
THE PLACE OF SOUL IN THERAPY, OR THE PLACE OF THERAPY IN SOUL

Helen Palmer and Peter Hubbard

Introduction

As modern psychotherapy looks beyond its rational and scientific antecedents, the spotlight is beginning to fall on the definition of soul and its relationship to psychotherapy. The questions that show up in this enquiry tend to focus on where soul might be acknowledged in psychotherapy, and then on how this particular aspect of therapy might be done. These are reasonable questions, yet put in this way, they underscore an assumption about this relationship. This assumption is predicted on the notion that soul is an aspect of therapy, that it is 'in' therapy.

When an enquiry into soul regards it as one aspect of therapy that can be separated off, a crucial conceptualising frame is unconsciously established. This frame relegates soul to the status of a subset of identity. Essentially what we are doing is protecting the primacy of egoic identity. Our sense of who we are remains defined by our egoic consciousness. In this we maintain that the characteristics of egoic consciousness are the ultimate coherence of personality. We affirm the egoic experience of individual separateness as the 'human condition'.

If on the other hand we hold that soul is not merely an aspect of therapy, but is the actual context of therapy, this notion of egoic identity is disturbed, disrupted. To hold soul as context for therapy requires that we be willing to engage the possibility of a psychological level shift. It intimates that hard-won egoic differentiation is but a stage of human development, rather than its sine qua non. Ego contemplates its own developmental 'death'.

Yet if we claim that we are not separate from soul in our therapy and in our lives, and that we are not separate from the ultimate context of spirit, a considerable reconceptualisation is required. This is because in our normal waking consciousness we do experience ourselves as separate.

Mental-egoic Consciousness

Our normal waking consciousness is essentially 'heroic' consciousness, which the transpersonal theorist, Ken Wilber calls mental-egoic consciousness. Wilber's term is quite specific. It suggests an experience of consciousness and of meaning-making that is centred in upper cognitive faculties, and is to do with embeddedness in, and maintenance of, ego. The parameters of this mental-egoic consciousness are characterised by:—

- an ability to separate and differentiate body/feelings from mind, and mind from the Divine.
- an ability to separate self from environment
- an ability to be self-reflexive, to develop rationality and formal operational thinking
- the experiential acknowledgement of individuality as a primary factor of identity, and a morality that reflects this
- linear temporal awareness, a grasp of historical time, and the ability to facilitate long-term planning.

While the fulfilling of this heroic potential stages a glorious epic of individual striving and affirmation, there is also a less comfortable or shadow side to the egoic structure. The self-conscious ego may be:–

- vulnerable in its separateness
- painfully aware of its mortality as the unity of life/death is severed
- guilty about its emergence and the shadow it thereby creates and projects
- open to anxiety, both neurotic and existential.

To withstand the terrors that may arise from these experiences, ego not only defends against basic levels of consciousness, initiating neurotic conflicts, but also defends against the more inclusive realms of consciousness, initiating existential crises.

In *Up From Eden*, Wilber says of the mental-egoic:–

It sealed out subconsciousness and superconsciousness. There arose that peculiarly Western egoic mood: cool, rational, abstract, isolated, bravely over-individual, solid, shy of its emotions, shy of God. ... And in this doubly defended consciousness (repressing the Below and denying the Above), the new ego, with its visions of cosmocentricity, proceeded to remake the Western world. (p 292)

The language forms that developed to express this egoic consciousness tend to nominalise events and then to describe the relationship between them. As the individual ego learnt to encapsulate its own experience and separate from its wider context, so language structure reflected a conceptual dualising. The basic subject-verb-object sequence of English structurally encodes this. We tend to nominalise events and processes, think in terms of polarities, of dualistic forms, and then make implicit assumptions that this is in fact how the world really is.

Our language then not only expresses, but also shapes our egoic meaning-making. Unconscious to the potential for hubris, we take the logical step of

assuming that an activity such as psychotherapy, which makes intensive use of the egoic skills of upper cognitive self-reflexiveness (nb the 'talking cure'), is able to subsume the far more inclusive and dynamic process of soul-making.

The context of soul-making

Egoic consciousness is experienced through these upper cognitive, self-reflexive faculties. How might awareness of soul-making as context for psychotherapy be built so that it includes and contains these egoic faculties, and also goes beyond them?

