

“I,” SELF, AND EGG*

BY

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In 1934, Roberto Assagioli published the article “Psicoanalisi e Psicosintesi” in the *Hibbert Journal* (cf. Assagioli, 1965). This seminal article was later to become “Dynamic Psychology and Psychosynthesis,” the lead chapter of his first major book, *Psychosynthesis*. In this early article, Assagioli outlined the basic personality theory of psychosynthesis by using an oval-shaped diagram, often called informally, the “egg diagram.” This diagram has since functioned as one of the central models within psychosynthesis theory.

However, as Assagioli said in this same article, his diagram is “far from perfect or final.” Indeed, over the course of the intervening years, aspects of this diagram have been found to be problematic in portraying: 1) Assagioli’s own understanding of the human person, and 2) the observed experience of many clients, students, and practitioners. This article attempts to point to the difficulty with this diagram, and to suggest a way that the diagram might be changed so to represent more accurately the psychosynthesis understanding of human being.

Self

Central to this suggested change in the egg diagram is Assagioli’s profound understanding of the nature of Self (or “Higher Self” or “Transpersonal Self”). That is, the original diagram obscures Assagioli’s insight that Self is transcendent of all content and process, transcendent even of the numinous patterns and transpersonal qualities of the higher unconscious or superconscious:

...the all-important and not often clearly realized difference between ‘superconscious’ experiences and...the spiritual Self. (Assagioli, 1965, p. 192)

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Rather than reflecting this insight into the nature of Self, the original diagram represents Self as existing solely in the direction of the higher unconscious, that level of the unconscious glimpsed in “peak experiences” (Maslow, 1971) and characterized by such qualities as ecstasy, union, compassion, wholeness, joy, and beauty. Thus Self is apparently associated only with these sublime energies, and somewhat removed from day-to-day awareness, the middle unconscious, and the more traumatic material of the lower unconscious. Unfortunately, this diagrammatic representation implies that in order to contact and respond to Self, one must distance oneself from the “flatlands” and depths of human experience, and reach upwards to the heights.

However, many people both in and outside the field have reported experiences which do not fit well within this higher-unconscious notion of Self. Contrary to this restricted idea of Self, many reported experiences in which they encountered the presence of Self in the mundane details of daily life; in everyday relationships to other people and nature; in the depths of despair and disintegration; when lost in compulsions and addictions; or when submerged in a “dark night of the soul” (St. John of the Cross). All such experiences obviously reveal that Self is a presence of such magnitude that it cannot be limited to the higher unconscious alone.

Furthermore, it has been observed over the years that Self-realization is not a matter of working through lower unconscious issues and then moving into the higher unconscious, as implied in the early diagram. To the contrary, many seasoned travelers on the path of Self-realization find that the more they are in touch with the heights in themselves, the more they engage the depths.

For example, even after many years of quite valid transformative work via psychological methods and spiritual practices, many people nevertheless stumble upon vast areas of wounding which had remained hidden since childhood, and subsequently they are able to attain even more profound levels of healing. Of course, Assagioli (1965) himself clearly recognized the engagement with lower unconscious material in Self-realization, and psychosynthesist Anne Yeomans (1984) wrote poignantly about the painful process of “positive disintegration” encountered in human growth.

To reiterate, Self-realization appears to involve not a climb from the “past” of the lower unconscious to the “future” of the higher unconscious—an implication of the earlier diagram—but instead tends towards an increased ability to engage a range of experience that includes *both* these areas of the personality (i.e., an expansion of the middle unconscious).

The Changed Egg

Given all of the above, the suggested change in the egg diagram is simply this: *that Self not be depicted as existing solely in the direction of the higher unconscious*. The diagram can be presented as it always has been, with the single exception that Self not be illustrated at all. In such a presentation it should be made clear that Self pervades *all* the areas of the person—lower unconscious, middle unconscious, and higher unconscious—and that therefore Self is potentially present to us at any of those levels. This type of revised diagram has already been published by psychosynthesist Molly Young Brown (1993) following the work of Tom Yeomans, and also by Ann Gila and myself (Firman & Russell, 1993).

This diagrammatic change accurately reflects, for example, the fact that one may encounter Self while working on childhood wounding, or caught up in a peak experience, or performing the routine tasks of daily living. This modified diagram also emphasizes a crucial point strongly voiced by Assagioli and by subsequent psychosynthesis thought: Self is so distinct from higher unconscious energies that the higher unconscious can in some cases pose a distraction from authentic Self-realization (see Assagioli, 1965, 1973).

It is important to note that this omnipresence of Self does not imply that Self is to be equated with the sum total of these levels of experience. That is, Self is not simply the totality of the personality (a Jungian notion), not an aggregate of the content and processes of the psyche-soma. Self is distinct, but not separate, from all levels of the person, a characteristic that can be called the “transcendence-immanence” of Self (Firman, 1991, 1994, 1996).

Transcendence here denotes that Self cannot be equated with any specific content or process of the higher, middle, or lower unconscious, while immanence denotes that Self is yet completely present and active within the content and process of all these levels—both insights at the core of Assagioli’s understanding of Self.

Thus while Self is not separate from the levels of the personality, Self is yet not identical to the levels of the personality. In philosophical or theological terms, this conceptualization avoids the extreme of pantheism or monism on the one hand (identifying Spirit with creation), and dualism or deism on the other hand (viewing Spirit as separate from creation).

