

## The Self: A Unifying Center

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In our examination of the various forms and types of psychosynthesis, we have been considering the group in which the unifying Center is constituted by some dominating tendency of the personality, such as a vital “function” like maternity, or an activity or social or professional task, or finally, by the intense admiration of a hero, or superior being.

But these centers are not apt to produce either a complete psychosynthesis, in which every single element in us is coordinated and harmonized in a living unit, or an entirely independent psychosynthesis, one not based, that is to say, on elements foreign to our own being.

To realize such a complete and independent psychosynthesis another kind of Unifying Center is needed. In the first place this Center must be of a different nature from that of all the single elements which constitute our psyche. It must be different form and superior to them because then only can it have the power to dominate and rearrange them in an organic unity. In other words, the unifying Center must not be only psychological, but *spiritual*.

In the second place, such a Center cannot be something foreign to the personality, but intimate and really “central” to it. In short, the unifying Center must coincide with our real self, the profoundest essence of our inner being.

“I.” How often each of us uses this brief word every day, without hesitating or reflecting, as if its meaning were well known! Everyone knows that this word is the nominative singular of the first person of a pronoun. But if with the addition of an article we consider the “I”, not as a part of speech, but as a symbol of reality, there is a great difference. Our certainty about an obvious notion changes suddenly into a perplexity. We have a sense of being confronted by a mystery.

At times, the “I” seems to us the most immediate and sure reality. Again, it is vague, intangible, almost inexistent like a mathematical point. It seems like something distant, like the coinciding in the infinite of innumerable parallels. Sometimes we have a clear sense of our personal identity through all changes; then again we seem changed, different from our “I” of the day before, and we don’t “recognize ourselves”.

At times we feel strongly the unity of our being, the cohesion of its parts in an organic whole, the personality; at other times we perceive in ourselves profound differences, strong contrasts; two souls seem to possess us, who lacerate us in their fierce struggles. Sometimes our “I” seems intimately connected with our organism, dependent on it, and subject to every physiological change. Again, it seems entirely independent of the body, and made of a spiritual substance that is simple, unchangeable, and untouchable by any

material influence. Sometimes we feel clearly the difference between the “I” and the “non-I”, we see an abyss without bridge between ourselves and others, we feel terribly *alone*, like islands far from any land; at other times we seem to become one with a loved person, or with a multitude, or with nature, or with God. Every night our “I” seems to go out, vanish during sleep, and every morning it miraculously reappears as if emerging out of nothing . . .

Yet we cannot be satisfied to know ourselves so vaguely and imperfectly. Our insatiable thirst for knowledge which drives us to scrutinize the immense, distant worlds and the multitude of beings that germinate in a drop of water, cannot leave us indifferent in regard to the unknown in ourselves, that seems to us the central mystery of Being. But not alone the desire to know drives us to fathom this mystery; personal motives of immediate practical bearing also urge us on. We feel that we have light, order and harmony within us, we try to distinguish among the innumerable thoughts, feelings and impulses that arise in us, those which are really the expression of our realest and deepest being, and those that are instead derived from external suggestion or instinctive tendencies. We try to dominate and eliminate those we recognize as not our own, or unworthy of us. But we must admit, if we are sincere, that such attempts are often unsatisfying. They remain an unattainable aspiration. The opinions and tendencies suggested to us from our surroundings mask themselves as ours, without our noticing it, while we often doubt and repel our most intimate intuitions. The instincts, passions and habits we try to control resist our efforts obstinately or escape from our grasp, hiding themselves in the subconscious whence they operate in a subtle manner, or else they make a violent attack and, in either case, we are defeated.

Our lack of success is due to various reasons: first of all to the real difficulty of the problem. Moreover, we act blindly in the effort for self regulation because of our ignorance of the precise methods to use for the investigation and discipline of our inner selves. These definite methods do however exist, and are worth of just as much interest and appreciation as those now so widely used in the physical culture. In a large measure also, our mistakes and failures are due to the too rudimentary conception that we have about the nature and powers of our real selves. For these practical reasons therefore, a more accurate knowledge of ourselves is a necessity, not only for a special group of students, but for everyone who wants to live consciously and worthily, as master and not slave of his own inner world.

But, if to find out what our “I” is, we turn to scientific psychology which has till recently held unquestioned sway and even now dominates in the universities, we are completely frustrated. To this question psychology has no answer, not because it does not know, but because it does not wish to know. The way has been deliberately barred by the denial, a priori, of the existence of a real subject. It has chosen to be, according to the unfortunate expression of Laing, a “psychology without soul.”

