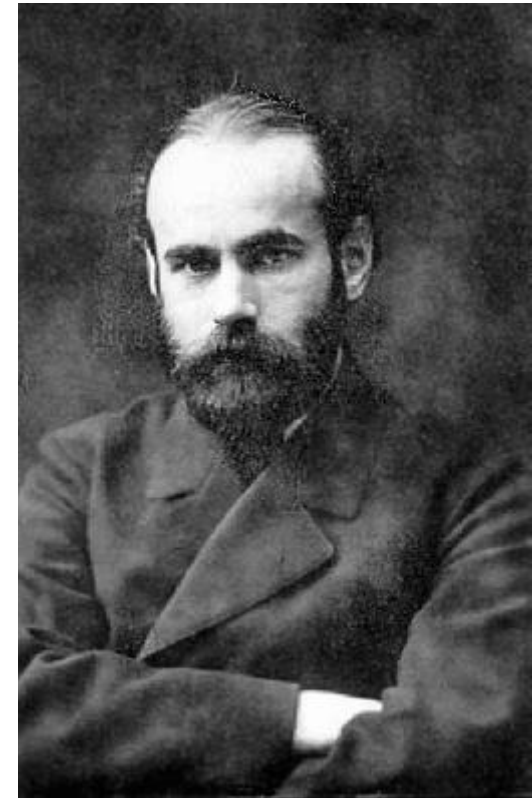


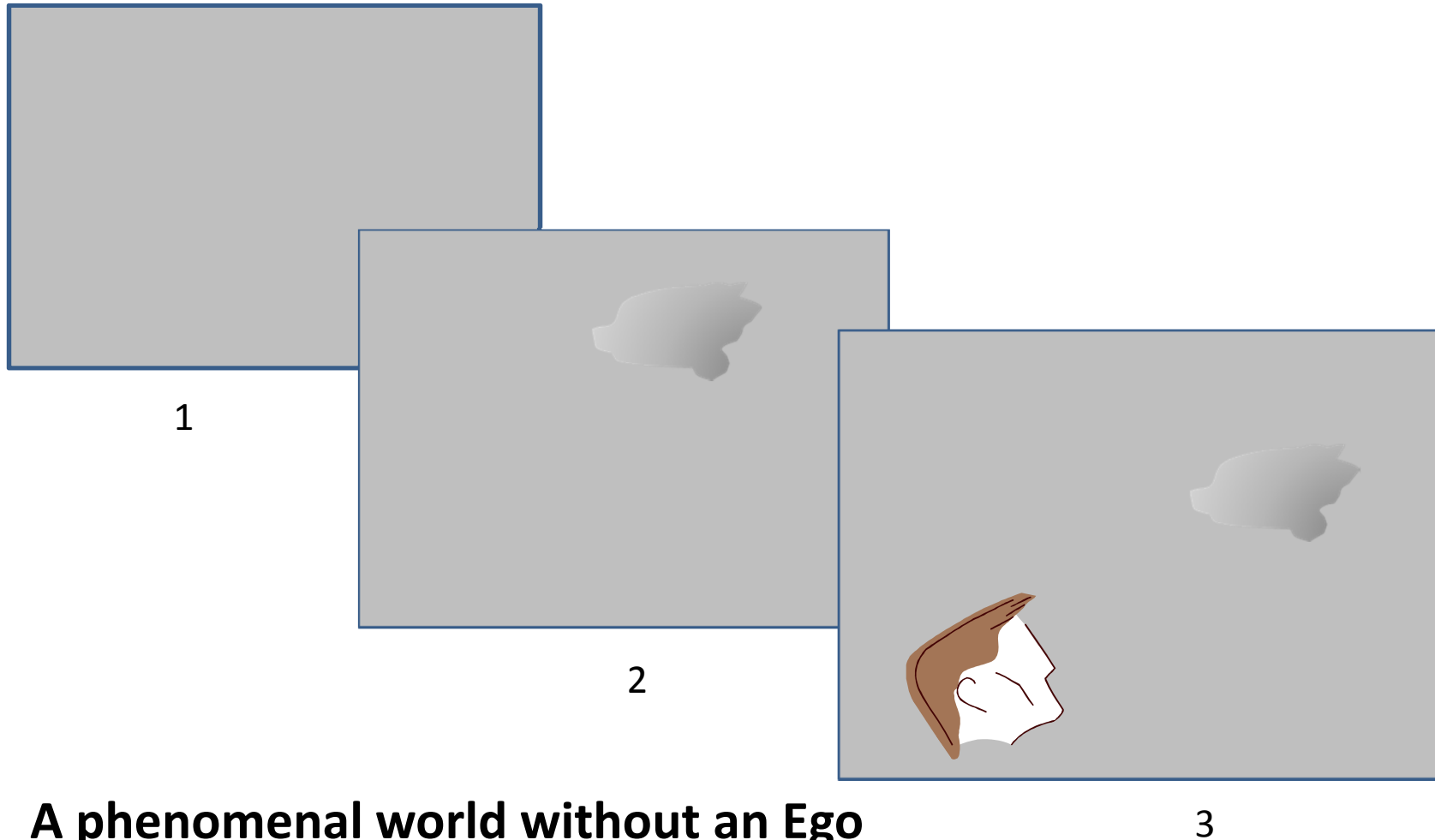
1. The phenomenal Ego and the phenomenal environment are a segregated field part.
2. When Ego disappears from the phenomenal world or consciousness ceases altogether, the need tensions within the Ego system survive.

