

# The Resolution of Conflict

*Roberto Assagioli*

## *Part one*

For purposes of this writing, I shall restrict myself to a discussion of the ways of resolving, or better still preventing, the conflicts produced by the combative and aggressive energies. It is a subject that is always current, but never more so than now.

The understanding and use of means appropriate for this purpose call for awareness of the fact that *we live in a psychological world*, in which energies of various types are at work. Various kinds of relationships exist between the external and the inner worlds. Primitive man does not distinguish himself from the external world; he believes natural forces to be beings, to whom he attributes psychological qualities and passions. He feels himself in the grip of forces and seeks to propitiate them. A number of mythologies, the Indian and Greek, for instance, reveal the origins of the gods as personifications of natural forces: air, fire, wind, water etc.

Then followed the development of the mind and self-consciousness, paralleling the differentiation of the self from the external world. It is only in relatively modern times that there developed a really objective study of nature, conducted in a scientific spirit. Concomitantly, the increasing control of nature merged through the discovery of its natural laws, and the technical inventions for controlling and utilising natural forces.

Yet another important step leading to other great cognitive and practical achievements can and should be taken. It consists of becoming aware of the fact, and in drawing all the consequences from it, that we live in a psychological world as real as, if not more real than, the external world. In the psychological world, a variety of energies exist, and operate in accordance with laws as precise as those governing external natural forces. Then we must realise that although we live in this psychological world, we are *not* at the mercy of its energies; that we can know them, discover the laws which they obey and employ techniques for making use of them. The “I”, our real being, the centre of self-consciousness, is *different* from all the psychological forces from which it is immersed. These forces are “not-I”, as is demonstrated by the fact that we can observe and study them, note their dynamics, and transformations, and most importantly, influence them with the will. Our ability to modify these forces means that they do not form an integral part of the “I” or self.

However we are so accustomed to identify ourselves with those psychological forces that if we are to free ourselves from their control – to use instead of being used by them – we must cultivate a continual vigilance and maintain what has been called “the consciousness of the observer,” or, in modern theatrical terms, the director. Symbolically, the theatre or the stage itself, can be said to be the body, while the actors are the psychological forces that appear therein, to be given direction by the director. An effective help in recognising this fundamental distinction between the “I” or self and the various elements or content of the psychological world is provided in the *Exercise in Dis-identification and Self-identification* described in my book *Psychosynthesis*.(1)

As I wrote many years ago in an article, *The Psychology of Idea Forces and Psychology* (2), suggestive analogies can be presented between the objects and forces of the natural world and those of the psychological world. Passion is similar to a rushing torrent that carries away everything in its course and inundates the surrounding territory. A fantasy of daydreaming can be considered analogous to clouds that pass across the sky, continuously changing shape. And idea is a seed, a germ which finding suitable soil can grow into a majestic tree, or create a whole current of thought and action; and so on. These analogies between the world of nature and the world of the psychological can be usefully developed by regarding them as something objective and not solely subjective. An entire science of psychodynamics is thus being created; a science, that is, of consciousness, of the laws and techniques for influencing psychological dynamism.

These preliminary remarks open the way to a consideration of the application of this conception to our subject, psychological conflicts. The fundamental principle is that the resolution of external conflicts with other people necessitates the *prior* resolution of one's own inner conflicts. To put it in a more general way, to regulate psychological forces in others, individually and collectively, the corresponding psychological forces in ourselves must first be brought under regulation. This does not demand specific demonstration. It stands to reason that if a conflict exists *within* us, we cannot be in harmony with others, since if one part of us is in harmony with another person, another part of us in conflict with the first part, must be in conflict also with the person. Thus an internal harmony or integration, must first of all be created if the energies are to be regulated and directed in such a way as to resolve conflict *in* the psychological world and *with* the psychological world of other beings in the community with which we are or come into contact.

The various means of regulating then utilising the aggressive energies may be briefly indicated as follows: Elimination of projection, discharge of irritation in muscular activity, transformation of energy into other kinds of expression.

A primary rule requires that *we do not project on to others our states of mind and our conflicts*. Human nature displays a strong tendency to attribute to others the attitudes, impulses, feelings, and ideas present within us. Let us apply this rule to a class of conflicts now widespread and particularly acute, those produced by the aggressive and combative energies.

