

SELF AND SELF-REALIZATION

by

JOHN FIRMAN

Psychosynthesis Palo Alto
461 Hawthorne Avenue
Palo Alto, California 94301
U.S.A.

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INTRODUCTION

This fourth monograph in the Psychosynthesis Palo Alto Monograph Series presents central aspects of Roberto Assagioli's understanding of Self and Self-realization. In order to do this, the author not only carefully explores Assagioli's basic insights, but examines aspects of psychosynthesis thought which confuse or obscure these insights: the notion that Self exists only in the higher unconscious; that transpersonal psychosynthesis and Self-realization are identical; that Self-realization involves an "identification with Self"; and that Self-realization is a contentless unitive experience.

The author then outlines new concepts in psychosynthesis which not only avoid these past confusions but also represent Self and Self-realization more in accord with Assagioli's view and with observed experience. This increased precision is also used to clarify related aspects of psychosynthesis thought, such as disidentification, the synthesis of the personality, and trans-individual psychosynthesis.

This monograph is based on the author's earlier article, "A Suggested Change in the Egg Diagram" (Firman, 1995), published in the Italian journal *Psicosintesi*. As in former monographs, we here follow a convention in which the first use of a psychosynthesis term is printed in boldface type. This allows the reader to know that these concepts are discussed more fully in other psychosynthesis literature.

Finally, we would like to thank our colleague and friend Chris Meriam, whose careful reading of the manuscript, copious feedback, and kind encouragement were invaluable at many stages of this publication.

John Firman and Ann Gila
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SELF AND SELF-REALIZATION

An understanding of the nature of **Self** and **Self-realization** is fundamental to Roberto Assagioli's psychosynthesis. This understanding profoundly conditions all other facets of psychosynthesis thought, from "**I**" and **disidentification**; to the **higher unconscious** and **lower unconscious**; to **personal psychosynthesis** and **transpersonal psychosynthesis**; to the phenomenon of **synthesis** itself. Even when Self and Self-realization are not addressed overtly in the practice of psychosynthesis, an implicit understanding of them nevertheless conditions the overall endeavor.

Yet there is some confusion about Self and Self-realization both in Assagioli's own writing and in subsequent psychosynthesis theory. In response to this confusion, I here focus upon the essentials of Assagioli's (1965, 1973) view of Self and Self-realization, and then a) examine problematic formulations of this view, and b) explore how this view can be better represented within psychosynthesis.

THE NATURE OF SELF

Perhaps one of Assagioli's most fundamental insights into the nature of Self is that Self is transcendent of all content and process. This transcendence is so profound that Self is not to be confused even with the higher unconscious (or **superconscious**), that sector of experience characterized by illumination, ecstasy, mystical experience, cosmic consciousness (Bucke, 1967), peak experiences (Maslow, 1971), spiritual images, and **transpersonal qualities** such as love, joy, and beauty. It is telling that Assagioli affirms this distinction in two almost identical sentences in the same chapter of his seminal book, *Psychosynthesis* (1965):

This necessarily involves the all-important and not often clearly realized difference between "superconscious" experiences and...the spiritual Self. (p. 192)

This raises the all important and not often clearly realized difference between "superconscious" experiences and psychological activities and the spiritual Self. (p. 198)

Assagioli explicitly differentiates Self from, for example, “peak experiences,” “spiritual awakening,” “spiritual realization” (p. 38), and “mystical experience” (p. 207).

This transcendent aspect of Self of course means that contact with, and response to, Self is not dependent on the experience of higher states of consciousness. Self is so very transcendent that it cannot be limited to even the most sublime states of human experience. In this view of Self then, Assagioli is at the same time making a distinction between the attainment of higher states of consciousness and the building of a relationship with deeper Self—the latter which is called Self-realization.

Assagioli’s (1965) notion of Self-realization is also very clear in his outline of the four stages of psychosynthesis. The first two stages involve an exploration of the lower unconscious *and the higher unconscious*, while the second two stages involve contact with, and response to, Self. Exploration of the unconscious—both lower *and* higher—is only an adjunct to the main aim: developing a relationship with Self. Self and Self-realization are thus differentiated from all the levels of the unconscious, including the higher unconscious.

But why is it important to emphasize this transcendent aspect of Self? Isn’t this a minor theoretical point of only academic interest?

Some Dangers of Confusing Higher Unconscious and Self

This discrimination between Self and different experiences of content and process is not at all a minor one. This is especially true regarding the higher unconscious, because this realm is often confused with Self. Religious traditions of both East and West take great pains to make this same type of distinction—the Absolute or Divine is differentiated from any particular type of experience, however powerful and wondrous the experience may be. The reason for this discrimination is a tremendously practical one:

It should also be pointed out that the reaching up into the realm of the superconscious and its

exploration...*may sometimes even constitute an obstacle to full Self-realization...* (Assagioli, 1965, pp. 38-39, emphasis added)

That is, if we confuse spiritual, mystical, or peak experiences with relating to Self, these experiences are apt to be seen as central to human psycho-spiritual development and so become idols preventing an authentic, lived relationship with Self. For example, we may be led to a) seek these experiences rather than develop a relationship with Self; b) assume that because we have these experiences we are approaching Self or are already in relationship to Self; c) become vulnerable to ego inflation and spiritual pride because we have unknowingly cut ourselves off from Self; and d) ignore the encounters with Self which can take place in mundane or painful life experiences. These are among the reasons that Assagioli—and many religious traditions—are careful to make this distinction in both theory and practice.