3. Therefore, the real, psychophysical Ego is not identical with the phenomenal Ego, but it is permanent. This persistence of the Ego is not memory in the usual sense, but comparable to the persistence of the real organism in the real environment. This makes a theory of personality possible.
4. If the Ego as a segregated system persists independently of consciousness, then the environment from which it is segregated must also persist independently of consciousness.

# Max Wertheimer 1924

“There is not from the beginning an Ego over-against others, but the genesis of an Ego offers one of the most fascinating problems, the solution of which seems to lie in Gestalt principles. However, once constituted, the Ego is a functional part of the total field.”



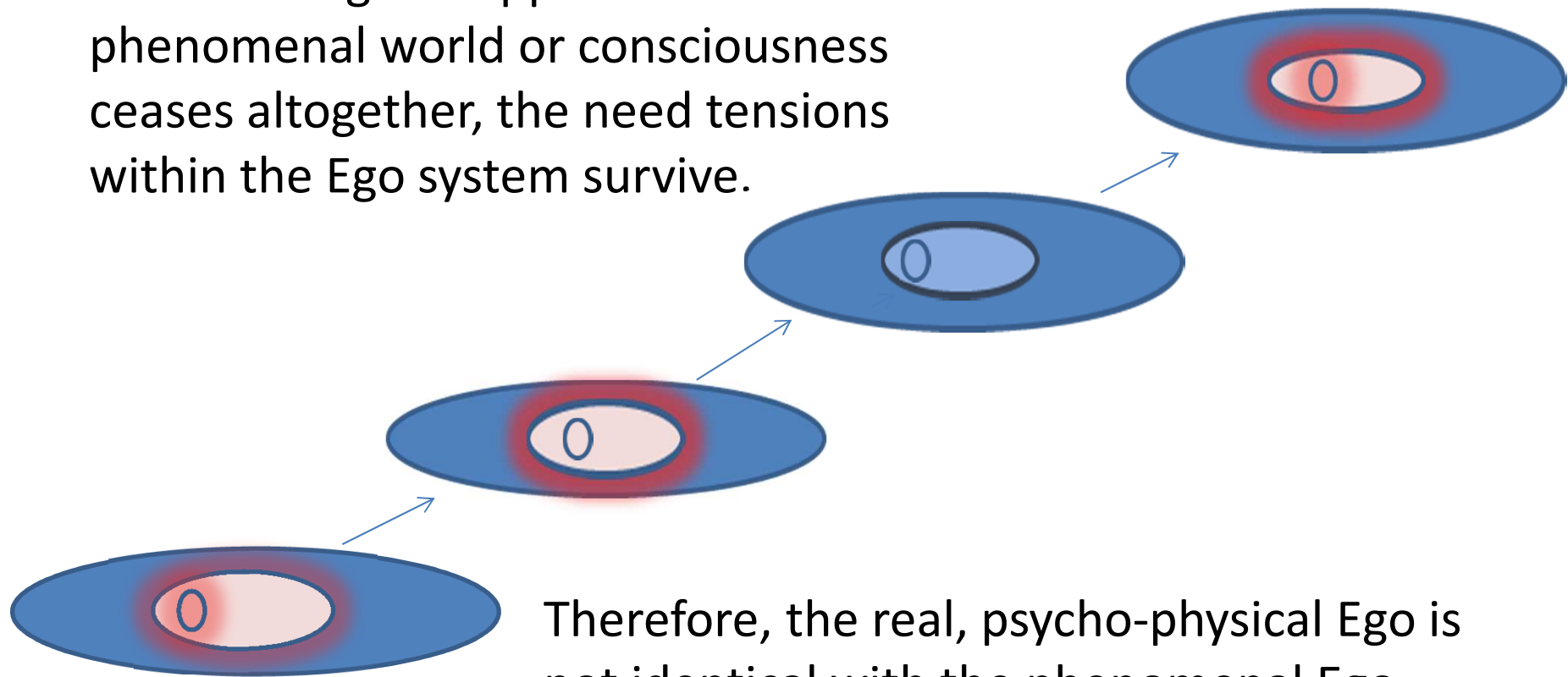


**A phenomenal world without an Ego  
and the segregation of an Ego in the case of the mountain  
climber Guido Lammer (Koffka 1935)**

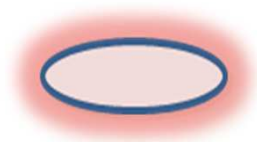
- 1** complete homogeneity - nothing but fog
- 2** first articulation of the field: the light point
- 3** the field becomes bipolar: light spot / Ego



When the Ego disappears from the phenomenal world or consciousness ceases altogether, the need tensions within the Ego system survive.



Therefore, the real, psycho-physical Ego is not identical with the phenomenal Ego, but it is permanent. It survives as a part of the psychophysical field even when it is not represented in consciousness.



Behavioral field



