

The Process of Synthesis: Two Aspects of the Same Power

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to frame the idea of self-realization within the broader perspective of the process of synthesis, which includes but is not limited to an evolutionary aspect. The underlying premise is that the more precise our understanding of synthesis as a process, the more refined and effective will be our practice of psychosynthesis as a means of facilitating that process.

The concept of synthesis has received many different definitions over the years by many differently oriented psychosynthesis practitioners. Jean Hardy (Hardy, 1987) reminds us that the first system of psychosynthesis [was] advanced by Bezzola and reported to the Amsterdam Psychoanalytic Conference in the year 1907. (p. 9). After hearing Bezzola, Hardy tells us, Freud irritably remarked, "after all...if we try to analyze to find the repressed fragments, it is only in order to put them together again." Despite Freud's comment, however, Hardy finds it useful to define psychosynthesis (at least initially) by contrasting it with psychoanalysis; whereas the latter focuses its efforts on analysis of the repressed psychic fragments, the former attempts to put the pieces back together. In fact, Hardy states, [Assagioli's] emphasis throughout is on synthesis rather than analysis. (p. 17). Molly Brown (Brown, 1983) defines synthesis as a synonym for human growth, the ongoing process of integrating all the parts, aspects, and energies of the individual into a harmonious, powerful whole. (p. 3). In contrast to this, John Firman (Firman, 1991) has argued that, most often "synthesis" is thought to imply parts coming together in a harmonious whole. But the thrust of our current study is precisely that "psychosynthesis"...may not involve parts coming together in this way at all...[Rather] the term "psycho-synthesis" can be thought to denote the process of synthesis...based upon a relationship to Self...again it is the personal I-Self relationship here which is forefront. (p. 95) Curiously, both Brown and Firman's ideas find some resonance in Assagioli (Assagioli, 1965): "[Psychosynthesis] is first and foremost a dynamic...conception of our psychological life, which it portrays as a constant interplay and conflict between the many different and contrasting forces and a unifying center which ever tends to control, harmonize and utilize them." (p. 30) James Vargiu (1974) in his article on subpersonalities, talks about synthesis as the final phase of subpersonality work in which the subpersonalities come together in a process he refers to as harmonization. Here, while [the process of synthesis] has an influence on the subpersonalities, it has [more] to do with the interaction of the individual with others and with the world, and is mediated by the Transpersonal Self. (p. 20). Also framed in terms of subpersonality work, Betsie Carter-Haar's (Carter-Haar, 1975) concept of the "I" as a synthesis of all colors...a unifying center for the whole personality, (p. 81) is relevant here, as is the well-known article, "Dimensions of Growth", in which Firman and Vargiu (1977) refer to the process of synthesis as the compelling pull [within the person] to include both the personal and transpersonal dimensions of meaning. When Albert Szent-Gyoegeyi's (1974) article, "The Drive in Living Matter to Perfect Itself" was reprinted in Synthesis 1, it was noted that his conception of syntropy, or the inherent drive in nature to put things together in a meaningful way, (p. 15) closely resembled Assagioli's concept of synthesis. As the editor's prologue to Szent-Gyoegeyi's article says, "...today many are calling increasing attention to a psychological drive toward synthesis, toward growth, toward wholeness and [the organism's inherent drive toward] self-perfection." (p. 14). And finally, there is Assagioli's (1965) conception of psychosynthesis more generally as the individual expression of a wider principle of a general law of inter-individual and cosmic synthesis. (p. 30).

One interesting thing about this sequence of definitions (which is intended to be representative though by no means exhaustive) is that each tends to conceptualize synthesis as either a drive in living matter to perfect itself or an intrapsychic phenomenon which denotes the nature of psychological development. In other words, taken one way, synthesis is used to denote the nature of growth,

movement and progress in the physical and perhaps biological sphere (I will call this view of synthesis the Evolutionary or Aspect #1 perspective). Whereas taken the other way synthesis is a psychological process in which "I" comes to terms with its various aspects (subpersonalities) and eventually establishes relationship to Self, others and the world (I will call this view of synthesis the Self-realization or Aspect #2 perspective). Now obviously the processes of self-realization and evolution, so considered, can and do interpenetrate and influence each other, and so my point is not to say that one of these ways is the right or better view of synthesis. Rather, I am simply suggesting that there are indeed two aspects of the process we call synthesis, two aspects of the same power, and that it may be helpful to distinguish them.

