

Some Clarity – Part 3 – What is the Self?

I had a familiar feeling after sending out Part 2 of my “Autumn Clarity”. It was about having somewhat naively blundered into a conversation without having really honoured its enormous scope. The relationship between the personal and transpersonal dimensions of ourselves is a huge subject, and central to it is the whole question of the nature of the self.

So, whilst I had planned that this Part 3 would be about the “pitfalls and projections” we encounter on our journey, I feel the need to open up this question of “what is the self? What constitutes a person? What is the soul, do we have one”? How does the self change through the unfolding stages of our development? Is there an “I” which is beyond all the numerous small “I”s of our personality? Is there, or can there be, an “I” which is separate from my ego? Is the sense of “self” entirely illusory? We recognise the transpersonal, with its “Goodness, Beauty and Truth”, at times even through the darkest of our fogs, but what part of us recognises it? Also, inherent in all these questions is *the* topical question of the moment, “How do we know what is true?”.

At least this time I am more aware of the enormous size of the “can of worms” I am opening. Obviously I cannot do the subject justice, but I am reconciled to that. Again, my hope is that despite this, some clarity and usefulness can emerge.

I rather like the definition of self that Wikipedia currently gives – “The self is an individual person as the object of its own reflective consciousness. Since the *self* is a reference by a subject to the same subject, this reference is necessarily subjective. The sense of having a self—or *selfhood*—should, however, not be confused with subjectivity itself.” In other words my perception of my self is obviously subjective, but my self does exist as an object. But, what then, is it made up of?

There is obviously many millennia of thought behind this question, but, for the necessary brevity of this piece and the points I wish to make, I will start with Freud. For Freud the self was made up of Id, ego, super ego and personality all with their different levels of consciousness. Freud saw that we are largely governed by the unconscious Id and sub-conscious super-ego, he saw how little will power and self-knowledge people in general had. From this he developed various “drive theories” which to my understanding inevitably left the self in a negative context, as inherently “polluted”, rather like the Christian curse of original sin. The psychanalytic and psychodynamic approach that emerged from Freud’s work did though understand how trauma splits the self up into separate alienated parts and that healing, integration and maturity are possible.

For Behaviourists the self was / is simply that which reacts to and is controlled by its inherited nature and the external forces it reacts to. The Humanistic “third force of psychology” that emerged from Maslow, Rogers, Perls, et. al. understood how the self is fundamentally good, which is something I think that many of a Psychodynamic perspective still struggle to see. This insight was a core aspect of the sixties revolution that tried to throw off the heavy moralistic shackles of Victorian “original sin”. Obviously it only partly succeeded, but the understanding of our fundamental goodness enabled clarity around how all our negativity, all our difficulties, were the result of repression and trauma, and so essentially defensive in nature. It is not that our inherent nature is flawed.

From this flowed the possibility of “self-actualising”, of healing and opening to our deepest desire, to embody the “Goodness, Beauty and Truth” of wholeness with its transpersonal qualities of being. This journey of healing, integrating and repairing our selves, enables us to grow and mature into “realising our potential”, and it was the beginning of what has become known as the “Psycho-

Spiritual” approach, which combines the knowledge of our psychology and pathology, with that of the transpersonal or spiritual dimension of our existence.

Gestalt incorporated the work of Reich and Merleau-Ponty to re-integrate the body back into our understanding of the self, the concept of “organismic self-regulation” became a central theme in Gestalt’s deep commitment to holism. We are comprised of head, heart and body, and we need good connections between these parts, if we are to fulfil our potential. The force towards health and wholeness within Life itself is always with us, always wanting us to heal and mature and realise our potential.

Gestalt also developed its theory of the self out of the Field theory and Postmodernist perspectives. This saw the self as “emerging at the contact boundary between the organism and its environment”. It argued that there is no “thing”, “ghost”, “essence”, “soul” or “self” inside a person, we are simply process, and that it is in relationship to what is other that the self appears and can be seen, felt and develop. I think this led to the “relational turn” in Gestalt Therapy, and other perspectives, which, again from my perspective, caused an excessive emphasis to be placed on our “relationships” as holding our ultimate meaning.