Ego system with  
need tensions



Ego system phenomenally  
given as ego pole

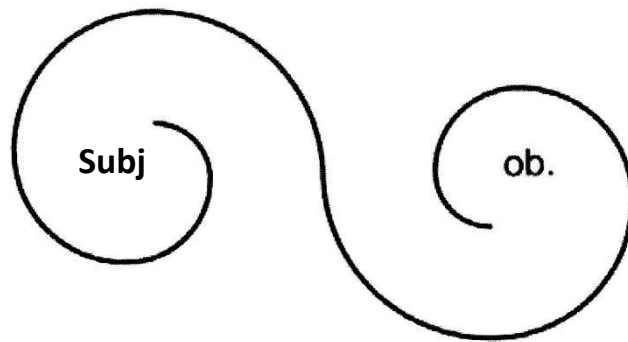
# Wolfgang Köhler

There are dynamic relations between **the process complex of the self** and **the environment processes in the brain field** which have no correlate in any analogous causal connections between the physical organism and its physical environment.



Every kind of behavior in which we are directed toward a part of the environment will have to be understood as the expression of a vectorial state or event between the momentary process of the self and the environmental process in question.

(Köhler / Pseudoproblem 140)



*„duality in the unity“*

(F. Brentano)

**Giuseppe Galli (2000):**

- Every person has its own phenomenal world, the basic structure of which is an articulation of two poles, the Ego and the Environment (**subject and object**). Gestalt theory operates with the field concept, that means, with the concept of a continuous dynamic system.
- This **„duality in the unity“** (Brentano) can be symbolized with a double helix, in which both poles are clearly articulated; but between these two poles there is **absolute continuity** insofar as it is impossible to fix a point where one spiral ends and the other spiral begins.
- In theoretical terms: **Ego- and object-pole** are seen as **parts (subsystems) of the psychic total field**. They are **determined by the whole-conditions and the interactions between these parts**.