This of course does not mean that experiences of higher unconscious material (as well as lower unconscious material) are unimportant, nor that they have nothing to do with developing a relationship with Self. It is simply that higher states are only one of many different types of experience which can be encountered in Self-realization; they should not be confused with Self-realization *per se* nor seen as the goal of Self-realization:

Several Christian teachers have rightly pointed out that the mystical experience is not an end in itself, but from it the subject has to draw the fire, enthusiasm and incentive to come back into the world and serve God and his fellow men. So the mystical experience while having positive value is not an end in itself and is a partial experience of the spiritual life. (Assagioli, 1965, p. 207)

Self as Transcendent-Immanent

The understanding that Self is not limited to higher unconscious experiences also allows an openness to Self-realization

as it takes place in the more mundane, painful, and even traumatic experiences of life. Paradoxically, clarity about the transcendence of Self allows an appreciation for the intimate presence of Self in each moment of our lives, a presence which can be called the “immanence” of Self.

Self is not then only distinct from all content and process, but can also be present in all content and process, a characteristic which can be called **transcendence-immanence** (Firman, 1991; Firman & Russell, 1994; Firman & Gila, 1996).

In theological terms, this notion of transcendence-immanence avoids the extremes 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). The complementary principles of transcendence and immanence are clearly stated by Assagioli:

The individual is never absolutely alone and God (or the spiritual reality) is never purely transcendent, but always in living relationship with the manifestation. (Assagioli, 1965, pp. 205-206).

This immanent aspect of Self, this closeness of Self in all aspects of our lives, can be recognized in many different ways. People describe experiences in which they encounter the presence of Self in the normal details of their daily activities; in everyday relationships to other people and nature; in art, literature, and religious structures; in synchronistic events; in the depths of despair and disintegration; in a struggle with compulsions and addictions; or in what St. John of the Cross calls the “dark night of the soul.”

The Heights and Depths

Furthermore, it has been observed over the years that Self-realization is not a matter of finally working through painful issues from the past and then moving into the higher unconscious. To the contrary, many seasoned travelers on the path of Self-realization find that the more they are in touch with the heights, 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.

Assagioli recognized well the engagement with trauma and suffering in Self-realization, and this has been understood by much subsequent psychosynthesis theory and practice (for example, see Yeomans, 1984). In his famous chapter, "Self-Realization and Psychological Disturbances" (1965), Assagioli outlines many crises and reactions which can occur over the course of developing a relationship with Self. These disturbances may include such painful experiences as:

...an acute sense of unworthiness, a systematic self-depreciation, and self-accusation; the impression of going through hell, which may become so vivid as to produce the delusion that one is irretrievably damned; a keen and painful sense of intellectual incompetence; a loss of will power and self-control, indecision and an incapacity and distaste for action. (p. 47)

This engagement with suffering is born out too by the stages of psychosynthesis mentioned earlier. The first stage includes an exploration not only of the higher unconscious, but of the lower unconscious—that sector of the unconscious most closely associated with the wounds from childhood; with dissociated current trauma; and with the feelings related to these such as abandonment, isolation, rage, and anxiety (see Firman & Gila, 1996). Like higher unconscious work, lower unconscious work may also be an important part of Self-realization.

Although Self-realization cannot be reduced to encounters with either higher unconscious or lower unconscious material, it seems apparent that an openness to these two areas of ourselves may play a significant role in our Self-realization.

To put it another way, since Self is transcendent of and yet immanent within these sectors of the unconscious, Self-realization may involve engaging material from either sector at differ-

ent times. Assagioli seems to be saying that we should be ready to move into the heights or the depths as our relationship with Self unfolds over the course of our lives.

In sum, Self-realization is not only possible in moments of unity or bliss, but more importantly, throughout all the suffering and joy, the defeats and victories, and the events both sublime and mundane which make up a human lifetime. So how might Self-realization then be described? As we shall see in the next section, Assagioli's (1973) most insightful answer is that Self-realization is a lifelong interplay between **personal will** (the will of "I") and **transpersonal will** (the will of Self).