I absolutely agree that we are a process, that we need to ever deepen our holism and our awareness of our completely relational existence, but, I find the “there is no self” aspect of this theory of self, untenable. It seems to me to be an example of postmodernism getting lost down a “rabbit hole” of its own intersubjectivity. Some spiritual traditions see “the self is an illusion” which could be taken as supporting this statement, but Postmodernism’s intellectual insight only grasps a tiny fragment of the profound experiential reality behind this truth. It tends not to understand how embodying a sense of ourselves as non-separate, as profoundly connected, is an extra-ordinarily advanced “non-dual” state of consciousness.

Yes, the self is a complex process made up of many parts, but it is also something that grows, matures and develops along established and known pathways. To dismiss its existence into an intersubjective relational field dependency, is to miss its central meaning. This meaning emerges from its developmental trajectory. Yes, we are “field dependant”, adapting chameleon like to every situation, but the essential point of our development is to wake up from our mechanical reactivity, to mature into an integrated person capable of holding an embodied presence independent of our circumstances. This is about finding freedom from being identified with our reactions, un-aware, un-self-reflective, constantly acting out with Pavlovian reactivity. (i.e. slaves to our “devilish”, or Freudian, drives!).

The possibility, and the point here, is seeing how our development is towards becoming a person that knows themselves, who has been able to take responsibility for themselves. This is towards a degree of integration where there is a holistic “I” capable of “running the show”, where there is a real adult who has grown up enough to have real will, who is largely compulsion free and so able to take genuine responsibility for themselves. Such a level of being is a huge achievement and it can indeed take decades. It is a journey that needs our increasingly ruthless honesty to see how we are largely caught in our false self, pretending to be a “competent adult”. Wealthy people are past masters of this pretence, their wealth can give an arrogant power and control that convinces them of their superiority. More broadly, looking at the world today and especially at our politicians here in the UK, it is obvious that we dearly need more real adult’s in it!

Wilber’s “Integral” approach has much in common with the humanistic perspective, where the self is seen as having this developmental trajectory towards wholeness. What it contributes is a clarity,

that comes from integrating many peoples research, which reveals how there are established stages to our development from birth to old age and death. This helps to us to locate where we are on our journey. He makes clear that the separate parts of the self, i.e. head, heart and body each has their own particular developmental journey. He also talks about the “false self” as being the unconscious reactive, trauma conditioned self, calling it the “actual self” and how we can, through “waking up” and maturation become our “authentic self”. He uses “real Self” to refer to the embodied transpersonal self we have the potential to become.

This is very close to many transpersonal developmental maps, including Gurdjieff’s who emphasised how we are “three-brained beings” (head, heart and body) and how healthy development is the *even* development of each alongside the quality of connection between them. He also talked about the difference between “essence and personality”, which makes sense to me, distinguishing between what I was born with and what I accumulated through my conditioning, both traumatic and non-traumatic. This is about distinguishing between my inherent and my trauma generated defensive, selves. “Essence” here is simply the inherited qualities of our head, heart and body, which, given the right conditions, can unfold into its potential, as happens with any plant or animal.

As a therapist, I know that most people meet the world through their “false” self, whilst keeping their true “emotional” self, with all its insecurities, hidden from view with varying degrees of self-awareness. Our real emotional self is often trapped and stuck within us as young, immature, and insecure parts of ourselves. This is then overlaid by our personality with all its parental and cultural conditioning, together with all our trauma informed compensatory processes and reactions. Behind every “should” that we are caught identified with, there is a trauma of some sort. If as children, when we “had to” behave in a certain way or else be rejected, we tended to “introject” (swallow down) the injunction and make that part of ourselves “bad”, rather than face the pain of that rejection. This is the definition of trauma, locking away inside ourselves the pain, hurt, fear or distress that we could not face. Trauma comes in *all* shapes and sizes, it is what generates our insecurity and it means that we are constantly compulsively defending ourselves. Indeed, all compulsivity carries the hallmark of trauma.