“I” or Personal Self

Following this change in the diagram of Self, so a change may take place in the conception of “I” or personal self. The earlier conception at times suggested a dualistic notion of “I,” a dualism which can be inferred from the statements: “I have a body but I am not my body; I have my feelings but I am not my feelings; I have a mind but I am not my mind” (cf. Assagioli, 1965, 1973).

Again, the problems with this dualism have been voiced since the early 1970s, and have found their way into print (O’Regan, 1984; Firman, 1991). Chiefly the problem here is that “I” can be misunderstood as intrinsically disconnected and separate from the personality and the world, rather than as intrinsically in relationship to the personality and the world. Clinically, such a misconception of human being can encourage not true disidentification, but a devaluation of intrinsic human relatedness and embeddedness in the world.

However, since “I” is a projection or reflection of Self (Assagioli, 1965), and the new diagram presents Self as transcendent-immanent, then “I” is also transcendent-immanent. That is, just as Self is distinct but not separate—transcendent-immanent—within all levels of possible experience, so “I” is distinct but not separate—transcendent-immanent—within the immediate flow of experience, e.g., sensations, feelings, images, and thoughts. “I” is thus neither separate from, nor identical to, the personality and a relationship to the world.

This transcendence-immanence of “I” accounts for a commonly observed effect of disidentification: instead of becoming less aware of the flow of experience in disidentification, one becomes *more* aware. That is, as one becomes free from a limited identification—whether with feelings, thoughts, a life role, a subpersonality, or a transpersonal quality—there is an increased ability to engage a spectrum of experience beyond that identification.

As one disidentifies from a mental identification, for example, there can now be more awareness of feelings as well as thoughts; there is here an expansion of consciousness, not a dissociation of consciousness. In other words, as there is transcendence—the realization that “I” am distinct from a particular identification—so there is immanence—an openness to many more experiences beyond that single limited identification.

According to this transcendent-immanent view of “I,” human beings are intrinsically at home in the cosmos. We are not visitors

from another dimension, alienated and seeking our way home; we are home, and it is only our past conditioning that makes us feel otherwise. Thus this change in the egg diagram helps underscore the fact that psychosynthesis is in accord with other relational views of life, as exemplified by modern physics, the women's movement, nature-centered religions, ecopsychology, liberation theology, and the spirituality of daily life, to name a few.

Self-Realization

The earlier diagram of Self also tends to confuse transpersonal psychosynthesis (or spiritual psychosynthesis) with Self-realization. Although Assagioli is quite clear that Self-realization is distinct from transpersonal contents and energies, the early diagram can confuse this distinction.

Assagioli at one point states that transpersonal psychosynthesis involves “the proper assimilation of the inflowing superconscious energies and of their integration with the pre-existing aspects of the personality” (Assagioli, 1965, p. 55). Transpersonal psychosynthesis is here obviously seen as the integration of higher unconscious material into the conscious personality.

But he later writes, “*Self-realization* concerns the third higher level, that of the superconscious, and pertains to Transpersonal or spiritual psychosynthesis” (Assagioli, 1973, p. 121, emphasis added). Ergo, transpersonal psychosynthesis and Self-realization seem quite the same, both having to do with the higher unconscious.

However, this early conception confuses two distinct processes: 1) the contact with, and integration of, higher unconscious (superconscious) energies; and 2) the ongoing relationship between “I” and Self, which is not limited to the higher unconscious alone.

Following the revised diagram, this confusion can be avoided by using the term “transpersonal psychosynthesis” to describe contact with, and integration of, transpersonal or superconscious energies; and the term “Self-realization” to describe the ongoing relationship between “I” and Self (Firman & Russell, 1993).

Accordingly, Self-realization can involve work with the middle and lower unconscious (personal psychosynthesis), work with the higher unconscious (transpersonal psychosynthesis), or work with both realms simultaneously, depending on the individual's own unique path of Self-realization. Maintaining a relationship with a transcendent-immanent Self can take one any place at any time.

This approach makes abundantly clear “the all-important and not often clearly realized difference between ‘superconscious’

experiences and...the spiritual Self” (Assagioli, 1965, p. 192). The revised diagram accurately depicts the I-Self relationship as sharply distinct from, for example, “spiritual awakening and spiritual realization” (Ibid., p. 38) or “mystical experience” (Ibid., p. 207).

To state this in an affirmative sense, the new diagram emphasizes Self-realization as a committed relationship with Self each moment of each day and over the course of a lifetime. Closely following Assagioli (1973), Self-realization is viewed as a continual interplay between personal will (the will of “I”) and transpersonal will (the will of Self).

This committed relationship with Self, as all committed relationships, can of course involve moments of ecstasy and unity, even moments “in which the sense of individual identity is dimmed and may even seem temporarily lost” in the Other (Ibid., p. 128). But the path of Self-realization may also lead through the abyss, through periods of isolation, loss, and pain. To see that this is so, we have but to review the lives of any of those mentioned by Assagioli as exemplifying Self-realization: Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, and Albert Schweitzer (Ibid., p. 122). None of these remarkable human beings, in following the call of their Deepest Truth, were shielded from the dark mystery of human alienation.

Summation

Assagioli’s understanding of Self, as well as years of observed experience, suggest a change in the original oval-shaped diagram of the human person. This change is that Self not be represented as limited to the higher unconscious nor approachable only via the higher unconscious, but as pervading all levels of human experience.

From this representation of Self, two points are made clear: 1) “I” is intrinsically related to the personality and not dualistically separate from this; and 2) Self-realization is not a matter of seeking particular experiences of unity or enlightenment, but of living out one’s life’s calling or dharma—the transpersonal will—in relationship to other people and the world.

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