The Spiritual Marriage

Following closely from the transcendent-immanent nature of Self is Assagioli's fundamental understanding of Self-realization as an ongoing relationship between "I" and Self, an interplay or "dialogue" between personal will and transpersonal will. He understands Self as possessing transpersonal will, often experienced as a "pull," "call," or "vocation" from a power greater than ourselves:

Accounts of religious experiences often speak of a "call" from God, or a "pull" from some Higher Power; this sometimes starts a "dialogue" between the man and this "Higher Source," in which each alternately invokes and evokes the other. (Assagioli, 1973, p. 114)

Self-realization is an ongoing relationship—even, as some traditions say, a "spiritual marriage"—between the individual human being and Self, between the human and the Ground of Being (Tillich). The emphasis here is not upon the attainment of particular states of consciousness, but upon developing a lived *relationship* with Self. And as any committed relationship, this relationship cannot be limited to a particular moment or special event; it is rather lived out in all life events, "for better or worse, in sickness and in health." A good example of the process of Self-realization is described by transpersonal psychotherapist Greg Bogart (Bogart, 1994; Bogart, 1995).

Bogart was called to become a psychotherapist by a dream in which a therapist challenged him to think more deeply about his life direction, and then by a very unlikely means: an obscene phone call. Receiving this obscene call, he heard an “inner voice” telling him not to hang up, and so he continued to interact with the caller. This call nauseated him for days afterwards, and later brought up memories of abuse from his childhood which he then worked through. A series of events on the path of Self-realization? Yes.

Later the caller phoned to thank him, saying that Bogart had helped him more than any therapist ever had. According to Bogart, “At the moment the man thanked me, I remembered my dream of the psychotherapist, recognized the transformative impact my conversation with the phone caller had on both of us, and knew I had found a calling” (p. 20). He eventually became a psychotherapist.

Bogart’s invitation to this particular life direction was not simply a blissful state of consciousness nor a sensed unity with the Divine; it was in fact quite painful, and necessitated work with abuse memories from the lower unconscious. Furthermore, this vocation subsequently led him through the rigors of graduate school and professional licensing. But something was leading him throughout. Something was calling him, inviting him to a certain direction. This sense of call, of invitation, of dharma, is the essence of Self-realization. Here we encounter the invitations of Self—potentially in each and every moment of the day—and choose to respond to these invitations or not.

This ongoing intimate relationship with Self, as all ongoing intimate relationships, can of course involve moments of ecstasy and unity, even wondrous peak moments “in which the sense of individual identity is dimmed and may even seem temporarily lost” (Assagioli, 1965, p. 128). Such moments of profound union give rise to the insight that without Self we do not exist, that “I” has in truth “no autonomous substantiality” (Assagioli, 1965, p. 20). We realize here that there is an ontological union between “I” and Self, akin to the absolute union between a reflection and its source.

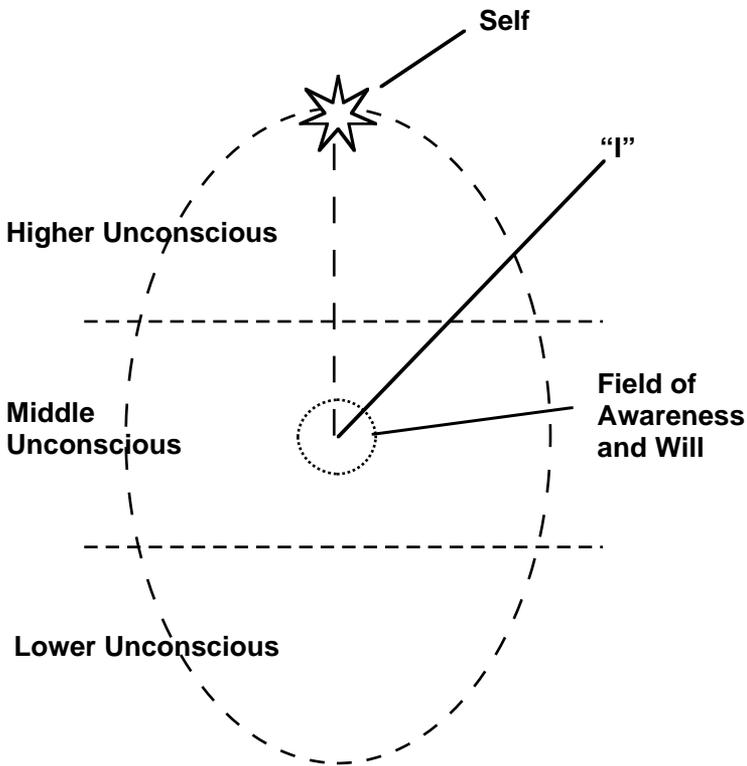
However, experiences of this unity do not characterize the entire relationship with Self any more than the initial romantic encounter characterizes an entire marriage. Like other ongoing intimate relationships, the path of Self-realization may also lead through the abyss, through periods of isolation, conflict, loss, and pain. Here we may find our fidelity to Self takes us far away from any sense of union, and instead into challenging times of separation and loneliness. To see that this is so, we have but to review the lives of any of those mentioned by Assagioli (1973) as exemplifying Self-realization: Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, and Albert Schweitzer. None of these extraordinary human beings, in following the call of their Deepest Truth, were shielded from the dark mystery of human suffering.

So Self-realization is not limited to a single special moment of union with Self, nor a final destination or goal; it is a committed intimate relationship potentially present at all points on life's journey.