In fact, as William James said some years ago, for psychology, “souls are not in fashion.” Such a denial, a priori, is quite without justification. To justify it the proof of the non-existence of the Higher Self should be given. This proof does not exist. This is

recognized by some of the more prudent psychologists who do not resolutely deny the existence of the Higher Self, but say that such a question has nothing to do with psychology. But this agnostic reservation is purely theoretical. In practice, they study psychological life as if there were no Higher Self and identify themselves therefore with those who deny its existence. But even conceding that one can, up to a certain point, make an analytic and structural study of psychological phenomena apart from their connection with the Self, the fact remains that proceeding from the anatomy to the physiology of psychological life, from the structural study to the functional study, from analysis to synthesis, the existence of a unifying principle, an active center, of a real self in short, is absolutely necessary.

In order really to understand the various manifestations of psychological life, we have to consider it as the expression of a living being who in proposing to itself certain aims, attributes a value to them, wants to attain them and attempts to do so, by overcoming the outward and inward resistance to them which impedes that attainment. If then the existence of a Unifying Principle is admitted, we must try to determine as closely as possible its nature and powers. The task is difficult because the nature and powers of the "Self" do not reveal themselves, at least usually, directly to our consciousness. What we are ordinarily conscious of is only what may be called the phenomenal self to which all the various states of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, etc. refer. But this phenomenal self is only the manifestation of the ordinary consciousness, the reflection of the real "I", which is the permanent active principle, and the real substance of our being. If we recall the state of our empiric conscious self, or in other words, our ordinary consciousness, in normal conditions, that is, when we do not purposely observe ourselves or reflect about ourselves, but let ourselves go spontaneously, we are confronted with two important facts. In the first place we see that our ordinary consciousness, our conscious self, always identifies with the *content* of consciousness in a given moment. We say, in fact: "I am tired, I am rested, I am sad or happy, I am beautiful or ugly", etc.

The identification of one's self with the body and the feelings are innumerable. If, for instance, a sad thought occupies our consciousness, we say, "I am sad". If a feeling of fatigue occupies it, we exclaim, "I am tired". If we desire food, we say, "I am hungry". And so on.

In the same way, we identify ourselves with moral, intellectual, and social characteristics which represent only a partial aspect of ourselves. We say, "I am beautiful or ugly", "I am strong or weak", "I am a man or a woman", "I am a son or a father", "I am a positivist or a spiritualist", etc. The particular content or aspect of our consciousness is not always strong or full enough to occupy it all, and we say, "I am tired" while still thinking of other things. But if the state is intense enough, like a profound sadness due to a disappointment or grave loss, it occupies for a certain time all the field of consciousness and the identification of the self with the content of the consciousness is for that time complete. A person in profound grief not only says, "I am sad", but forgets, for the moment, that he has ever been serene and cheerful, can hardly conceive of how cheerfulness can exist, and if he sees others laugh and joke, he is surprised and this conduct seems to him strange and unreal. The person tends to generalize, to "objectify",

so to speak, the subjective and transitory state with which he has identified himself and says, for instance, "Life is sad", "Only grief is real, all the rest is illusion". Let us suppose that this person receives some good news: the loss which he thought he had sustained was unreal; the dear being whom he thought dead is saved. We immediately see a change in the state of his consciousness; sadness gives place to joy and the person, identifying himself with the new state of mind, exclaims, "How happy I am!" Life seems good and worth living and often, in the exuberance of joy, he forgets the existence of grief. If someone or something recalls his recent grief, this seems to him far off and unreal, and he is apt to say, "Now I feel like another person".