The metaphor that comes to mind, is one of seeing the unhealthy or dis-ease-d aspects of my ego as calluses or cysts that form around a foreign object stuck in the body. The self builds defences around its wounds, in order to protect itself from what would have been too much. The trouble is that these defences become deeply engrained habits, which as adults, no longer serve us. The healing of our trauma needs us to take responsibility for ourselves, facing, seeing, accepting, and re-allowing the stuck energy, of those young immature and insecure parts of ourselves, to flow again. This is as ever about the two intertwining processes of taking self-responsibility and growing up together with opening to self-compassion and self-forgiveness. As we become freer we improve our connection to the evolutionary force towards Consciousness, Love and Energy within the depth of all our “here and nows”, we can increasingly follow and trust our inherent organic process towards the miracle of being able to just “be”.

We also need to work through our personality, choosing and changing those parts that were conditioned into us, deciding what we do and do not want. I see all this as integrating our essence and personality into a new, authentic, self. This healed and integrated authentic self includes our “re-conditioned” healthy ego. Whilst relatively few people manage this, it is a necessary foundation for any trouble free ongoing development through the stages of letting go of the ego.

I can see now that my previous definition of the ego, that it was simply the defensive structures that formed around my traumas, was too limited. It needs to be wider in scope, to include our non-traumatic conditioning and the pervasive identification we have around ourselves as separate individuals.

I still think that the illusion of separateness comes largely from trauma, which it seems is an inevitable part of human life. However Jeremy Lent argues in "The web of Meaning" (building on McGilchrist and others work), that this problem comes from the increasing dominance of the left pre-frontal cortex that occurred in modern humans due to our increasingly complex social structures. It is this area of the brain that is responsible for language, for the use of symbols and concepts and planning, for the intellectual dominance that has taken over the developed world.

The Non-Duality teachings of the Far East have at their core this understanding that our belief in being a separate self is an illusion. As above, this does not correspond to the intellectual conceit of Postmodernism, it is an understanding that a profound shift in consciousness is possible. I have experienced this, where there is a shift into a new level of presence, awareness and stillness, a sense of being alive in the "here and now" with little sense of separateness between myself and everything. I have had these glimpses through meditation, or on occasion for short periods which have always come after intense and well supported times of working on myself.

A cautionary aspect of this however, is about how such experiences can often come from the mind / consciousness and energetic aspects of the self alone, without the personal dimension of the heart being engaged at all. There is this door into experiencing the transpersonal that can be opened using the head and body alone, and whilst it can enable real open heartedness due to the self being temporarily freed from its insecurity, it can also lead to a huge amount of "spiritual bypassing" (J. Welwood). Accessing this presence, whilst being given permission, as it were, to ignore any emotional problems with the personal self, because that is just illusion anyway, has caused many to "bypass" their insecurity. But this is *uneven* development, and it inevitably catches us out, with all sorts of difficult consequences.

So, it is clear to me that the vast majority of us, need to first attend to healing our hearts of the wounds behind our traumas, so that we can become our authentic selves. Only after this has been significantly achieved can we fully commit to working on embodying the realisation that our separateness is an illusion. We can then proceed from a position of having our feet steady and on solid ground. Otherwise, we don't know what we are doing or why, and we end up with lopsided and inauthentic development. History is full of examples of people, who, having claimed some form of enlightened, turned out to have "feet of clay" (more in "pitfalls and projection" later). The great question to hold with any form of spiritual searching is, "Who is doing this? "Where is the motivation coming from?" "Is it escapism?"

I recently saw the Ram Dass film, "Becoming Nobody – everyone's busy becoming somebody". Its title sums up our journey very well I think. We can't let go of what we have not yet been able to hold, so we have to somehow heal our wounded self before we can let go of our ego into the freedom of becoming "nobody". Something that, from the evidence in the film, he struggled to achieve.