The foregoing discussion of Self and Self-realization outlines what I believe to be the essence of Assagioli's thinking about these central topics within psychosynthesis. However, there are certain aspects of Assagioli's own thinking, and of subsequent psychosynthesis theory, which work to obscure this essential view of Self and Self-realization. There is a need to clarify these confusing aspects of the theory, as well as a need to develop new understandings which can portray the nature of Self and Self-realization in a more precise way. The remainder of this monograph begins to address both these needs.

A SUGGESTED CHANGE IN THE OVAL DIAGRAM

Perhaps the most central model within psychosynthesis theory is the oval-shaped diagram (or "egg diagram"), a model of the personality presented by Assagioli as early as 1934. Although this model offers a tremendously comprehensive view of the human being, Assagioli himself wrote that it is "far from perfect or final" (Assagioli, 1965, p. 16). As we shall see, there is one aspect of the diagram which clouds the view of Self and Self-realization presented above. But first let us look briefly at the diagram itself:



First of all, this model of the person illustrates the different sectors of the unconscious as understood in psychosynthesis. The first of these is the higher unconscious, that realm contacted in moments of ecstasy, peak experiences, and unitive states of consciousness. This area is characterized by transpersonal material which has not been integrated into the functioning personality.

The second level is the **middle unconscious**, comprising those aspects of the personality which, although outside the immediate field of awareness, are readily available in ongoing normal functioning. These include developmental achievements; accessible values, skills, and aptitudes; and material integrated from other levels of the unconscious (e.g., transpersonal contents and traumatic early experiences which have been re-owned after having been repressed).

The third sector of the unconscious is the lower unconscious, comprising painful memories and wounds from earlier life which underlie psychological symptoms such as compulsions, addictions, anxiety, and depression.

Surrounding the oval representing the individual is the **collective unconscious**, that realm of archetypes and collective influences explored by C. G. Jung (1933) and others. This area, like the unconscious of the individual, is understood in terms of its higher, middle, and lower sectors (Assagioli, 1967).

At the center of the diagram is represented "I" or personal self, that is, *you*. This is the true or essential self, having the functions of **awareness** and **will**. The clear experience of I-consciousness is most often hidden by various social roles, masked by psychological symptoms, and lost in the rush of modern living.

Finally, the diagram depicts Self, of which "I" is a reflection or projection (hence the dotted line connecting them). As stated above, Self is experienced most essentially as a sense of vocation or call, providing direction and meaning not only for individual unfoldment, but for living our relationships with other people, nature, and the planet as a whole.

It seems clear that this model is a wonderfully comprehensive view of the human person. Included here are the collective unconscious and Self studied in Jungian psychology; the lower unconscious of psychoanalysis; the center of identity and volition addressed by existential-humanistic psychology and drawn upon by cognitive-behavioral approaches; and the higher unconscious and Self studied in humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

However, given the discussion of Self and Self-realization above, the reader will perhaps have noticed the difficulty posed by this otherwise elegant and useful model of the person.

A Problem with the Egg

The difficulty with the diagram is of course that Self is depicted as existing in the higher unconscious. Thus Self is represented as distant from day-to-day awareness and the middle unconscious, and more distant still from the traumatic material of the lower unconscious. This representation therefore

clouds the understanding of Self as transcendent-immanent, as distinct from all levels of experience and therefore able to be present within all levels.

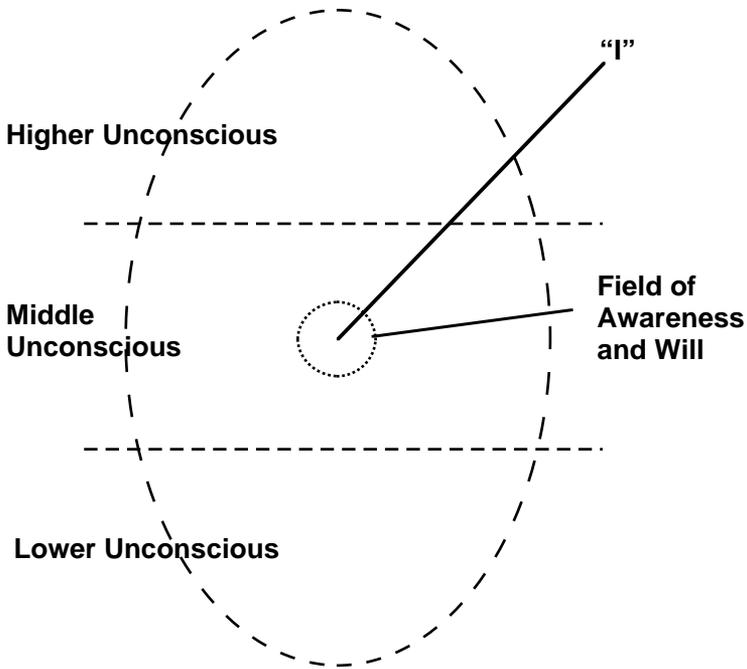
Furthermore, this image of Self-on-the-heights implies that in order to contact and respond to Self—to engage in Self-realization—we need to distance ourselves from the depths and reach upwards to the heights. Self here apparently invites us only to the sunny peaks of human experience, and not to tread the shadowy valley or dark abyss. (It is ironic that one of the reasons Assagioli represented Self in the higher unconscious was to emphasize the *difference* between Self and the higher unconscious! See Assagioli, 1965, p. 38.)