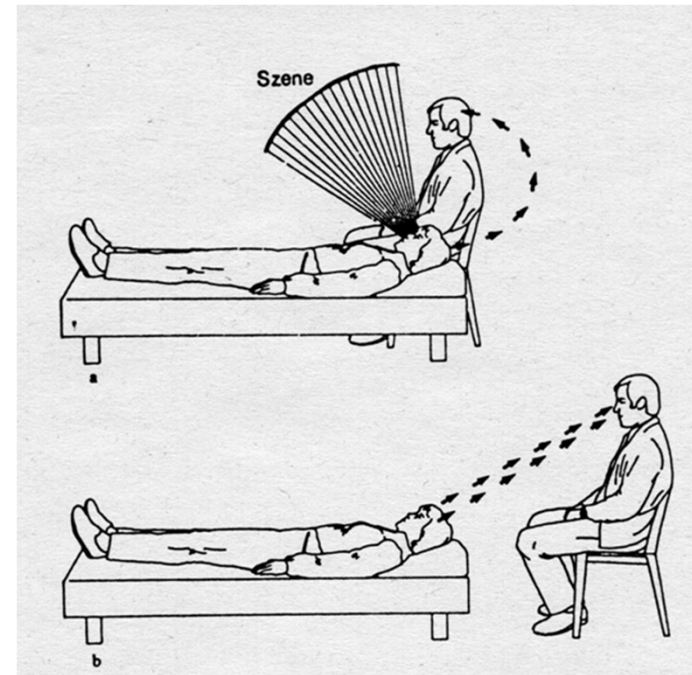
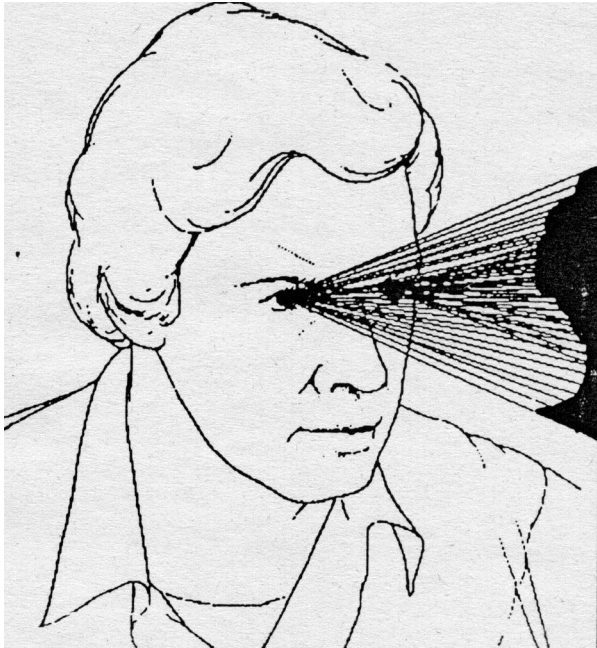
**TODD E. FEINBERG, M.D.**



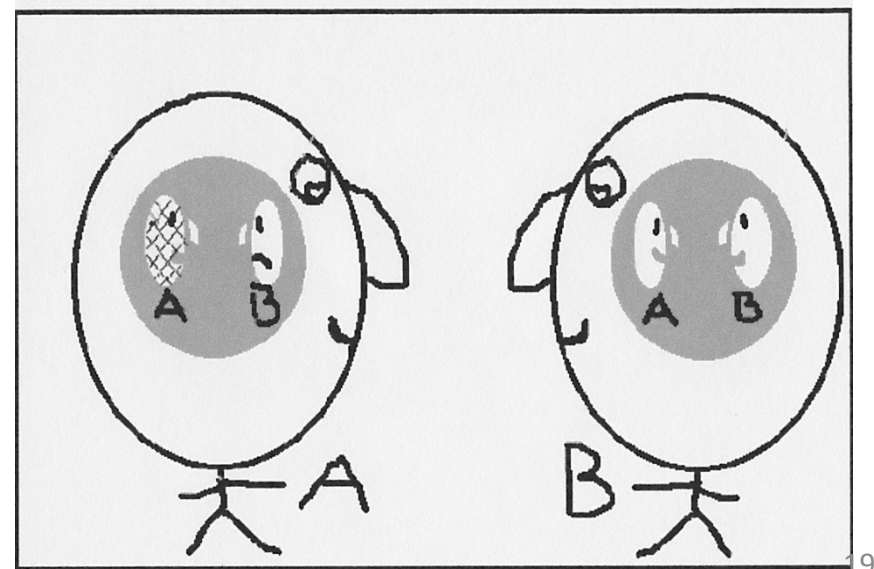
***Altered Egos. How the  
Brain Creates the Self***  
(Oxford 2001)

- While the many parts of the brain create the self, however, there is no specific material locus of the self or the inner „I“ within the brain.
- The brain creates the unity of the self by producing a nested hierarchy of meaning and purpose, where the levels of the self, and the many parts of the brain that contribute to the self, are nested within all other levels of the hierarchy.