A basic practice of psychosynthesis monitors levels of being in order to develop this awareness. It involves identifying the physical, emotional and mental experiences, the personal centre of identity, and finally Self awareness, using a meditative focus. Roberto Assagioli originally formulated this: "I have, and I am not my body; I have, and I am not my feelings; I have, and I am not my mind; I am a centre of Self-Consciousness and Will."

While helping to differentiate levels, this formulation appeared to be quite dualistic and seemed to imply a disembodied psychology. The more inclusive wording: "I am, and I am more than my body, ... my feelings, ... my mind" avoids the separation implicit in: "I am not ..." with its egoic level overtones, and facilitates a sense of connectedness and relatedness. These qualities are preconditions for accepting one's humanity.

The reiteration of 'more than' acknowledges an increasingly inclusive experience of Self which is beyond the mental-egoic level of consciousness, while the awareness "I am my body and I am more than my body" grounds the heroic ego within a deeply immanent soul-making context.

Body is not then separate from spirit, but is spirit at its physical level. Physical experience is not essentially separate from what is divine, nor is emotional experience, nor mental experience. This has ramifications not only ontologically and philosophically, but also ecologically; not only for us as individuals, but also for the systems of which we are a part. These ramifications challenge heroic precepts that see individuals as separate from others and from the environment. They illustrate that the human experience can be both profoundly separate from, and interconnected with, all that there is. Mental egoic consciousness creates the individual experience of separateness from the system in which the individual lives. Soul-making consciousness creates the coexistent experience of separateness **and** connectedness in which our hard-won egoic consciousness is not 'lost'. This is the experience of immanence, grounded as form, as matter.

It is also important to acknowledge and include transcendent yearnings and experiences. These have been associated historically with denigration of body, and devaluing of matter and nature. Mental egoic consciousness has tended to see

the transcendence of form as the only true and valid spiritual truth. This is of course consistent with the way it conceptualises a split between body and mind, mind and the Divine, and body and the Divine. At best the body is regarded as a vehicle for soul, at worst an encumbrance to be scourged into submission.

Our mental-egoic consciousness may rebel at the apparent paradox implicit in attempting to hold both immanent and transcendent experience. Yet holding both helps connect us to the ultimate spiritual context which the Perennial Philosophy names as the ultimate ground, being the condition of all things and events. It also helps connect us to the context of soul-making, which may be understood as the personal ground, being and condition of all things and events. Here the same phenomenon manifests at different levels of being, appearing different, but in essence not.

Placing our therapeutic work in such a context requires that our mental processes keep engaging with perspectives that go beyond the usual parameters and identifications of egoic meaning-making. These perspectives require us to both include and be more than our meaning-making identifications, to include and be more than our mental-egoic experience. The ego defends against this. It is being asked to 'die'. In fact this is its evolutionary challenge.

If we align with a context which takes us beyond the maps and models of psyche delineated and defined simply by mental-egoic consciousness, then we can engage in therapy as a way of participating in soul-making.

This does not mean that personality dysfunction is not diagnosed and addressed with clinical precision, that ego-strengthening work is not engaged in where appropriate, that developmental deficits are not engaged in the transference, as some psychotherapists seem to fear.

Centering the therapeutic relationship in a context of soul-making requires that we eschew the possible mental-egoic hubris of thinking that we can fully diagnose, and conceptually encompass, what our clients' lives are about, in terms of pathology (and problems) alone. We attempt instead to be clearly and therapeutically in relationship with our clients in their soulmaking, knowing we can make useful hypotheses about pathology which contribute to understanding.

We also take care to keep open to the mystery at the heart of the psychotherapeutic encounter. Our psychotherapeutic skills include the ability to maintain a creative presence and the ability to live in the anxiety of the unknown. It is in the therapeutic moment of not knowing that we can open to the mystery of soul-making in ourselves and in our clients, if we are willing to recognise it as such. This perspective on soul-making, that includes pathology rather than focuses on pathology primarily, allows for healing insights and experiences other than those available to mental-egoic consciousness. It allows for grace, and profound connection. As psychotherapists, we know such moments.