Implicit here is my belief that indeed the two aspects of synthesis are often confused and/or grafted onto one another in a way that can be theoretically partial to the detriment of clinical practice. For instance, a leading theorist in transpersonal psychology, Ken Wilber (1995), purports a view of the universe as a hierarchical movement toward ever higher levels of integration and organization in which everything participates. Rooted partly in the evolutionary thinking of philosophers like Hegel and Whitehead, the process of synthesis (what Wilber calls differentiation/integration) plays a central role in his scheme. Although this is not the place to enter into even a brief analysis of Wilber's intricate, rich and deeply complex system, I will quote two key points he makes about his evolutionary theory:

1. In sum, evolution requires both differentiation and integration — "the many become one and are increased by the one" — and, indeed, these two normally...occur conjointly, which is why I usually write it as "differentiation/integration." (p. 71)
2. ...there have now been discovered basic regularities, patterns, or laws that apply in a broad fashion to all three great realms of evolution, the physiosphere and the biosphere and the noosphere, and a "unity of science"...is now possible...in other words..."everything is connected to everything else"—the web of life as a scientific and not just religious conclusion. (p. 15).

My reason for citing Wilber here is that he probably has the most cohesive, if not the most persuasive theory going. But that should not occlude the fact that there is a deep vein of evolutionary thought that runs through nearly every major transpersonal theorist now writing — and this despite their various disagreements. As I have already suggested, there is certainly a case to be made for the veracity and even the usefulness of this common theoretical perspective. However, what I wish to point out is the similarity between the evolutionary point of view (of which, again, Wilber is just one example), and Aspect #1 oriented definitions of synthesis i.e. definitions of synthesis that tend to refer more to physical and biological processes than to psychological ones. What is significant about this similarity is that it can lead to the confusion I alluded to earlier, namely the confusion which occurs when evolutionary (Aspect #1) models of growth (differentiation/integration) are assumed to apply not only to the physical and biological realms but to the totality of the self-realization or psychological (Aspect #2) process as well. That is—despite the emphasis on holons and wholeparts and holism—a basically dualistic view of psychological development in which the one becomes two so as to become one, though increased by the one (eg. mind/body fusion goes to mind-body differentiation then to integrated bodymind, and on up from there). But what exactly is the problem with this point of view?

To begin with, I would like to suggest that psychological growth may or may not involve an evolution to higher level integration; and that even when self-realization and evolution do occur together it is important to realize that they are independent from one another. For instance, a client who has achieved a modicum of moral, mental and even spiritual development and yet cannot figure out why she is so abusive to her husband even when she doesn't want to be abusive, and has affairs even though she knows it's wrong and it is not what she wants to do because she doesn't want to hurt her husband and yet she isn't, for all her higher level development, fulfilled by that relationship—a client like this is most

likely going to need to examine issues that have less to do with levels of organization proceeding to higher orders of development, and more to do with relatedness, relationships, and whatever it is that happened and/or keeps happening to inhibit her (and perhaps her husband's) capacity in that regard. Though eventually this may of course lead to greater wholeness for the client (evolution), my point is that the achievement of higher levels of development does not necessarily, in itself, mean better, more humane, more useful and more integrated at the psychological level. The recovering addict who has been clean and sober in therapy for seven years, and who in that span of time has examined the abuse and neglect inflicted upon him by his alcoholic mother and drug addicted father, and who has made such substantial repairs in his self-structure that he is now able to be of meaningful service to others, make high level moral choices in response to dilemmas, and practice spiritual skills regularly with a subtle and glorious return, falls prey to an intractable depression dominated by suicidal ideation three days after marrying the woman with whom he has decided to spend the rest of his life. In therapy it is discovered that a deep layer of fear and rage was triggered by the marriage (and the commitment it represents). The feelings are first identified in the context of earlier relationship betrayals, and later worked through over a period of several months. One salient consequence of the therapeutic work on this post-marital depression is an abundance of liberated energy available for the client to channel into his lifelong commitment with a new wife.