I hope this has provided some ground for an understanding of what the self is and what it is comprised of. But this still leaves the question of where and how the soul fits into the scheme of things?

The Soul

“Soul” is such a confusing word, it is used in so many different contexts, has so many different meanings. Some equate it with “essence”, others say it is the transpersonal part of us. Some say it our “spirit” whatever that means. Instead of exploring all these views, I hope that by briefly exploring Gurdjieff’s ideas about the soul, a perspective of some interest will emerge.

I would like to start though, by returning to what “Part 2” of this enquiry was all about, how fundamentally we are made up of these two dimensions, the personal and the transpersonal.

We are never, in reality, separated from the transpersonal. Whenever we “remember ourselves” we connect up our heart, head and body to some extent, which reduces our ego identifications and helps to create a gap of self-awareness. This automatically means we are more connected to the transpersonal level of life. Whilst the personal needs to heal and develop, it is clear that the transpersonal only cares about my development indirectly. The transpersonal is what is infinite and eternal and always available in the depth of the “here and now”, it is always contactable if we turn our attention to it. The transpersonal unknowable Whole is what is behind the birth and death of the universe and who knows what else. It only cares, it seems to me, in that it would like us to realise its nature, to complete the astonishing experiment it started some 13.7 billion years ago of seeing if Formlessness could become conscious and embodied in Form.

The laws that govern the universe produced life and evolution and eventually, in us, a sufficient concentration of consciousness to facilitated the emergence of free will. It is as though God is playing an immense cosmic game of hide and seek with itself, and for the finale, realised that if there was to be any real meaning and fun to the game, there had to be creatures able to choose to realise the Consciousness, Love and Energy of the Absolute. Otherwise if all is pre-determined, where is the fun? Why bother?

It seems some people are stuck being fully mechanical, they are so caught up in their trauma derived reactive prisons that no self-reflection or self-awareness is possible. For most of us though, despite being largely hypnotised by our insecurity, there is some self-awareness, we are somewhere on the scale. We do experience moments of self-awareness, of some connection to the transpersonal dimension of life, we do struggle with choice, with the truth, we are aware at some level of the need to take responsibility for ourselves. Whenever this is the case, we have both the personal and transpersonal dimensions to our being. Whenever there is a gap between ourselves and our experience, however small, the transpersonal is there.

On this developmental scale there are steps or stages which represent the levels of being that we are capable of. Before the first step, there is ordinary life, where we are largely mechanical, as above. The first “step” on the graph then represents achieving an authentic self, the second step achieving a level of presence that corresponds to a significant surrendering of the ego, and maybe there is a third step into the fourth level of being where there is no separation from the Whole. Who knows? The point is, as many spiritual traditions (see Gurdjieff / Wilber) have said, that each of these stages has a corresponding “soul”, or “body”.

Gurdjieff argued that before people become their “authentic selves” they do not have a soul that can continue after death. For many the idea of anything surviving death is daft, for others like the psychic, Suzanne Giesemann (batgap.com) the idea that there is nothing after death, is daft.

Whatever the truth here, I think it is clear that on a basic energetic level our “soul” is the same as that of any animal. At death the animating force of life is suddenly gone, energy, consciousness and feeling all stop, it is a profound change. But this does not stop us wondering where that magical life force goes, what happens to it?

Gurdjieff’s thesis was that it is through the work of “conscious labours and intentional suffering” (to use his oft repeated phrase) that we develop something independent enough to be capable of surviving death. Our “conscious labour” is all about becoming more self-aware, about understanding and taking responsibility for ourselves by using our attention and developing our will. Whilst “intentional suffering” is about healing ourselves through facing and allowing the pain, hurt, fear, distress, behind our trauma. We have to choose to do this, and it is this overall “work” that creates a new “body” within us that is able to hold this new level of consciousness. This forms around our more integrated and solid “I”, which is forged from the heat generated by the struggles of this work. It is very hard to face and take responsibility for ourselves, to choose consciousness over “sleep”, love and self-compassion over resentment and blame, awareness over identification with our victim selves. This is also the work, that I discussed in Part 1, of creating a gap between ourselves and our experience through coming into our “here and now” with awareness, disidentifying and making our experience an object of exploration. This is returning again and again to holding ourselves in question and it is this that slowly creates an integrated and independent “I”.