The repression of the sublime in psychotherapy

Do clients want this soul-making context? Anderson and Hopkins, in *The Feminine Face of God* explore and collate women's spiritual experience and concerns through extensive interviews with women across America. This is what the authors say:—

The women we spoke with had a deep desire to tell us what was meaningful and sacred in their lives.

The warmth with which we were received and the openness and trust with which each woman related her story made us keenly aware that opportunities for this kind of sharing are virtually nonexistent.

Even in the cloistered walls of a psychotherapist's office the dialogue usually focuses on what has gone wrong with one's life, rather than on *the deep purpose moving through it*. (p 13) [our emphasis].

Compare Michael Basch, a psychotherapist who has been engaged in attempting to provide a valid, unifying and useful explanatory theory for psychotherapy. From *Understanding Psychotherapy*:—

It is a person's self-image, or self-concept, that furnishes both the potential and the limits of individual existence. Psychotherapy focuses on the aspect of a person's self-concept that is either frustrating that potential or is leading the patient into an inappropriate and counter-productive attempt to breach these limits and then tries to help the patient resolve these problems. (p 19)

This is a reasonably true and adequate description as far as it goes. But it tends to suggest that psychotherapy is simply a treatment option. It is obvious in his writing that Basch's practice of psychotherapy is empathic, respectful, and effective. Even so, can a theory underpinned by such an essentially pathologising mental-egoic focus truly be a unifying psychotherapeutic theory? If there is no clearly articulated spiritual context, can clients be assisted to engage consciously the soul-making, the deep purpose moving through their lives, as effectively as when there is such a context?

Theories that ignore, or do not formatively acknowledge soul-making may usefully unify knowledge of mental-egoic consciousness, but they will not serve as adequate evolutionary psychological frameworks which are inclusive of spiritual experiences because they do not map the egoic defence of repression of the sublime.

We are familiar with concepts around repression of the basic unconscious drives, instincts and developmental trauma that need to be defended against. Repression of the sublime, like the 'denying of the Above' that Wilber referred to earlier, involves 'sealing out' the superconscious and the experience of connectedness

beyond the egoic ceiling. It is a common phenomenon in our culture.

Psyche, which is etymologically derived from the Greek for breath, life, soul, has for Basch become information. He says:—

Information is the psychical or psychological force, the motivation behind behaviour. (p 58)

It is important to include this concept. Yet it leaves unanswered speculation about the nature, process and experience of motivation. And there is no indication that Basch includes as information, input from levels of experience that contextualise, that are more than, the level of mental-egoic meaning-making.

Thus is the once-mysterious psyche taken out of the realm of the supernatural to join science, the search for order in nature. (p 58)

This is a reasonable statement and it sounds suspiciously like an egoic motivation to repress the sublime. It implies psyche is to be 'reduced' to fit a 'scientific' notion of nature. There is enough debate about consciousness and the brain to know that attributing the capacity for will and volition to a biologically based, mental-egoic self-system does not eliminate the need to hypothesise the existence of levels beyond that. Mind as computer is not a sufficient metaphor, because it does not satisfy existentially or spiritually. We are still left with the questions: Who/what creates the self-system? Who maintains? Who dreams the dream? You still have the ghost in the machine.

We suggest that answering these questions takes us into realms of experience beyond mental-egoic consciousness, realms which cannot necessarily be adequately conceptualised with the faculties available to mental-egoic consciousness. Such experience must be validated without pathologising spiritual experiences as regressive fantasising, or, more subtly, patronised as mature self-soothing skills. Basch seems to be doing this in his account of a client reinstating himself as a practising Catholic. He says:—

.... [the client] could now look to his religion – a more mature, abstract, internalized source of self-object experiences – for support in times of stress. (p 232)

He does not say his client could look to God as a context for living his life – whether stressed or not. He does not say that his client was willing to engage in the process of surrendering his egoic consciousness for a more inclusive and connected sense with all that there is. Yet these are other ways of naming the choices this client seems to have made.