In spite of this early representation of Self, psychosynthesis has always emphasized the importance of family-of-origin work, healing childhood wounding, and the amelioration of psychological dysfunction as important aspects of Self-realization. However, given that Self is continually depicted in the higher unconscious, the path of Self-realization seems to lead inevitably away from the lower unconscious upwards to a unification and even identification with Self in the higher unconscious.

Given the oval diagram's confusing representation of Self and Self-realization, a suggested change is simply this: *that Self not be depicted as existing solely in 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.

It is important at the same time, however, to make clear that this immanence of Self does not mean that Self is to be equated with the sum total of these levels of experience (a suggestion found in some Jungian thought). That is, Self is not simply the totality of the personality, not an aggregate of the content and processes of the psyche-soma. Self is distinct, but not separate, from all levels of the psyche-soma—transcendent-immanent within them.

This type of revised oval diagram with no image of Self has been published by psychosynthesist Molly Young Brown (1993) following the work of Tom Yeomans, and also by Ann Gila and myself (Firman & Gila, 1996; Firman & Russell, 1993):



This non-depiction of Self strongly emphasizes Assagioli's crucial insight that Self is distinct from higher unconscious energies and that Self-realization may or may not involve encounters with these energies. This simple change in the diagram also accurately reflects the fact that we may encounter Self within any type of human experience, from healing the pain of early wounding, to embracing the joys of a peak experience, to managing our daily affairs.

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

The view of Self and Self-realization outlined above also asks for a clarification between two phenomena which are often confused in psychosynthesis thought: transpersonal psychosynthesis (or **spiritual psychosynthesis**) and Self-realization. Let us first look at the current confusion between these terms.

Assagioli at one point states that transpersonal psychosynthesis involves "the proper assimilation of the inflowing superconscious [higher unconscious] energies and of their integration with the pre-existing aspects of the personality" (Assagioli, 1965, p. 55). Here he clearly views transpersonal psychosynthesis as facilitating the infusion of higher unconscious energy into the conscious personality.

But Assagioli later confuses this transpersonal psychosynthesis with Self-realization, writing: "Self-realization concerns the third higher level, that of the superconscious, and pertains to Transpersonal or spiritual psychosynthesis" (Assagioli, 1973, p. 121). Thus in this early thinking transpersonal psychosynthesis and Self-realization seem quite similar, 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 material, and 2) the ongoing relationship between "I" and Self which is not limited to the higher unconscious and indeed may occur quite independently of the higher unconscious.

In order to avoid a confusion between these two very distinct phenomena, the following clarification has proven useful: "transpersonal psychosynthesis" can be used to describe contact with, and integration of, higher unconscious material; while the term "Self-realization" can be reserved to describe the ongoing relationship between "I" and Self.

According to the clarified usage of these two terms, Self-realization can then involve work with the lower unconscious (the focus of personal psychosynthesis), work with the higher unconscious (the focus of transpersonal psychosynthesis), and even work with both realms simultaneously, depending on the individual's own unique path of Self-realization. Maintaining a relationship with a transcendent-immanent Self may involve engagement with any level of the unconscious.

So again, Self-realization is not something only possible after climbing up through stages of development to a higher plane, nor something attained only in rare peak moments, nor a far-off goal to be achieved. Rather, Self-realization is the individual's ongoing relationship to Self.

IDENTIFICATION WITH SELF?

Given the transcendence-immanence of Self, Self-realization does not then entail a supposed “identification with Self.” This somewhat vague, ill-defined notion that we are to identify with Self has often been used in psychosynthesis in an attempt to describe optimum human functioning:

As a result we achieve complete identification *as* the Self, and the realization of *Being*. (Firman & Vargiu, 1977, p. 105)

Identification with the Transpersonal Self is a rare occurrence—for some individuals, the culmination of years of discipline; for others, a spontaneous extraordinary experience. (Ferrucci, 1982, p. 45)

Gradually and increasingly, we are able to identify ourselves with the Higher Self, to know Who we really are. (Brown, 1983, p. 115)

Identifying with our essential Self and our superconscious strengths implies becoming powerful in the true sense. (Whitmore, 1991, p. 133)

But in psychosynthesis terms, identification implies taking on the perspective of that with which one identifies, in effect *becoming* that other, as in identifying with a **subpersonality**, a feeling, or a mode of thinking. Therefore identification with Self is not beneficial, even if possible, because this would mean taking on the perspective of Self, in effect becoming Self—which would only lead to an immersion in the profound transcendence-immanence of Self.

That is, in such an identification with Self we would become aware of all the content and process of all levels of the psychosoma at once: we would be plunged into the experience of all traumatic memories from the past; all biochemical events in the body; all conscious and unconscious feelings, thoughts, and images; and all higher unconscious contents and energies—*simultaneously*.