## Naiv-realistic assumptions of 'projection'



## Critical-realistic alternative



# Extensions of the Ego I

- Skier and ski grow together to a unity
- „Basket and Ego have to be united“





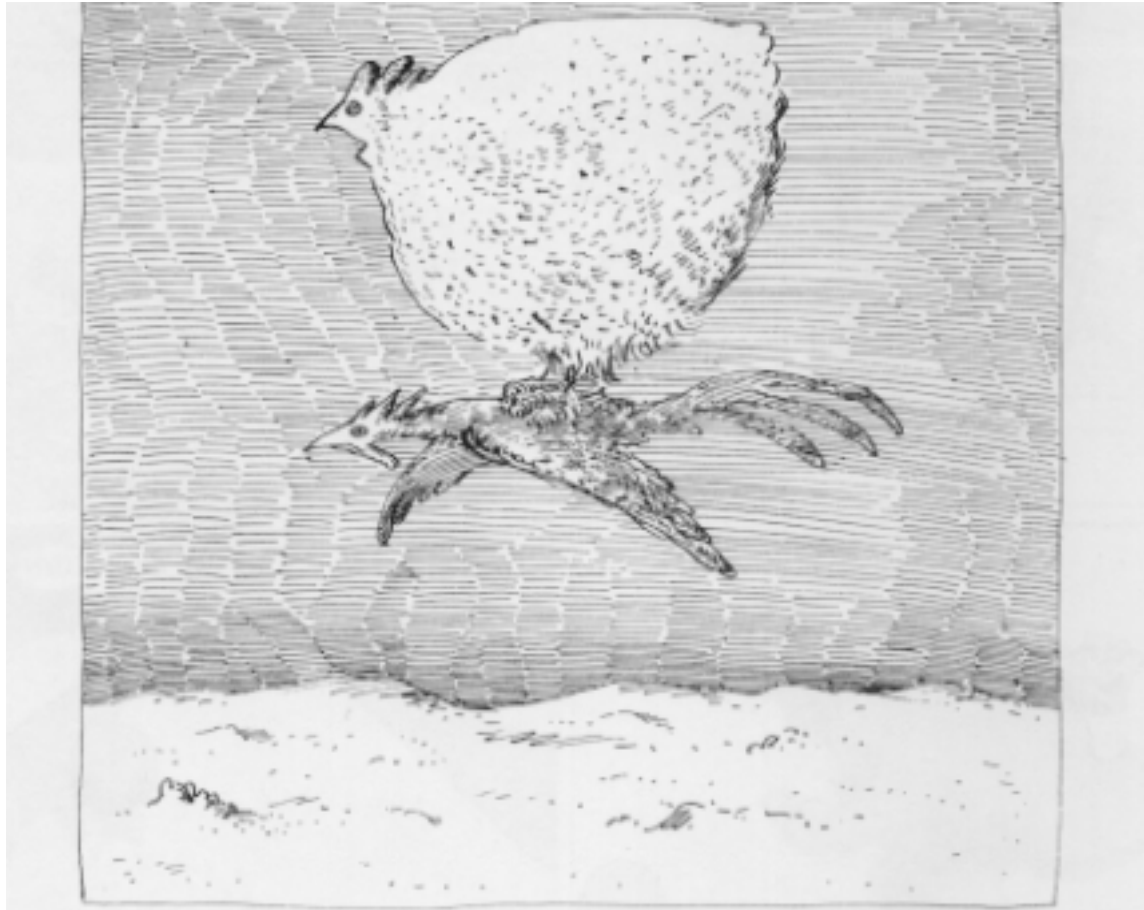
**„gap“, „fitting“, „being required“, as parts in a consistant whole.... (II)**

## **Extensions of the Ego II**

Aus Wolfgang Köhlers  
"Intelligenzprüfungen an  
Menschenaffen" aus dem Jahre  
1921



# Extensions of the Ego III



**„Never forget the pains I had to suffer in giving  
birth to you ...“**

„gap“, „fitting“, „being required“, as parts in a consistant whole.... (I)

....