If we feel hostility towards others, we tend to "project" it on to them; that is we believe it *they* who are hostile to us, when in reality they may not be. Such an attitude is as mistaken as the primitive man's belief in a personal hostility of natural forces. The erroneous projection often gives rise to a fear and conviction of being persecuted and threatened, and these in turn create defense and hostility reactions which can easily arouse other people's hostility. Thus is built up a vicious circle, or, in modern terms, a chain reaction.

How then can we prevent such projections? First of all it is necessary to recognise them for what they are, to become aware of them. Then when others display hostility, criticise and blame us, we must understand that often they are not really angry with us personally. They are projecting onto us hostility harboured for other reasons and discharging a load of animosity that cannot for the moment be directed towards its real cause. Therefore their hostility is not to be taken personally. This situation has been well described by Laura Huxley in the first chapter of her book *You Are Not the Target*, which contains a number of psychological rules and techniques for self control presented in a lively and amusing manner. (3) She says: "When your husband complains, your wife badgers you, the boss is irritable, your partner gets difficult, your children are rebellious – stop! Stop a moment and realise that their irritability, their unreasonableness, their coldness, in other words their unpleasant and annoying behaviour is not really directed at you. ... In the majority of cases it is not you that is the target. You merely happen to be around." (4)

The author then gives some advice on ways to behave in these situations; one among them, perhaps surprising and seemingly trivial but nonetheless effective, is to unload a natural aggressive reaction through some exercise involving muscular contraction, without the other person being aware of it, instead of giving it verbal expression. Flex the arm and leg muscles and rhythmically retract the stomach, thus displacing the emotional charge into the physical nervous system. This, says the author, has the added advantage of combining a useful gymnastic exercise. If one can then see the humorous side of the matter, it helps one to smile inside and so discharge even more effectively. The book is full of similar "recipes", as it calls them – shrewd, somewhat bizarre, but capable of working well.

In addition to these measures of eliminating projections, discharging irritations and transforming our expressions of energy, one can write an acrimonious letter – and not send it, box a punching bag etc. let us remember that a symbolic gratification is often sufficient for the unconscious, which can be satisfied with the action of striking a leather ball in place of an "enemy". It is the energy discharge that is important. Another method is to distract one's attention by throwing oneself into some activity that engages interest. Another aid is to remember the elementary fact that irritation harms oneself most of all. An English writer has

said this in the following way: "Rage is a way of making oneself pay for the faults of others". Enlightened self-interest can induce not to react so aggressively.

In reality it is not easy to restrain oneself thus, whether in the right or the wrong. It could be advanced that being in the wrong makes it easier to recognise the control of the reactions; but this is not so. The fact is that when one is in the wrong, one is loath to admit it, and therefore we try to persuade ourselves and others that we are right, often going to excessive lengths to do so. This is well expressed in the French maxim *Il se fache donc il a tort* (In the wrong tempers fly). On the other hand when we are right we feel our aggressive reaction to be justified, heedless of the trouble it may cause. In these cases the inner satisfaction of knowing oneself to be in the right should suffice, *without* wishing to assert it in words and action violently. In reality the antithesis is artificial; right or wrong are almost never clear-cut; and in any situation it is very difficult to establish their proportions. One can stick to Tommaso Campanell's dictum: "In God we shall discern who did and said the better thing."

*Fear* is another source of hostility and aggressiveness. The fear of being injured, the fear of being attacked more or less by surprise, prompt one to take the offensive. Inversely, fear attracts the hostility of others. It has been ascertained that fear produces a substance, perhaps an odour, that irritates animals. The beads of perspiration exuded by a frightened individual have been known to arouse reactions of irritation and aggressiveness in animals.

Self-control, with its capacity to regulate combative energies, is of advantage also when one wishes or is forced to fight. One of the techniques used by a boxer, for instance, consists in keeping on the defensive during the early rounds in order to encourage his opponent to attack and tire himself. Then at the right moment he takes the initiative.