Furthermore if Self is posited to have a universal presence, such an identification with Self would in theory mean attaining universal transcendence-immanence, the experience of pervading the entire cosmos. This unimaginable state would entail awareness of every quark and electron, every star and galaxy, and every microcosmic and macrocosmic event in the universe simultaneously—true omnipresence and omniscience, a state far outside the experiential range of a human being (see the discussion of this in Firman & Russell, 1994).

So characterizing Self-realization as an identification with the Self seems misleading and inaccurate, obscuring Assagioli's notion of Self-realization as a lived relationship to Self. (Identification with Self would also imply that one becomes the source of one's own call, that one becomes one's own "God" or "Higher Power," to use Assagioli's terms quoted earlier.)

UNION WITH SELF

Another idea which can obscure this relational understanding of Self-realization is the idea that Self-realization implies a profound moment of experienced union with Self. Assagioli refers to this unitive experience as a way again of demonstrating an essential insight into the nature of Self—that Self is distinct from all content and form, including the heights of the super-conscious:

The foregoing indirectly explains and emphasizes the difference between becoming aware of superconscious levels of experience and contents on the one hand, and pure Self-realization on the other. Self-realization, in this specific well-defined sense, means the momentary or more or less temporary identification or blending of the I-consciousness with the spiritual Self.... In these cases there is a forgetfulness of all contents of consciousness, of all which forms the personality both on normal levels and those of the synthesized personality which include superconscious or spiritual levels of life and experience... (Assagioli, 1965, p. 202)

Psychosynthesist James Vargiu discusses this type of encounter with Self also, affirming that this experience is beyond all form:

Anything that has movement, change, activity, direction, boundaries, dimensions, restrictions, limits, or specific qualities of any kind, in other words anything that is less than eternal and infinite, that seen from our normal point of view, contains or implies any kind of differentiation, is not the Self! (Vargiu, 1973, p. 7, emphasis in original)

Assagioli and Vargiu both attempt to establish the profound transcendence of Self by pointing to a particular type of unitive experience with Self. They thereby affirm that Self is beyond all content, all process, all form. This is a laudable approach, and has also been employed in the “apophatic,” “negative theology,” or “*via negativa*” religious traditions of both East and West.

However Self is immanent as well as transcendent. Self is not only to be met in such moments of unmanifest formlessness, but in form and manifestation as well. This has been recognized by the complementary “cataphatic,” “positive theology,” and “*via positiva*” approaches of both East and West. In simple terms, Self-realization can engage form as well as the formless, the manifest as well as the unmanifest.

God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. (Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*)

So even the contentless unitive experience described by Assagioli and Vargiu is only one particular type of encounter with Self, and while it does indicate that Self should not be confused with content and form, such a moment can occur with or without an ongoing relationship to Self—this is why, I believe, Assagioli maintained that this union with Self was to be understood as Self-realization only in a “specific well-defined sense.” Again, confusing a single unitive experience with the ongoing process of Self-realization is like confusing an intensely romantic evening with a committed lifetime of marriage.

The difficulty with this unitive experience, just as with a higher unconscious experience, is that such a contentless experience can “constitute an obstacle to full Self-realization”; it can become the supposed defining moment or goal of the path of Self-realization, distracting one from the true business of Self-realization—seeking to meet and respond to Self in all life experiences.

“I” OR PERSONAL SELF

A clear focus upon the nature of Self and Self-realization also suggests a change in the early conception of “I.” This conception often implied a dualistic view of “I,” as represented in 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).

Problems with this formulation have been voiced since the early 1970s, and some of these have found their way into print (e.g., Firman, 1991; O’Regan, 1984). Here is psychosynthesist Miceal O’Regan writing about the “disidentification exercise” based on this early notion of “I”:

...this kind of thinking and effort is illusionary and the basis of ego inflation. At best it becomes a practice in positive thinking, at worst it becomes a practice in denial and repression. (p. 44)

The problem with the earlier view is that “I” can be misunderstood as intrinsically disconnected and separate from the personality and the world, rather than intrinsically in relationship to them; only the transcendent aspect of “I” is represented here. Such a notion of human being can encourage dissociation, “spiritual bypassing,” or **dualistic denial**—a devaluation of intrinsic human relatedness and embeddedness in the world.

However, since “I” is a direct reflection of Self, and Self is seen as transcendent-immanent, then “I” can also be seen as 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., the passing flow of sensations, feelings, images, intuitions, and thoughts.

On one hand, “I” is not here seen as separate from contents of experience, not some “ghost in the machine” (Ryle) inhabiting the personality; on the other hand, “I” is not considered simply identical to these contents of experience, and thus an unneeded or illusory concept. Drawing upon Assagioli’s statement about the transcendence and immanence of God quoted earlier, we might say that “I” is never purely transcendent, but always in relationship. “I,” like Self, is paradoxically distinct but not separate, transcendent-immanent.