This natural exclamation that we have so often heard is in fact very significant. On the one hand, it shows how apparently complete the identification of the self with the content of his consciousness was. But the person, even while saying the words, *knows* that he is not *really* another person. In other words, he did not lose the sense of personal identity. This means that while the conscious phenomenal self identified itself with the various contents of the consciousness, there is something in us that is not identified, that does not change with the changing states of mind, that remains always the same, fixed, unassailable. This is our real "I", the center of our individuality, the real substance of our being. Without admitting the existence of this deeper self it is impossible to explain satisfactorily the duration of the sense of consciousness, or the feeling of personal identity through changing states of mind, and through the interruptions of consciousness produced during sleep, fainting, hypnosis and narcosis. The fact that ordinarily we have no consciousness of the deeper self is not surprising. Ordinarily our consciousness is occupied with the continual flow of our various states of mind. Our empiric self identifies itself with each in turn. How would it then be possible to have at the same time a consciousness of the real Self? It is impossible, except in special circumstances, to be aware of the transitory and the permanent at the same time. But if we succeed in stopping the mental flow for a few moments, keeping the field of consciousness free from the states of mind which usually occupy it, we can manage to obtain a partial knowledge of the real self. It is not an easy experiment, and it requires particular conditions. Continually external and internal sensations seek to invade the field of consciousness; continually feelings, emotions, thoughts arise, and it is difficult to keep our attention fixed on the self. In order to succeed, patient exercises of concentration and meditation are needed, or else there must be exceptional psychological conditions in which ordinary mental activity is suspended. This explains how it is that the majority of people have never had any consciousness of the deeper "I". Therefore they doubt or deny its existence. But those who through exceptional conditions or by means of patient efforts have reached that consciousness, have a profound certainty of the existence of the real Self.

That the conscience imposes itself on the ordinary self is one of the most convincing proofs of the existence of the Soul. The laws of association alone, the mechanical action and reaction on one another of the various psychological elements, are entirely insufficient to explain the superior manifestations of psychological life. Reason, creative imagination, moral judgment, selection, acts of will imply a synthetic, directive, and creative activity. But this activity does not take place in the empiric self, in the light of

ordinary consciousness. Only the results reach this personal self. And in certain cases when the activity of the Spirit is intense and its results break suddenly, almost violently into ordinary consciousness, a more or less confused sense of the mysterious power that is influencing it is felt. The poet who feels within himself an inscrutable power that dictates inspired verses, the monk to whose consciousness is revealed the power and greatness of the Supreme Good, the patriot to whom the imperious voice of conscience dictates sacrifice for the victory of his country, all who have similar experiences concur in testifying that there is a powerful inner force which operates on the ordinary consciousness impelling it in the direction of its profoundest aspirations.

When the existence and marvelous power of the deeper self is recognized, the “Know Thyself” of the Delphic Oracle acquires a new and profounder meaning. It no longer means only “analyse your thoughts and feelings and actions”; it means study your most intimate self, discover the real being hidden in the depths of your soul, learn its marvelous potency.

At this point, I should like to forestall a possible objection, or eliminate a possible misunderstanding. The fact that we have spoken of the ordinary self and the profounder Self must not be taken to mean that there are two separate and independent “I’s”, two beings in us. The Self in reality is *one*. What we call the ordinary self is that small part of the deeper Self that the waking consciousness is able to assimilate in a given moment. It is therefore something contingent and changing, a “variable quantity”. It is a reflection of what can become ever more clear and vivid; and it can perhaps someday succeed in uniting itself with its source.

Another possible misunderstanding must now be dealt with. This recognition of our highest being is not to be considered as implying a deification of the individual self. This would be the case only if we considered it as separated from its natural and intimate contact with reality, that is with other beings and with the Supreme Being, the Universal Self. This conception gives us instead a means of realizing this contact more clearly and therefore we can the more consciously open ourselves to its influence.

The spiritual conception of the self and of the soul has been generally admitted though differently stated, by Christian philosophy and religious tradition. St. Augustine affirmed the absolute and transcendent unity of the Self. Various mystics speak of the Spark, or apex of the Self, or else of the bottom, of its center, which is its intimate reality and in which it comes in contact with  
God . . .

Father Graty, in his admirable work, “La Connaissance de l’Ame” says: “The soul carries within itself hidden treasures and does not see them, knows nothing about them, cannot explain them” (p. 147) He adds however that we possess an “inner sense” which, in certain moments when we are able to withdraw ourselves from the habitual tumult of distractions and passions, gives us a direct and clear consciousness of our own souls.

“I felt something like an inner form . . . full of energy, beauty, and joy . . . a form of light and fire which sustained my whole being: a form that was stable, always the same, often reencountered in my life and forgotten in the intervals, and always joyfully recognized with the expression, “Here is my real being”. (p. 199)

The recognition of the existence of the Self and of its nature, is of immense spiritual value. Such a recognition constitutes a real revelation for the individual. It is the beginning of a new life, and the necessary foundation for a successful effort toward self regulation, toward freedom and inner regeneration; that is to say, for a real *Psychosynthesis*.