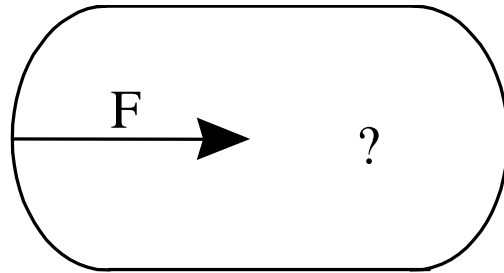


Fig 1: F = Question ?=gap

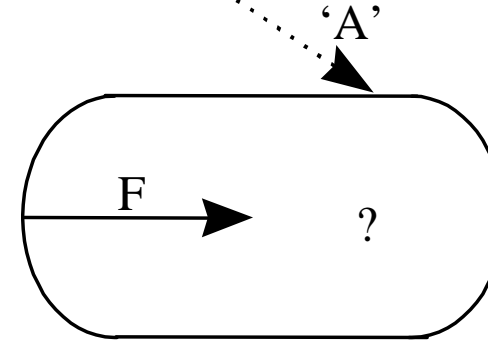


Fig 2: F: How is your health?  
A (Answer): Two plus two is four.

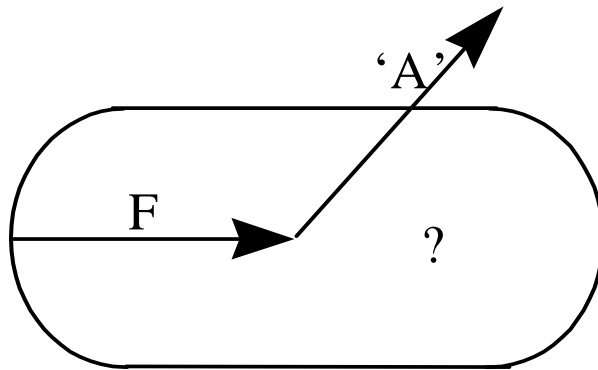


Abbildung 3:

F: Wie geht es Ihnen?  
A: Das hängt von den  
Kalorien ab.

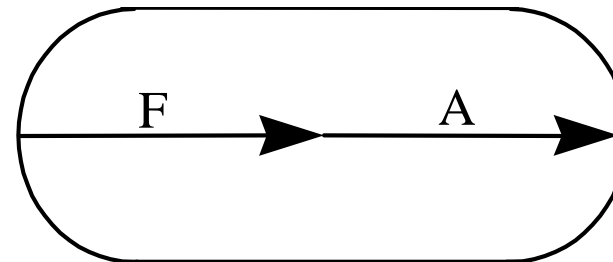
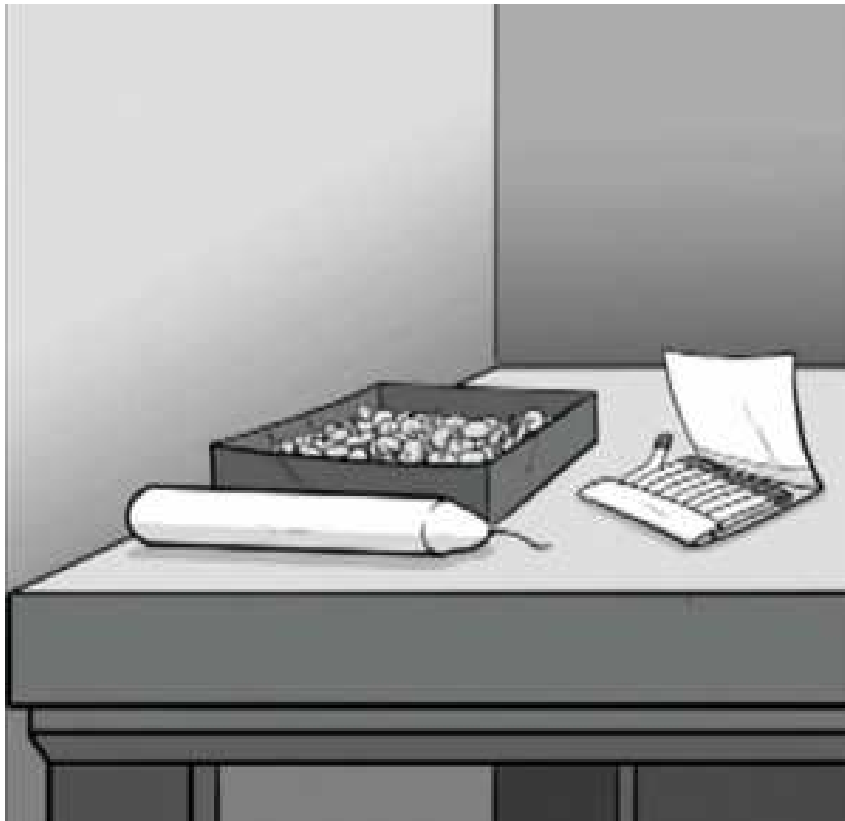