Disidentification

This transcendence-immanence of “I” accounts for a commonly-observed effect of **disidentification**, those moments when we discover that we are not identical to the contents or structures of consciousness. When we disidentify from a limiting **identification**—whether with sensations, feelings, thoughts, a life role, or subpersonality—there is indeed an increased sense that “I” is distinct from, or transcendent of, the particular identification. However, such experiences do not entail a distancing or separation from experience, but quite the contrary, *allow an increased engagement with experience*. For example, freed from a mental identification, we can be conscious of feelings as well as thoughts; freed from an identification with a subpersonality, we can be aware of that subpersonality and now others as well.

In other words, an increase in transcendence—the realization that “I” am distinct from a particular identification—goes hand-in-hand with an increase in immanence—an openness to many more experiences beyond that single limited identification. This is to be expected, because in disidentification “I” is becoming a clearer reflection of a transcendent-immanent Self. Disidentification does not lead out of the personality “upwards” into the higher unconscious, but towards a more intimate engagement with a wider spectrum of experience and a richer relationship with others and the world—a more accurate or true reflection of the greater transcendence-immanence of Self.

Note carefully that this increased engagement with experience may or may not lead to feelings of unity, wholeness, or

"being centered." Often, especially when one is disidentifying from a long-standing identification, this disidentification is apt to feel chaotic, scary, and painful. Such disconcerting experiences may arise because one is confronting the unknown, but also because this unknown contains painful experiences which have been repressed by the major identification. Disidentification, an increased sense of I-ness, does not necessarily imply a serene "centeredness" but a deeper, more intimate relationship with aspects of one's experience—an increased sense of immanence.

According to this transcendent-immanent view of "I" then, human beings are intrinsically at home in the cosmos. We are not visitors fallen from another dimension, alienated and seeking our way home; we *are* home, and it is only our past wounding and social conditioning which makes us feel otherwise. Thus psychosynthesis is very much in accord with the current interest in non-dualistic views of life, as exemplified by nature-centered religions, ecopsychology, liberation theology, and the belief in the sacredness of daily life, to name a few.

This transcendent-immanent view of Self and "I" also allows a better understanding of personality development, and begins to expand the view of synthesis within the personality.

SYNTHESIS AND THE PERSONALITY

Assagioli recognized very early that the human personality did not function as a unified whole but was composed of, among other things, semi-autonomous and often-conflicting subsystems which he called subpersonalities. He stated that a goal of psychosynthesis here was "to synthesize these sub-personalities into a larger organic whole without repressing any of the useful traits" (Assagioli, 1965, p. 75).

This movement towards unity within the personality became the hallmark of subpersonality theory, and was subsequently seen as proceeding through five stages: **recognition**, **acceptance**, **coordination**, **integration**, and **synthesis** (Vargiu, 1974). Over the years, it seems that most books about psychosynthesis have included some discussion of subpersonalities and how these parts are synthesized into a larger whole.

Clearly, this thrust towards unity is a major element in the developmental theory of early psychosynthesis thought. However, as John Rowan points out in his comprehensive study, *Subpersonalities: The People Inside Us* (1990), this emphasis on unity does not meet all the facts, and there is a growing body of evidence which indicates that this type of unity may not be necessary for a healthy personality. Rowan writes,

We shall see later on, as we have briefly already seen in our mention of individuals such as James Hillman and Mary Watkins, that we do not always have to strive for unity, *but it is a strong value within psychosynthesis.* (p. 74, emphasis added)

In his book, Rowan discusses new discoveries about the human psyche which are specifically challenging the emphasis on unity within psychosynthesis. But is not the synthesis of parts into larger and larger wholes a fundamental meaning of the very word, “psychosynthesis”? Not necessarily.

Synthesis Evolves

“Synthesis of the psyche” does not need to imply bringing together the parts of the psyche-soma into a harmonious whole; it may mean more essentially a communion between the parts of the psyche-soma and “I”—a process not necessarily implying harmony or unity among the parts themselves. As we saw in discussing Self-realization, *relationship* seems a fundamental principle in human growth, not simply *unity*.

At the level of personality development, this view of synthesis is completely supported by the understanding of “I” as transcendent-immanent—“I” is distinct from all parts, and can therefore engage all parts whether these parts themselves are in conflict or harmony with each other. As Rowan writes,

To be integrated is to be more in touch with more of one’s subpersonalities, particularly the ones which have been feared, hated, and denied. (p. 188)

"To be more in touch with more of one's subpersonalities" does not imply unity or harmony among the subpersonalities, but only that "I" is empathically connected to each one of them. This view is also echoed by the developmental research of Daniel Stern (1985), who understands human growth as the unfolding of different "selves" which remain discrete and operational within the healthy adult personality. Gestalt therapist Erving Polster agrees, presenting a notion of synthesis "characterized not by fusion but by the retention of dissonant selves" (Polster, 1995, p. 15). Douglas Richards (1990) goes further still, maintaining that dissociation of parts within the personality can be an important dynamic in spiritual growth as well.