I see, from the work of therapy, how the healing and integration changes people energetically and materially. Gurdjieff saw human development in terms of the refining of energy /matter, as per the symbol of the alchemists, refining the course into fine. So, any new body is made from this new finer matter, and when enough of it has been accumulated it can crystallise, enabling us to establish ourselves as an “authentic adult”, rather than remaining in a place of moving in and out of authenticity. This is the work of transforming the coarser energy/matter of our “ordinary life”, it is all about working with our fight, flight and freeze responses, our frustrations and wants, all those feelings, thoughts and tensions that accompany our “victim mode” of being, to heal and transform them via consciousness, love and compassion, processing their stuck energy into the new and finer substance that corresponds to this level of being.

The “conscious labours and intentional suffering” involved in working towards the third stage of being is it seems a little different. It is more about building a deeper presence, a more committed “here and now” focused attention using meditation and body work, to inhabit and expand this gap between ourselves and our experience, along with consciously allowing the suffering that inevitably comes with letting the ego go. I.e. surrendering the sense of self that was previously hard won. Again, the necessary quantity of the required finer energy / matter / attention has to be generated to enable this stage to crystallise into a permanent embodying of this level of being, rather than being left with experiencing just temporary moments of connection to the transpersonal. Achieving this the self has an “I” that is able to use and focus its attention, because it is supported by the wisdom and lack of internal conflict that comes with such an integrated self.

So, from this perspective the soul can be seen as having at least three stages of formation. There is the basic energetic “animal” level. At the next stage a stable authentic self can form. The possible third stage, is where yet finer matter can be accumulated and crystallised, enabling us to live consistently in simply “being”. Finally, a possible fourth stage of complete freedom. Who knows which, if any, of these stages of soul formation survive after death? And it doesn’t matter much to me just now, there is plenty to get on with refining my energy and presence right now.

I wonder about the relationship between these stages of soul formation and our head, heart and body structure. With the heart there is the normal level of identified and reactive feeling, then the self-compassion and opening to love of the authentic self, then the embodiment of Love in the third / fourth stages of being. With the head there is the associative reactive thinking of ordinary life, the more presentful directed, intuitive and creative thinking of the authentic self, moving towards the more expansive consciousness of the later stages. With the body there are all the unconscious tensions of ordinary life, the more consciously self-care and presence of the authentic self before the conscious embodiment of the stillness, fluidity and energetic fullness/emptiness of the transpersonal Self. Perhaps each of these has a part to play in the creation of a complete soul?

What is clear though, is that our self can transform from being imprisoned in the personal towards embodying the freedom of the transpersonal. We can move from being dominated by multiple compulsive and conflicting personal "I"s towards our potential as an integrated transpersonal "I" that is the spacious, silent, loving and alive embodiment of the Consciousness, Love, and Energy of the Absolute. How far we get along this path is anybody's guess, but one thing I am certain about, is that every step we make along the path is worth it.

Lastly, I think the best answer to the question of our times, "how do we know what is true?", is to question, with as much ruthless honesty as can be mustered, and with as much understanding of human nature as can be gathered, to assess whether what is being stated or claimed, is coming from compulsion.

So, to ask this about this piece, "Why have I written it?" is a question that opens interesting doors. Is my search for clarity in some way a projection of my insecurity, of my need to claim knowing, as became apparent in the Ram Dass film? Or is it a giving, an attempt to share and support the unfolding of Consciousness, Love and Energy in the world. Or perhaps a mixture of the two? For you to decide!

Jim Robinson - Feb 2022