When we take on this context of soul-making, we need to keep alive to all the ways that our language might betray a lapse into dualistic thinking. Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul*, a book which describes the soul-making context for

Soul in Therapy: Therapy in Soul

his practice of psychotherapy, illustrates the difficulties of dualistic language structures. For instance, he says:–

.... we can respond to our own soul as it winds its way through the maze of our life's unfolding. (p xiii)

This is evocative and poetic, yet by nominalizing 'soul' he implies a separation between soul, and 'life's unfolding'. If we consider soul-making as a process rather than just as a concept, then our soul-making is our life's unfolding and our responding to it.

Moore says:–

We can cultivate, tend, enjoy and participate in things of the soul but we can't outwit it or manage it or shape it to the designs of a wilful ego. (p xvi)

This is conceptually unclear. It is true that we have a choice about whether or not we consciously cultivate, tend, enjoy and participate in soul-making, which engages the fascinating process of will. However, if the soul is still reified as a 'thing' which we have 'options' about, the relationship of the choosing consciousness and soul remains unmapped. Is that consciousness different from soul? We suggest that it is not helpful to consider soul as partial consciousness. This is the approach of mental-egoic consciousness creating separate classification and categorisation.

If we consider soul-making as a process of the personal ground unfolding, which includes all personal things and events, and all transpersonal things and events which are cohered by an individualised sense of self, then we begin to have a unifying sense of what a human being is in the fullest possible way.

When we surrender our individual sense of boundaries, not as psychotic regression, but because we are opening to the spiritual ground of the ultimate/infinite/God, then we can go beyond the referents of individualised consciousness to an experience of profound connectedness charted by spiritual disciplines through the ages – an experience of the Divine. We differentiate psychosis from such a surrender by the ability of the mature ego to reassert itself, function in consensual reality, and begin the process of making meaning of the experience. It is worth remembering that these experiences of profound connection, called by Maslow "peak experiences", are more common than traditional psychology's silence on this might have us believe.

Repression of the sublime is the individual's or the culture's way of protecting itself from superconscious inflow that can devastate egoic boundaries, and so it serves as a primary defence of egoic integrity. This defence can also deny the transformative potential of such a psychological event if it is not recognised as such. Repression of the sublime needs, therefore, to be positively framed as a

psychological threshold, with possible developmental ramifications. It needs to be considered, like all thresholds, as a rite of passage available only to those developmentally ready to undergo it. In this case by those ready to undergo the process of surrender of the ego-centric world view to the more inclusive context of soul-making.

Conclusion

What then are some of the dangers of having therapeutic theories which do not formatively acknowledge soul-making and spirit?

1. Limited Diagnosis

Non-ordinary states of consciousness, or altered states of consciousness range from deeply spiritual and mystical experiences through to psychotic conditions characterised by lack of insight, paranoid delusions and hallucinations, and extravagant forms of behaviour. Obviously it is important not to romanticise severe personality dysfunction, but to treat it appropriately.

However, it is equally important to identify spiritual and existential issues and not treat them pathologically. Appropriately dealt with, they are potentially transformative.

We need to have psychotherapeutic models that help to differentiate clinically among spiritual, mystical, existential, neurotic, and psychotic states; that map aetiology and level of causation, and the phenomenology of each state; and that help structure the therapeutic relationship in terms of what may best support, contain and realise the healing potential in a non-ordinary state of consciousness.

2. Avoiding the I–Thou encounter in the dynamics of the therapeutic engagement

How comfortable are we with the I–Thou relationship which challenges us not just to tolerate the unknown, but to actively to seek it as the potential of the therapeutic encounter?

And if this potential does unfold, and there is that profound meeting, how do we name and hold it? Do we try to ‘executively manage’ the I–Thou relationship?

In the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship we are responsible for holding a point of tension with it as it unfolds, and helping the experience be known, named and validated. Our therapeutic model should structure such awareness and help give language to it.

3. Working with Transference

The exquisite process of decoding the dynamics of the therapeutic transferences is circumscribed by the failure to include awareness of the superconscious.

What can open up for a client if transference material is not just associated with the biological, personal mother or father, but also with basic existential dilemmas

and spiritual yearnings?

What closes down if a therapist pathologises projection of the sublime?

What happens if the I–Thou meeting is reduced to notions of parental transference?

4. Pride

There is a potential danger that if we lack an intrinsic soul-making perspective in our therapeutic approach, we may have to graft on to this approach understanding from our own spiritual path or religion. The ideal that simply acknowledging this perspective in our current modality will serve to integrate the two is naive. Our perspective informs our approach.