A higher and even more effective method is to make liberal concession; remembering that they are preferable to the damage, the wear and tear and the dangers of the struggle. It is sometimes sufficient to make pro-forma concessions – that is, to the prestige of others. This is questions of not only avoiding humiliation and offending an opponent, but of not crowing over him and of helping him to save face and appease his amour propre. He can even be allowed to consider himself the victor. What do his assertions matter provided the substance of the situation has been preserved? Here is an example. Two American businessmen, Carnegie and Westinghouse, were engaged in a rivalry that was damaging to their mutual interests. During a discussion in which they were trying to reach an agreement, Westinghouse who was still unconvinced about Carnegie's proposals, asked him: "If we amalgamate our companies, what is the new one to be called?" "Westinghouse", replied Carnegie, and this clinched the other's agreement.

But higher means than calculated concessions dictated by self-interest are to be found, of course, in an understanding indulgence towards the imperfections of human nature, accompanied by consequent generosity. Firmness and the ability to say no, when necessary, are not thereby excluded but are to be applied in no critical spirit, without emotional reaction, and from a broader viewpoint. Finally there is a still higher means for "disarming" an opponent, even an enemy: benevolence and compassion which can reach heights of true fraternal love. It was in this spirit that St Francis won over the wolf of Gibbio.

The best animal-trainers however, do not aspire to such heights but impose their control by means of a mixture of love and force. They also employ the magnetic power of the eye, coupled with a firm and fearless attitude. Some trainers have said that they really love their animals, caress them and display their affection for them, a treatment that renders them docile. Even at this elementary level benevolence shows itself to be effective.

I do not feel it necessary to point out the applications of these methods. Opportunities are legion – if one is willing to take them! They arise continuously, in family life, in all interpersonal relations, between all human groups at every level, between nations and between races. With contacts and communications multiplying in an ever-diminishing world, the establishment of harmonious individual and social psychosynthesis becomes increasingly urgent. These methods are more effective in preventing war and discouraging disarmament than are external, judicial and formal ones that do not get to the root causes of conflicts. This may appear an idealistic statement; but it is indeed realistic because it is based on the realities of human nature.

I shall conclude this section with the confirmation provided by the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO, the great cultural association of the United Nations, which affirms: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

### *Part Two*

Spiritual conflict and crises are different in kind from those of a purely psychological type, and from moral ones in a narrow sense, though sometimes having an association with them. Spiritual crises occur in a different inner dimension, being produced by experiences and conflicts that transcend the level and sphere of ordinary existence. The concern man’s relationship with the great Life of which he is a part, that is, with the essential Reality - however conceived or intuited - which stands “behind” or “above” the little personal life.

More than 50 years ago, in 1921, I developed this theme in a paper entitled *The Awakening of the Soul*. I shall repeat here in part what I wrote then, a statement that has since been included in a later paper, *Spiritual Development and Nervous Diseases*. “A clear understanding of the significance of the unusual inner experiences which customarily precede the awakening of the soul necessitates the recognition of some of the psychological characteristics of the so-called normal man.”

He might be said, not so much to live: as rather to simply exist, taking life as it comes and not posing problems about its meaning, value and purpose. If uncultivated, he is concerned simply to gratify his personal desires, seek sensuous pleasures, become rich and satisfy his ambitions. If of a more elevated mind, he subordinates his personal gratifications to the performance of the various family and civil duties that have been inculcated to him. At the same time he worries little about their *raison d’être* or genesis. He may even declare that he is religious and believes in God, but his approach to religion is superficial and conventional, permitting him to feel “in the clear” when he fulfilled the formal obligations of his Church and participated in its various rituals. In short, the normal man believes implicitly in the absolute reality of ordinary life and is tenaciously attached to his earthly goods, to which he attributes a positive value. Thus, in practice, he considers ordinary life an end in itself. Any belief he may have in a future paradise is entirely theoretical and academic as witness the fact that his eagerness to arrive there, often affirmed with amusing ingenuousness, hardly equals his determination to postpone doing so until the last possible moment.

