

SUB-PERSONALITIES AND AUTHENTICITY

A Model of Intervention in Spiritual Direction

Richard Boileau

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS IS A THEORY and practice of human development that combines the insights of psychoanalysis with an affirmation of the spiritual dimension of the person, the 'higher' or 'transpersonal' self, that coheres with traditional understandings of Christianity. The theory, proposed by Robert Assagioli around 1910, was distinct from others yet remained consistent with the emerging science of psychoanalysis pioneered by Freud and Jung.

The practice of psychosynthesis challenges the individual to accept the past, appreciate the present and assume personal responsibility for the future. Its underlying theory of personality is often schematized as being like an egg, with the 'I', or personal self, at the centre. The 'I' stands at a distance from the dynamics of the personality and controls the will. It is surrounded by a conscious field, in which there is a constant flow of feelings, images, thoughts and desires. Surrounding this is the mid-level unconscious, which is the source of creative and intellectual activity; it is where ideas develop and gestate. Below is the inferior unconscious, where primary impulses, childhood woundedness and suppressed desires reside. Above is the superior unconscious or supra-consciousness where deep intuitions, altruism and the higher faculties of the spirit are to be found. Around the 'egg' is the collective unconscious, containing archaic and archetypal structures that remotely affect our perceptions and decisions. Finally, at the very top, straddling the boundary between the higher unconscious and the collective unconscious is the spiritual or transpersonal self, the true heart of the person.

According to Assagioli's student and principal collaborator, Piero Ferrucci:

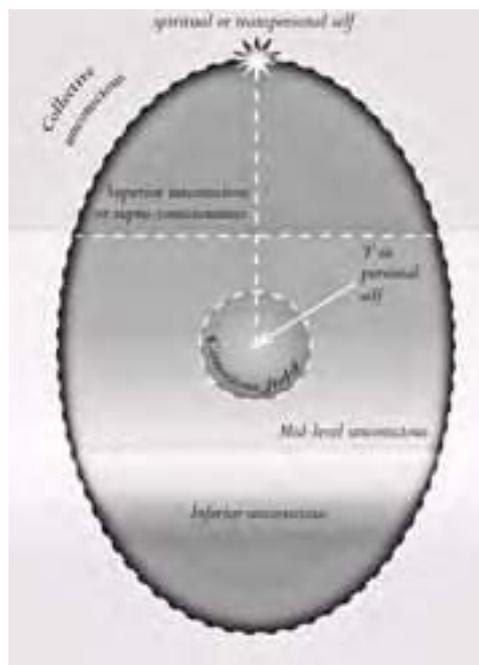
It is possible to experience the self as pure consciousness, apart from any content: 'I am'. From this psychological place, the self has a panoramic view of all the personality contents instead of being identified with just one of them at a time.

In the psychosynthetic conception, the self is neither the passive spectator extraneous to the show nor the actor completely involved in it. It is the producer, who stages the whole show with expertise, good timing, and tactful handling of the actors.

When clearly experienced, the self can decide to identify fully and easily with any personality content, from romantic love to furious anger to physical appetite. But it is also able to dis-identify from the content. The experience of self allows choice at all times. Thus the whole personality is available to the self.¹

It is worth noting that, while the terms 'I' and 'self' are used interchangeably here, it is helpful to see the 'I' as standing apart and the 'self' as intentionally linked to all or part of the personality.

Ultimately psychosynthesis aims to bring together the various parts of an individual's personality into a more cohesive self so that the person can function in a way that is more life-affirming, authentic and faithful to his or her espoused values. The project of reconciling the array of secular and religious values that are present in the person requires self-awareness, self-acceptance and commitment to self-transcendence. Its objective is to achieve union with God in a way that



The psychosynthesis 'egg'

¹ Piero Ferrucci, *What We May Be: Techniques for Psychological and Spiritual Growth through Psychosynthesis* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 64.

corresponds to the person's unique spiritual identity or calling, a state which produces the fruits of God's own Spirit, including spiritual joy.

A human being, in his present state of evolution, is not a harmonious and coherent unity. He is made up of a mass of heterogeneous and contrasting elements grouped around different centres that are found at different levels relatively independent of each other [These elements and centres] can be divided into two groups. Those that compose the ordinary human personality and those that constitute the superior individuality, the Soul properly so called. Now, while the ordinary joys and pleasures are felt by the personality, Spiritual Joy is the property of the individuality.²

The practice of psychosynthesis is well suited to spiritual direction precisely because it seeks to promote 'a harmonious and coherent unity' in a person, the result of which is honest openness to the deepest desire of the human heart, which is to engage in meaningful and loving relationships with others, including the ultimate Other.³ Psychosynthesis fosters an awareness and a growth in consciousness that result in intellectual, moral and religious conversion. Psychosynthesis promotes the identification of inner spiritual conflicts and their resolution by freeing the true from the false self.