Abbildung 4:

F: Wie geht es Ihnen gesund-  
heitlich?  
A: Gut.

# Functional Fixedness

(Karl Duncker)



- Here is a candle, a box of thumbtacks, and a book of matches
- Now attach the candle to the wall so that it does not drip onto the table below

*Zur Psychologie des produktiven Denkens,*  
Springer, Berlin 1935

# Emergence of a second Ego I

Edwin Rausch: Painting IV Volker Bußmann

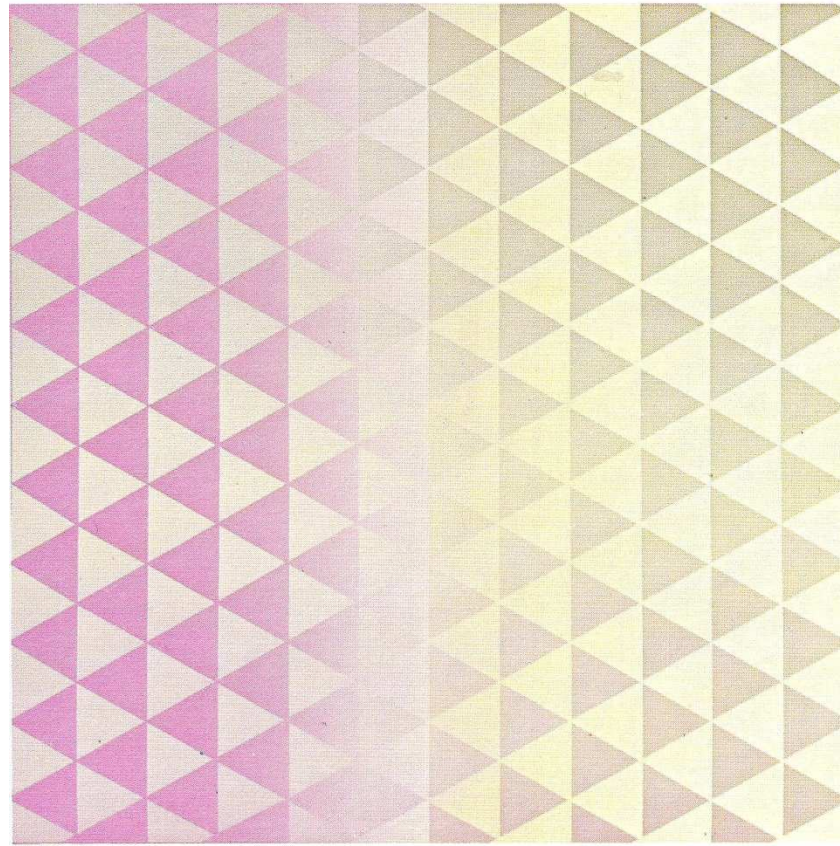


Bild IV

Shafts? Boxes? Loggias of an apartment tower?

# Emergence of a second Ego and its World II

Screenshot of the car chase in „Bullit“ (1968)





# Emergence of a second Ego and its World

## Ila



# Emergence of a second EgoIII

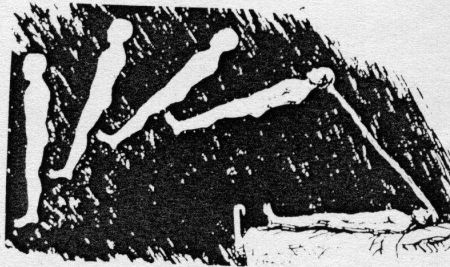


Abb. 9: Ausserkörperliche Erfahrung aus naiv-realistischer Sicht.  
Aus der naiv-realistischen Sicht der Okkultisten sowie einiger «moderner» Bewusstseinsforscher verlässt bei ausserkörperlichen Erfahrungen ein Zweitkörper («Astralkörper») den physischen Körper.