But among the ranks of the “normal man” it can happen - and cases do occur, though their incidence is proportionately rare - that an individual experiences, to his surprise and uneasiness, a sudden change in his inner life. Sometimes following a series of disappointments, not infrequently after a severe shock, such as the loss of a beloved person, sometimes - and this is of special significance - without apparent cause and in the midst of circumstances of exceptional wellbeing and prosperity (as in the case of Leo Tolstoy for instance) a vague disquiet makes itself felt, accompanied by a sense of dissatisfaction or lack. But the lack is not of something concrete, rather of something enigmatic, fugitive, indefinable. This emptiness is increased by the addition, little by little, of a feeling of the unreality and of the futility of ordinary life. Personal interests that previously occupied the bulk of his attention start to fade, their importance and value diminish. New problems present themselves that prompt him to question the *direction of life*. He wonders about many things which formally he accepted naturally: the reason for his and other people’s sufferings, the justification of the inequalities of fortune, the origin of human existence and its purpose.

This stage provides fertile soil for misapprehensions and errors. The meaning of these new states of mind escapes many of those who, experiencing them, regard them as vagaries or abnormal creations of the imaginations. The suffering they cause which is sometimes indeed painful, begets resistance of every kind. Fear of “losing his mind” makes the sufferer strive to recover his hold on ordinary life, which threatens to escape him. Sometimes, indeed, his reaction is to throw himself with the ardour of desperation into a search for new occupations, new stimuli, new sensations. By these and other means

individuals who are passing through this disruptive phase do succeed now and then in stifling their uneasiness, but almost never manage to neutralise it completely. It continues to smoulder in the depths of their being, undermining the foundations of their normal existence, and may, years later perhaps, burst forth again with added intensity. Then the state of agitation grows increasingly poignant, the inner emptiness more intolerable, until the sufferer feels shattered. The whole of what constitutes his life now seems a dream, while now new light appears to dispel his ignorance or to substantiate his belief in the possibility of receiving a more illumined view of life.

It is at this point that ideas of and impulses towards suicide are often likely to invade the consciousness of the sufferer. Physical annihilation seems to be the only logical sequel to the inner collapse and dissolution. It should be noted that the above description is only a presentation of a general outline of this kind of experience and its development. In actual practice individual temperaments account for numerous experiential variations. Some cases stop short of the acute stage, by-passing the gradual transition mentioned; others reach it almost at once. Still others are drawn towards research by philosophical doubts. The moral crisis is the outstanding feature for other persons.

Today, 50 years later, crises of this kind have not only increased in number and intensity at the individual level, but also assumed a collective character. They have become symptomatic in a wide range of human groups and are obsessing a large section of the young. It is not difficult to discern the cause. The Second World War, with its enormous toll of suffering, the destruction and convulsion it caused, not only of a material kind, but in all fields of human existence, confronted humanity squarely with life's tragic aspects. The fundamental problems about the meaning of life, the reasons and justification for an individual's personal sufferings and other people's were thereby inexorably presented in an acute and harassing form and on a vast scale.

The most widespread reactions were, and still are, rebellion, denial, mental suffering and even despair. Existential attitudes and convictions of a negative kind (there are others with a positive slant) have led to life being labeled absurd, to the denial of every higher, transcendent reality, to a position of protest and challenge which, however, is felt at the same time to be useless and impotent. This has been termed existential frustration and accurately described by Viktor Frankl. How Director of the Neurological Clinic of the University of Vienna, he underwent an exceptionally testing experience in a concentration camp which lasted many months and was accompanied by acute suffering and continual threats of death. These conditions provided the background of a spiritual awakening which transformed his life and now forms the basis of his thinking and psychotherapeutic approach. In his book, *Theorie und Therapie der Neurosen* which I strongly recommend to doctors, he writes:

“Besides inferiority feelings, psychic illness can be induced in man also by the feeling of absurdity, i.e. by frustration aroused by his need to give life a meaning. In such cases, in which a person sees failure of his aspiration to give his existence sufficient meaning to make it worth pursuing, we speak of existential frustration... If we seek to get to the bottom of this question and determine the pathogenic basis of these disturbances, we are continually made aware that it resides principally in this fact. What we term the 'will to meaning', in contrast both to the 'will to pleasure' (i.e. the pleasure principle in a psychoanalytic sense) and the "will to power" in the Adlerian sense) remains ungratified and frustrated". (1)