The integration of the personality results in part from what the eminent Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan called the 'dialectic process', which leads to the establishment of new foundations based on intellectual, moral and religious conversion. Lonergan saw dialectic as an operation at the fourth level of consciousness—the level which reveals the need to make responsible decisions based on rational judgments made at the previous level. He defined *intellectual conversion* as 'a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge'; *moral conversion* as 'changes in the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfactions to values'; and *religious conversion* as 'being grasped by ultimate concern. It is otherworldly falling in love. It is total

² Roberto Assagioli, 'Spiritual Joy', *The Beacon* (June 1942), available at <http://www.psykosyntese.dk/a-168/>.

³ The value of psychosynthesis in the context of Ignatian spirituality, in particular, was aptly demonstrated in Andrew Walker, 'Daydreaming Revisited: A Psychology for the Examen Explored', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003).

and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations.’⁴ All three forms of conversion facilitate growth in authenticity.

Psychosynthesis engages the entire person by drawing on all aspects of that person’s past and all hopes and apprehensions regarding the future, but it is situated more precisely in the present, where the centrality of consciousness is most critical and vital. In this present, the grandeur of each existential moment is best achieved through communion with God. The purpose of spiritual direction is to help the directee to recognise and foster his or her positive experience of God, and to identify interior conflicts which create barriers to an adequate understanding of that experience and, therefore, to forming appropriate judgments and decisions. Consequently, the director should enable the expansion of the directee’s field of consciousness and help him or her identify things that obscure the awareness of God’s call. As awareness grows, the ‘I’ exercises increasing control over the content of the conscious and, to a degree, over the mid-level unconscious, through the will, which is like a muscle that must be developed to perform effectively.

**Psychosynthesis
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The ‘I’ begins as obscure subjectivity, as no more than a point of reference for emotional experience, but it asserts itself gradually as it succeeds in distinguishing itself as a source of activity from its particular elements (feelings, inclinations, instincts, ideas). The will is the unified activity of the ‘I’, which is held above the multiplicity of its content and which replaces the spontaneous, centrifugal, fragmenting and impulsive action of its content. The ‘I’ and the will are correlatives: the ‘I’ exists inasmuch as the will gives it the capacity to act; and the will exists only as the autonomous and distinctive action of the ‘I’.⁵

The ideal state for any individual is to be free enough and aware enough always to act and react authentically out of his or her unique and God-given identity, purpose and attendant giftedness. As an ideal, this situation never wholly arises. In reality, each of us carries wounds, fears and anxieties from the earliest moments of our life that colour our understanding and judgment, and shape our actions. As life’s scars accumulate, our spiritual identity becomes overlaid with defence

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1971), 238, 240.

⁵ See Giovanni Calò, in *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti* (Rome, 1929–1939).

mechanisms, which crystallize into sub-personalities. These can function, to the degree that they are adapted to the circumstances of our life.

According to Piero Ferrucci:

Sub-personalities are psychological satellites, coexisting as a multitude of lives within the overall medium of our personality. Each sub-personality has a style and a motivation of its own, often strikingly dissimilar from these of the others As Assagioli wrote, 'We are not unified; we often feel that we are, because we do not have many bodies and many limbs, and because one hand doesn't usually hit the other. But, metaphorically, that is exactly what does happen within us. Several sub-personalities are continually scuffling: impulses, desires, principles, aspirations are engaged in an unceasing struggle.'⁶

Distortions inevitably occur when we identify with one of these sub-personalities, because they are necessarily incomplete and may run contrary to our true identity. Our true nature is to be found when the 'I' is linked to our higher self. Consequently, sub-personalities are false selves. But, at any given moment, if we are not sufficiently aware of the dynamics of our personality, we are inclined to identify with one or other of them, particularly if this has the effect of limiting fear or anxiety. But sub-personalities cannot be effective in all circumstances and are incapable of yielding true spiritual joy because they cannot be in communion with God. Sub-personalities can never be in authentic and meaningful dialogue with God because God is Life itself and they are unwitting diversions from the life that God has lovingly created in us.