So a transcendent-immanent understanding of "I" allows psychosynthesis to relinquish the idea that all parts of the psyche eventually come together into a harmonious union, and to emphasize instead a direct empathic connection between "I" and each of the parts.

It is important to say here that a clear sense of "I" may or may not be obvious in working out such a synthesis of the personality. It is not that one must develop a clear, strong sense of identity in order then to engage the different aspects of the personality; a sense of "I" usually emerges gradually as a function of working with the different parts. And in cases of extreme dissociation such as multiple personality disorder, "I" may merely function as the implicit, shared ground of being among "co-conscious" alters working out their relationships.

Of course, we need not rule out the harmonious integration of personality aspects, and indeed a shared connection to "I" may in many cases lead to increased harmony and even union among those aspects. The point is that this new understanding of synthesis does not hold union as the prime value or goal, and focuses much more upon the empathic connection between "I" and the various multiplicities which make up the personality. The "glue" of the healthy personality is not a seamless pattern of wholeness forged from multiple parts, but is rather an empathic holding of each part.

We have seen that a broadened understanding of synthesis within the personality supports a more accurate representation of Self and Self-realization. In this final section we shall explore the nature of synthesis as it occurs *beyond* the individual.

TRANS-INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

Psychosynthesis thought has tended to extrapolate the synthesis of the personality to synthesis among people, groups, countries, and even the cosmos itself. Assagioli states the premise of such trans-individual synthesis like this:

From a still wider and more comprehensive point of view, universal life itself appears to us as a struggle between multiplicity and unity—a labor and an aspiration towards union. (Assagioli, 1965, p. 31)

Assagioli goes on to claim that “the Spirit is working upon and within all creation, shaping it into order, harmony, and beauty, uniting all beings” ultimately into “the Supreme Synthesis” (p. 31). According to this vision, just as the synthesis of the personality led us towards a harmonious unified personality, so our contact with Self should lead towards a trans-individual synthesis which increasingly unites us to a larger whole.

However as we have seen above, this understanding of synthesis as a drive towards unity is incomplete and misleading; a broader view holds that synthesis may or may not involve this type of unity. So how might this newly-evolving vision of synthesis be applied to trans-individual psychosynthesis?

Synthesis as Relationship

At this level beyond the individual the focus is again not simply upon unity, but upon relationship. The fundamental principle of any larger evolutionary process would not be that all beings are drawn into a greater whole, but that *all beings are increasingly responding to their direct relationship to Self*. As subpersonalities can respond to “I,” but not necessarily form a harmonious union among themselves, so individuals and groups can respond to Self, but not necessarily form a harmonious union among themselves. This relational view of synthesis and Self-realization implies a relational understanding of trans-individual psychosynthesis as well:

Perhaps the term “psycho-synthesis” can be thought to denote the process of synthesis or union based upon a relationship to Self, with no necessary implication of specific psychological or social unification at all. Again, it is the personal I-Self relationship here which is forefront. One may tread the way of disintegration or wholeness at different times in Self-realization—it all depends on whether the relationship leads.

We may think of psychosynthesis then, as the process by which we develop an ongoing relationship and at times communion with Self. This relationship with Self may in turn at times allow the experience of union or connection with all things—*whether or not we and those things are fragmented or whole, in harmony or conflict.*

Thus, this union is not a far-off goal at the end of an evolutionary process which will establish a harmonious planetary or cosmic synthesis. This is a type of union which exists *now*, right in the midst of current personal and world crises. (Firman, 1991, pp. 95-96)

As this view of synthesis does not rule out the harmonious integration of personality aspects, so it does not rule out an evolution of “order, harmony, and beauty, uniting all beings.” But this understanding does shift the focus away from such a grand vista and towards something much more immediate and personal: our relationship to Self. Again, it is the spiritual marriage which is foreground, not the attainment of specific experiences and states of consciousness. Here we do not seek particular experiences of unity or enlightenment, but a relationship to our life’s calling or dharma—the transpersonal will—in relationship to other people and the world.

And if Self is transcendent-immanent, then our relationship to Self is present in all the relationships which make up the fabric of our lives. Whether relating to our own personality aspects, other people, larger social systems, or the natural world,

it is within a network of relationships that we meet and respond to Self. Thus it is our authenticity or deceit within these relationships, our empathy or neglect within these relationships, and our fidelity or betrayal within these relationships, which will form—or not—our Self-realization.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Firman is a psychotherapist, author, and psychosynthesis trainer practicing in Palo Alto, California with his wife, Ann Gila. He and Ann are both licensed as Marriage, Family, and Child Counselors by the State of California, and are adjunct faculty members at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology.

John began his career in mental health as a psychiatric technician in the late 1960s, working in the state hospital system and in the field of chemical dependence. He completed advanced training in psychosynthesis in 1973; trained with Roberto Assagioli in Italy; was a director of the Psychosynthesis Institute in Palo Alto/San Francisco; and trained at the Family Therapy Institute of Southern California.

His most recent book, written with Ann, is entitled, *The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction, and Growth*. The book will be published by the State University of New York Press in early 1997.

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