Considered this way, while it may not be wrong to conceive of these results as an "evolutionary" movement toward higher development for the client, the clinical reality (in both cases) is that the same "I" that was capable of achieving high levels of organization in the mental, moral and spiritual domains was also, at the level of relationship, still subject to profound fluctuations that reverberated to, and therefore required attention and repair at, the very lowest or earliest of levels (childhood wounding). Again this is not to discount the evolutionary view of synthesis as it applies to the general, "outside" arc of psychological development (both clients today are living at what might be deemed a higher level of development than they were prior to treatment). The point is rather that, as John Firman recently observed, There are two ways of looking at synthesis. One is that it is a natural process of moving toward larger and larger wholes. The other is that it has to do with healing the I-Self relationship (which may or may not involve the former). (*italics mine*). In other words, although one could make a case for the fact that self-realization involves differentiation/integration at ever higher levels, I am suggesting that this view may be misleading and give short shrift to the healing and ongoing work that must take place at the level of relationship as well.

Another way to look at the two aspects of synthesis is through the lens of Jean Hardy's (Hardy, 1987) response to a comment Sam Keen makes in his well-known 1974 interview with Assagioli: In the Christian tradition, says Keen, healing comes from accepting our brokenness, not from synthesizing our parts into a perfect whole...the idea of wholeness, realizing the full human potential, transcending contradictions, achieving enlightenment, intrigues me. (p. 4) Keen here makes a common misinterpretation to which Hardy has a handy, unequivocal reply: Keen offers an unreal distinction, because the theory of psychosynthesis postulates that in accepting and working with our brokenness and fragmentation, we have the means of becoming whole. (*ibid.*). Brokenness at the level of "I" is all about relationship—to Self, to parents, others, peers and to the world. As we heal what was lost or never had or is still longed for at this level we engage in a process of synthesis that leads us into meaningful connections at all levels of organization, higher and lower.

Assagioli's (1965) basic distinction between personal and transpersonal psychosynthesis is another, albeit analogous, way of making the same distinction between the two aspects of synthesis. Among other things, Assagioli tells us that personal psychosynthesis involves the elimination of repressions and inhibitions, or fears and childish dependence, the examination of self-centeredness and emotional distortions as well as the investigation of uncoordinated conscious and unconscious trends and

functions. (p. 55); while transpersonal psychosynthesis focuses more on harmonious adjustment by means of proper assimilation of the inflowing superconscious energies and of their integration. (ibid.) In most cases Assagioli considered personal psychosynthesis a pre-requisite for spiritual or transpersonal psychosynthesis, however, this is not meant to imply a linear progression up the ladder. Rather, it is intended to mark the outer boundaries of a process that engages the lowest to the highest in our being in an inclusive and ongoing dance. The unfortunate split between lower (personal) and higher (spiritual) in psychosynthesis, and the subsequent tendency toward an upwardly mobile model of growth, is less central to Assagioli's system than is the notion that even in the highest states of transcendence...the sense of individual identity is not wholly lost (Assagioli, 1973, p. 128). That is, there is an autonomous/interdependent, not a linear/sequential, relationship between "I" and Self.

Accordingly, it may not only be fitting but illuminating to define the process of synthesis as involving two distinct, though not mutually exclusive, activities:

1. Transpersonal Synthesis (Aspect #1), wherein the essentially autonomous/interdependent I/Self relationship is brought into focus and harmony with physical, biological, cognitive, affective-emotional and spiritual evolution toward ever higher levels of organization.
2. Personal Synthesis (Aspect #2), which addresses the ongoing need of "I" for relationship to Self, others and the world; wherein synthesis is less about moving to higher levels of evolution, and more about moving to the heights and depths of our being as needed, managing the appropriate sadness and elation and everything in-between, reaping the benefits and suffering the vicissitudes of relatedness at all levels.

Taken together, these two aspects of the same power delineate the general domain in which psychosynthesis occurs, and as well describe what is the endowment of each individual human being. That there is an evolutionary flow into which we are born is our phylogenetic inheritance: it moves and grows and evolves with or without our awareness, and whether or not we are developing the capacities to appreciate its more subtle inflections and innuendoes. In compliment to this evolutionary flow there is a matrix into which we are born that is filled with people who have been present during our ontogenetic development: people who have helped us and hurt us, loved us and hated us, had relationships with us and around us, uplifted us and let us down, damaged us and healed us in remarkable, wonderful and horrible ways. To each aspect must we give our effort, to each aspect must we be responsible, to each aspect must we support synthesis rising up within and around us so that we may bridge the gaps that still lay open between I and others, I and world, I and Self.

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