While sub-personalities detract from our true self, the spiritual director will find them interesting and useful because they reveal something of the circumstances of a directee's life, as well as the deepest desires of his or her heart. Indeed, all sub-personalities contain a version of the true self. They amplify some vital aspect to suit a situation, but cut us off from other parts of the self in the process. These parts remain real and necessary, however, and sooner or later they will make their presence felt, creating disturbing conflicts within and among the dominant sub-personalities. The less a person is aware of the

⁶ Ferrucci, *What We May Be*, 47–48, citing Roberto Assagioli, course given at the Accademia Tiberina, 1967, 2.

existence of different sub-personalities and the interplay between them, the more anxious and agitated he or she becomes. In conflict, sub-personalities will become less and less functional, prompting depression or psychological dysfunction, and perhaps ultimately creating a crisis in the person's physical or emotional health. Since God is the cause and purpose of our life, breaches in communion with the God of Life sap our life of its vitality and result in the behaviour that we, in moral terms, call sin, with all its detrimental consequences.



Roberto Assagioli

Sub-personalities tend to distort our perception of ourselves and others and, when they conflict, they cause confusion or anguish. The goal, therefore, is to unify our personality, to allow God-given talents to emerge and fear-ridden defence mechanisms to recede. This process operates through five stages: *recognition*, *acceptance*, *coordination*, *integration* and *synthesis*—the ultimate objective of psychosynthesis.⁷

Recognition is relatively easy. Dominant sub-personalities reveal themselves to the simplest introspection, although subordinated ones are less conspicuous. Nonetheless, it is important to avoid becoming obsessed with individual sub-personalities as static entities at the risk of abdicating to them control and energy needed for the 'I' to act autonomously. It is less important to name sub-personalities than to identify their dynamic, evolution and interplay.

⁷ See James G. Vargiu, 'Sub-personalities', in *Synthesis Volume I: The Realisation of the Self* (Redwood City: Synthesis, 1974), available at www.synthesiscenter.org/articles/1660.pdf.

The *acceptance* of sub-personalities is necessary in order to change or eliminate what is negative in them and accentuate what is positive. Acceptance of a sub-personality and its coordination with other sub-personalities must occur together and must be managed carefully and gradually.

Coordination requires a sound understanding of a sub-personality and what lies behind it. In effect, it seeks to manage the positive and negative forces within the sub-personality to allow basic intuitions and motivations to breathe and be expressed.

Integration uses all of these techniques to adjust particular sub-personalities so as to foster functional relationships between them as well as favourable outcomes for each. This occurs in a variety of ways: by an intentional and appropriate time-sharing between sub-personalities, by purposeful cooperation between them, or by their being absorbed into one another or fused.

While integration of the personality is focused on bridging the gaps between sub-personalities, synthesis results in the emergence of the transcended self in a manner that establishes a new foundation for interactions with others:

In the process of psychosynthesis, a person passes from being a disordered collection of clashing tendencies to being a meaningfully harmonized whole around a centre: the self. Through the action of the will, the self can then regulate each function of the psychophysical organism.⁸

As a result of this regulation, the individual's life and relationships with others become more responsible, caring, cooperative, altruistic and loving. It leads to the harmonious integration of the person with others, with humanity and with the world.⁹

An Illustrative Case

A client named John exhibited over several months a great deal of eagerness to apply gospel values to his life but struggled to find a clear direction. Periodically, he would reveal the presence of clear and reasonably distinct sub-personalities. The first sub-personality we called

⁸ Ferrucci, *What We May Be*, 46.

⁹ See Vargiu, 'Sub-personalities'.



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The Lover. Its energy came from the realm of feelings, which covertly coloured his most important relationships. John had always thought of himself as a thinker or a doer, but—with the benefit of hindsight—it became evident that affective engagement with others had been a hidden desire and that he often lacked confidence to act authentically on his feelings. The Lover was most evident in relationships with women, in which he was typically attentive and affectionate. More recently it had assumed new forms in friendship.

The second major sub-personality was the one for which he was best known professionally. It was named The Business Manager. In this role, he was creative, decisive and highly motivated to succeed. The Business Manager had often been very successful. But this sub-personality would get very anxious when success was threatened or goals were compromised. Latterly, John had found less evidence of its presence in his life. It was a false self whose energy came from the Body. Its life was marked by action, which was sometimes driven by panic and always defensive, though he never realised this at the time.