One of the ways in which this crisis manifests itself is the sense of oppression engendered by the immensity of the cosmos and the enormous time cycles revealed by astronomy. This is evident in some people's reaction to the "cosmic test". It consists in showing pictures of the universe increasingly enlarged in scale until the earth is seen to disappear in the immensities of space. Here is how Frankly speaks of this kind of anxiety:

“I remember a case in which the patient's anxiety turned out to be of an existential character, 'The infinite', she confessed, "oppresses me. I feel insubstantial to the point of dissolution'. Here let us add an observation of Scheler: "The infinite emptiness of space and time is the void man experiences in his heart". Inasmuch as this anxiety is in the last analysis, about nothing, 'the infinite emptiness of space' here assumes the place of nothing. But this macrocosmic void appears to be simply the projection of an inner emptiness, an existential

emptying, that is, a microcosmic emptiness. It resembles the reflection of the insubstantiality of our *Dasein* (being).” (2)

In other people, however, this sense or awareness of the immensity of space and temporal infinity arouses a different, even an opposite, reaction. They see the universe as regulated by a vast Cosmic Intelligence, as Einstein says, since the movements of the stars are so controlled as to be predictable, and order govern everything (cosmos in Greek means order). This view produces an expansion of consciousness and a sense of “participation”. These individuals feel themselves to be living particles of this great universe, microscopic but essential elements in the totality of being.

As regards the state of existential anxiety, previously mentioned, few know how to bear it, and therefore it is usually fled from and various ways are adopted to appease it: external activism, from violent sport and reckless car racing at the physical level to the struggle to contrive and triumph of some ideology; by admiration and imitation of “idols”, such as cinema stars and heroes of the boxing-ring and football field. Others seek self-forgetfulness and satisfaction in immoderate sexuality, or by means of alcohol and drugs.

But sooner or later these hypothetical remedies turn out to be ineffective, and the human being is obliged to face up to the reality and to try to understand the meaning and value of the obscure and apparently negative aspects of life. When this search for meaning is conducted without mental prejudice, rebellion by the will and personal emotional reactions, one discovers and recognises the *positive* values that exist in life, values having a reality not less, indeed more substantial and permanent, than the negative ones. They are the great universal and eternal values: Truth, Beauty and Goodness with their human manifestations in love, creative and beneficent activity, in joy and even in suffering itself as a path to increased awareness, deepening and elevation.

But this point is attainable only, I repeat, as a result of a great opening out, a dignified, not dispirited humility in the face of the mystery; of loving acceptance; of a disposition not to make demands upon life and other people, but rather to give and particularly of oneself; plus recognition of one’s essential personal spiritual liberty and acceptance of the consequent responsibility. Thus we arrive at the realisation that everything depends upon our attitude, and that this not only leads to the apprehension of meaning and values, but also can create and bestow them. And this, being in our power, depends on free choice on our part, on our *decision* and therefore on an act of will.

Here then is the lofty goal, the luminous conquest attainable through spiritual awakening and an appropriate spiritual development. But its attainment often demands our confronting and conquering a series of inner conflicts, produced by the multiplicity and complexity of human nature. Since these conflicts are discussed in detail in the article *Spiritual Development and Nervous Diseases*, since incorporated as a chapter ( under the title of “Self-Realisation and Psychological Disturbances”) in *Psychosynthesis* (3), I shall limit myself here to summarising their essential points.

The awakening self can be the origin of disturbances and imbalances in those whose mind is not well stabilised or whose emotions are over-charged or ill-controlled, or again in those with a too sensitive and delicate nervous system. A similar state can ensue also when the flow of spiritual energy overwhelms the recipient by reason of its suddenness and violence. Where the mind is too weak and ill prepared to endure the spiritual light, or where there is a tendency towards pretentiousness and egocentricity, the happening can be wrongly interpreted. There occurs, so to speak, a “confusion of levels”, in which the distinction between absolute and relative, between spirit and personality goes unrecognised. The spiritual force can then produce exaltation, and inflation of the personal ego.

In other cases the unexpected inner illumination accompanying the awakening of the soul brings about instead an emotional exaltation, which displays itself in obstreperous and disorganised behaviour evidenced by shouting, crying, singing and other forms of motor excitation.