If our client is not of the same religion or denomination, how do we keep the content from getting in the way of the process? If we bring in our own spiritual wisdom, how does this sit with a theory of practice which fails to articulate how the spiritual issues and dynamics we may be attempting to identify are best addressed and worked with? It could limit the client to whatever our own spiritual experience has been.

This demands a lot of us in terms of our knowledge and creative skill.

We need to stay alive to spiritual pride, the impulse to pronounce upon the life journey of another.

Having a transpersonal theory that is non-religious and non-denominational gives us the safe container of a knowledge base, a guiding context and process skills.

5. The mental-egoic ceiling

A danger of not having a model of therapeutic experience beyond the mental-egoic, is that it allows us to remain at the level of mental-egoic conceptualisation.

- There is no counterpoint to our mental identification. Nor to a world view predicated on duality and polarisation.
- Heroic mythology is elevated to an absolute truth.
- The psychological experience called Death of Ego is both overtly and covertly resisted.

Repression of the sublime goes unrecognised.

Maintenance of a mind/body split can all too easily lead to denial of body oriented techniques and strategies as suitable for the practice of psychotherapy. A ‘disembodied’ psychology may ensue.

Therapy is considered secular and scientific only – so that numinous experience in clients is given a reductionist gloss. Or we refer out of the province of psychotherapy, when in fact psychotherapeutic skills are called for to help a client integrate their experience.

6. Over-internalisation

The last danger we want to point out arises from an over-internalised examination of self that is not connected to vital engagement with social issues and the state of the world.

A context is needed which acknowledges the relatedness of all life, within which to encourage clients to consider the deep purpose moving through their lives.

This has profound implications for psychotherapy. James Hillman and Michael Ventura have published an iconoclastic dialogue entitled: *We've had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*. In it, Hillman says:–

We've had a hundred years of analysis, and people are getting more and more sensitive, and the world is getting worse and worse.

Maybe it's time to look at that. We still locate the psyche inside the skin. You go *inside* to locate the psyche, and you examine *your* feelings and *your* dreams, they belong to you. Or it's interrelations, interpsyche, between your psyche and mine. That's been extended a little bit into family systems and office groups – but the psyche, the soul, is still only *within* and *between* people. We're working on our relationships constantly, and our feelings and reflections, but look what's left out of that.

[Hillman makes a wide gesture that includes the oil tanker on the horizon, the gang graffiti on a park sign, and the fat homeless woman with swollen ankles and cracked skin asleep on the grass about fifteen yards away].

What's left out is a deteriorating world.

So why hasn't therapy noticed that? Because psychotherapy is only working on that 'inside' soul. By removing the soul from the world and not recognizing that the soul is also *in* the world, psychotherapy can't do its job any more. (p 3 – 4)

We think it can – but it needs to be anchored in a soul-making context that acknowledges both immanent and transcendent experience.

So it is necessary to examine the place of therapy in soul, rather than the place of soul in therapy.

We need to welcome the engagement and pleasure afforded our mental egoic meaning-making – the consciousness out of which we write this paper and you engage with the ideas presented.

And to welcome the edges of this experience, that help us stretch to more of who we are, to encourage more of who our clients are.

It may not be so bad, to stretch in this way. We will survive.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche puts it somewhat mischievously: Enlightenment is the ego's ultimate disappointment.

REFERENCES

Anderson, S. and P. Hopkins. (1991) *The Feminine Face of God*. Bantam Books.

Assagioli, R. (1984) *The Act of Will*. Turnstone.

Basch, M F. (1988) *Understanding Psychotherapy*. Basic Books.

Grof, S. and C. Grof (eds). (1989) *Spiritual Emergency*. Tarcher.

Haronian, F. (1974) Repression of the Sublime. *Synthesis* v 1, no 1.

Hillman, J. and M. Ventura. (1992) *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*. Harper San Francisco.

Moore, T. (1994) *Care of the Soul*. Piatkus.

O'Regan, M. (1984) Reflections on the art of disidentification. *Yearbook* v 4, 4 Institute of Psychosynthesis, London.

Wilber, K. (1983) *Up From Eden*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.