He came to realise that The Business Manager had caused him to make some very unfortunate professional and even vocational choices, and had placed him in inordinately stressful situations. Though this

sub-personality limited his capacity for integration, I emphasized that it must not be dismissed outright because it contained important elements of his giftedness. The third key sub-personality was one that had made a surprising appearance in recent years. It was named The Teacher. It was driven by a long-standing desire to discover Truth and a more recent passion to communicate Truth, as he understood it. Its instinct was to investigate facts and ideas, to reflect on the thoughts and feelings elicited by them, and to act with cautious and deliberate determination. Its actions were usually constructive because they emerged from what was for him the mediating centre, the Mind. This was the sub-personality that had most often informed and animated his actions in recent years. Though its influence was generally positive, it was important that this sub-personality should not become rigid or impede the full expression of the particular Word of God incarnating in him.

The fourth sub-personality that merited attention was The Friar. We call him The Friar because he was intellectually, morally and religiously conscious: contemplative but also active. John concluded that this sub-personality best approximated his true self in that it integrated the best of all energies (thoughts, actions and feelings). To the extent that was humanly possible, The Friar was in authentic relationship with God and with others. Interestingly, The Friar's presence had only been felt recently, but with increasing intensity.

Inwardly, John was discovering an abiding desire to be free of fear, free of false selves and free of compulsions that diverted his energy from the deepest yearnings of his heart. 'I am restless until I rest in you',¹⁰ his self said to his God, author of his true identity and purpose. What he sought most was the grace to be fully alive, engaged in authentic and loving relationship with others. The goal of his spiritual journey, therefore, was freedom and self-transcendence.

Outwardly, he found himself drawn mystically and powerfully to people, events and even biblical references associated with the freedom and self-transcendence he desired. His eyes rapidly gravitated to two familiar passages from Paul's letter to the Galatians because they resonated with his desire for greater freedom to enter into loving relationships (4:1–10 and 5:13–25). John's awareness of the joy of

¹⁰ Compare Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1 (1).

authentic relationship reached a peak during a reflection on a familiar gospel episode: Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:6–29). This gave rise to a sudden realisation that, for him, the water of eternal life was the integration of all those aspects of his personality that urged him faithfully towards his true self.

For John the process of psychosynthesis happened as two series of overlapping stages, the simplest of which best explained what he had been experiencing during the past few years, and most acutely during the past few months. The first stage was in some ways the most significant: at this stage, he honoured the other by being respectfully and even contemplatively attentive. He found openness in relationships essential. In his own self-awareness, this took the form of a willed engagement of the 'I' with the dynamics of his own personality. This was for John the most exciting part of his journey; his entire being leapt with wonder as he discovered the other in himself.

The second stage was an invitation to the 'I' to occupy its rightful place as the primary director of his will and the conscious arbiter of all aspects of his personality by entering, with discernment and courage, into an exploration of his unconscious. This began relatively easily, as he identified his dominant sub-personalities. (Others might be lurking in the shadows and might allow themselves to be discovered later.) The contents of his inferior, mid-level and upper unconsciousness were relatively unknown, although he had had some glimpses.

In the third stage John took control of these sub-personalities by assuming responsibility for their actions through a strong and independent 'I'. Psychologically, by shedding light on their existence and describing their attitudes and inclinations, he began to transfer power from them to the 'I', so that he could act intentionally rather than impulsively. Spiritually, he came to see that his will was not the only agent operating; so was the will of God.

The fourth stage was perhaps the most promising. In it he was called to deepen and strengthen the self through well-adjusted relationships with his own sub-personalities and with other people. He was also called to renounce false beliefs, inauthentic forms, and the paralysing fear of what lay beyond his immediate self-control. Spiritually, this was analogous to John of the Cross's dark night of the senses, when the senses are purified and we let go of our pleasure in them. John freely abandoned the trappings of his false self to allow God

to reveal the fullness of life, which had remained in potential, and to regain his higher or true self where God's Word was waiting to be actualised as he disengaged from falseness, illusion and ill-adapted defences. His woundedness was no longer something from which he fled, but the birthplace of his resurrected self.

The final stage recalled the spiritual progress through purgation and illumination to union. This communion was his heart's longing, expressed as an authentic and life-giving relationship with God and with those whom he brings across our path. John had had glimpses of this stage already, albeit fleetingly. He experienced it as ecstatic joy as he abandoned his will to God's, accepting the stripping away of everything that might encumber his journey and defining the meaning and purpose of his life in terms of sonship and brotherhood in relationship with God and with his neighbour.

With God's grace, John is now more conscious of the dynamics of his personality and he is able to resist impulses and temptations deriving from emotional woundedness, regret about the past or fear about the future. The more he focuses on the present moment and on wholesome relationships, the clearer his needs and desires are, as well as the graces in the choices that he must make.

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