Then the stimulation of the awakening can urge those of an active, dynamic and combative type to assume the role of prophet or reformer and give it expression through the formation of movements and sects, characterised by excessive fanaticism and proselytism. In some people with a relevant disposition, the inner awakening is accompanied by paranormal

psychological manifestations of various kinds. They have visions, usually of lofty and angelic beings, or hear voices and feel the urge to attempt automatic writing. The variable value of the messages received in this way necessitates their being examined and evaluated objectively and without bias, but also without allowing the channel conveying them to impose its own criterion of value.

Other conflicts and crises arise out of the reactions that *follow* the inner awakening. A harmonious spiritual awakening arouses a feeling of joy and mental illumination that brings perception of the meaning and purpose of life, dispels many doubts, offers the solution of many problems and bestows a feeling of inner security. In company with this comes a vivid sense of the unity, beauty and sacredness of life; and from the awakened soul a wave of love radiates towards all other souls and creatures.

But however long this joyous state endures, it is fated to come to an end. The ordinary personality, with its lower elements, has been overcome and put to sleep only temporarily, not killed or transformed. Moreover, the inflow of light and spiritual love is rhythmic and cyclic, like everything else that happens in the universe. Sooner, or later, therefore it diminishes or ceases. High tide is followed by the ebb. This inner experience is very painful, in some cases producing violent reactions, and even serious disturbances. Lower tendencies reawaken and assert themselves with renewed force. All the rocks, debris and waste matter which had been covered by the high water reappear once more.

These reactions are followed by a period in which a process of personality *transmutation* takes place; and this also creates conflicts and crises. It is a long and complex affair, composed of phases of active purification for removing the obstacles to the inflow and action of the spiritual forces.; phases of development of inner faculties which had been latent or feeble; phases during which the personality must stand steady and submissive, allowing itself to be worked upon by the Spirit and bearing the inevitable suffering with courage and patience. It is a period replete with changes, alternations of light and darkness, joy and sorrow.

It is a period of transition as well, a quitting of the old stage before the new one is reached. It resembles the condition of the caterpillar undergoing the process that will transform it into a butterfly. It must pass through the chrysalis stage, a condition of disintegration and impotence.

But man is generally denied the privilege afforded to the caterpillar of accomplishing this transformation protected within the folds of the cocoon. He must, especially within these days, stay at his post in life and continue to discharge his family, professional and social duties as best he can, as if nothing was happening to him. We cannot be surprised if so complex and demanding an operation sometimes causes nervous and psychological disturbances: for instance, nervous exhaustion, insomnia, depression, irritability and restlessness. Considering the powerful influence of the psychological nature on the physical, it is easy to understand how they in turn produce a variety of physical symptoms.

The subject of this article has obliged me to deal principally with the complications, suffering and conflicts aroused by spiritual development; but I would not wish to give the impression that they are more serious than those which afflict people who have had not an inner awakening. Thus is desirable that the following points be given prominence.

1. Many cases of spiritual development proceed more gradually and harmoniously than that described above, with the result that the difficulties are overcome and the different stages navigated without nervous reactions and physical disorders.

2. The sufferings and disturbances experienced by those who tread the spiritual path, however disagreeable they sometimes can be, are in reality only temporary reactions and, so to speak, the effect of an organic process of inner growth and regeneration. Therefore they often disappear when the crisis provoking them is resolved, and yield with ease to appropriate treatment.

3. The suffering accompanying the ebb of the spiritual tide and low water are amply compensated for not only by the phases of inflow and elevation, but also by faith in the greater purpose and lofty goal of the inner adventure. The resultant vision of glory serves as a powerful inspiration, an unfailing comfort, and an inexhaustible fount of strength and courage. We should therefore be ready to evoke the vision as vividly and as often as

possible. One of the greatest benefits we can confer on one tormented by a spiritual crisis and conflict is to help him to do the same.

1. Frankl, *Theorie und Thearapie de Neurosen*, Ernst Reinhardt, Munich, 1956
2. Ibid
3. Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis; A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, P40-44
4. Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, NY: Hobbs Dorman, 1965. Paperback – Viking Press, 1971, p116-125.
5. Assagioli, *Review of Applied Psychosynthesis*, Sept-Oct 1909
6. Huxley, *You Are Not the Target*, NY, Farrar, Straus, 1963.
7. Op Cit, p 37