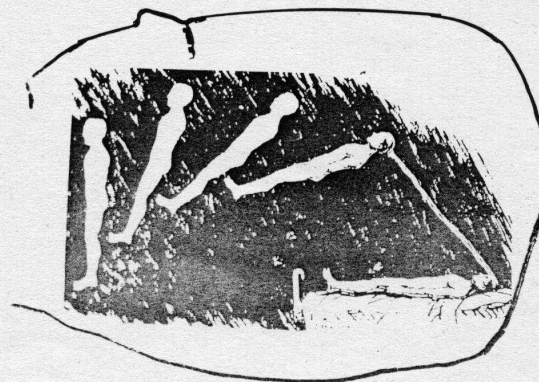
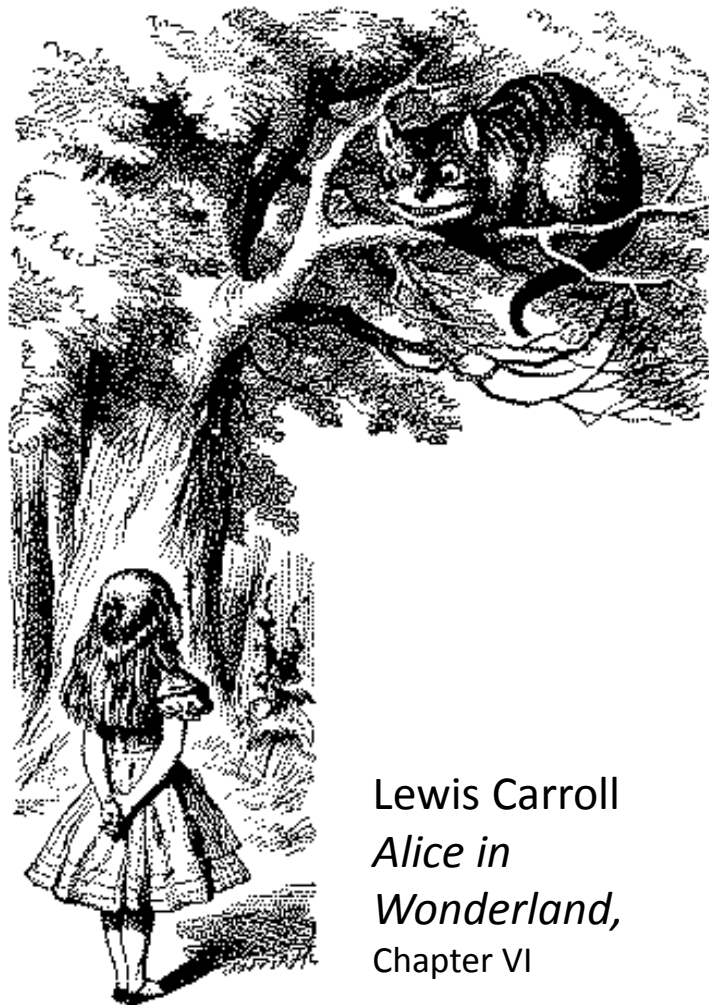


Abb. 10: Ausserkörperliche Erfahrung aus kritisch-realistischer Sicht.  
Aus kritisch-realistischer Sicht verlässt bei einer ausserkörperlichen Erfahrung nicht den **physischen** Körper, sondern es verlässt ein **erlebter** (phanomenaler) Zweitkörper einen **bloss als physisch erscheinenden, erlebten** (phanomenalen) Erstkörper. Dies spielt sich alles im Gehirn einer Person im Einschlaf-, Traum- oder einem anderen veränderten Bewusstseinszustand ab. (Wie also nach okkultistischer

‘All right,’ said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.



Lewis Carroll  
*Alice in  
Wonderland,*  
Chapter VI

‘Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,’ thought Alice; ‘but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!’

