

A Contextual Introduction to Psychosynthesis

Una Introducción contextual a la Psicosisíntesis

Helen Palmer and Peter Hubbard*

Institute of Psychosynthesis N.Z.
Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

This article is a brief introduction to the principles of psychosynthesis, first formulated by Dr Roberto Assagioli in his 1910 doctoral thesis. It tracks the development of transpersonal psychology through the 20th century as it sought to bridge the gap between science and religion, between psychoanalysis and behavioural psychology and the exhilarating encounters with psychedelics and Oriental spiritual approaches to human being and becoming. It acknowledges the perennial philosophy with which transpersonal psychology has long been identified, and identifies some of the developing critique of its epistemological methodology. It concludes that Assagioli's specific contribution of will and psychosynthesis continues to contribute to the evolution of transpersonal psychology.

Key words:

Psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli, Spiritual experience, Psychological understanding, Postmodern psycho spirituality

Resumen

Este artículo es una breve introducción a los principios de la psicosisíntesis, originariamente formulada por el doctor Roberto Assagioli en su tesis doctoral en 1910. El artículo continua con el desarrollo de la psicología transpersonal en el siglo veinte, como búsqueda de la unión entre la ciencia y la religión, entre el psicoanálisis y la psicología conductual y su conexión con los psicodélicos y aproximaciones a la espiritualidad oriental. En el artículo se comentan las críticas que la psicología transpersonal sufre en cuanto a su epistemología metodológica, así como su identificación con la filosofía perenne. Se concluye con la específica contribución desarrollada por Assagioli en su contribución a la evolución de la psicología transpersonal.

Palabras Clave

Psicosisíntesis, Roberto Assagioli, Experiencia espiritual, Comprensión psicológica, Psico-espiritualidad postmoderna

Received: February 23, 2009

Accepted: April 15, 2009

Psychosynthesis was founded by Dr. Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychiatrist involved in the early development of psychoanalysis. He first articulated the principles of psychosynthesis in his doctoral thesis of 1910 and developed them over the 1920's and 1930's, publishing such articles as *Spiritual Development and its Attendant Maladies* and *Dynamic Psychology and Psychosynthesis* which became the first two chapters of his book *Psychosynthesis*. His model of the psyche was published in English in 1933 and clearly showed an optimistic view of human beings as spiritual beings seeking meaningful and purposeful expression. A junior member of the psychoanalytic group that formed around Freud in the early 1900's, he nevertheless ultimately critiqued Freud's ideas because they did not to him sufficiently acknowledge the spiritual dimension, altruistic motivation and experiences of the sublime as integral to human Being.

However, it was not until decades later that psychosynthesis became more widely known. Humanistic psychology in the mid 20th century validated the focusing on healthy people, which Assagioli had advocated, rather than just on pathology. Transpersonal psychology also gained momentum then as a source of study and clinical practice recognising spirituality as an essential foundation of psychological health and healing. With James and Jung, Assagioli is acknowledged as one of the earlier explorers and practitioners of transpersonal psychology, and psychosynthesis continues to develop as one particular approach in this field, with its most specific contribution being articulation of the essential function of Will.

Freud and his circle were intent on having their 'new' field of psychoanalysis and depth psychology be recognised within the medical paradigm of the time, and therefore have it be regarded as 'scientific'. The behavioural psychologists, heirs to the academic study of psychology [after Wundt], defined a thoroughly empirical scientific frame as their field of enquiry. Transpersonal psychology sought to bridge the gap between science and religion. The psychologist Abraham Maslow (1968) exemplifies the spectrum - beginning as a behaviourist, moving to explore humanistic psychology, and thence to articulation of a new psychology that, in contrast to the humanistic orientation, would be transpersonal, transhuman, centred in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like.

Transpersonal exploration also involved a huge freeing up of Western cultural identification with Judeo-Christian thought and religious practices. Richard Tarnas, perhaps unexpectedly, describes transpersonal psychology as being born out of modern science with philosophical roots in the Enlightenment, in that it does not espouse a particular theological outlook as its philosophical underpinning, and looks to achieve an empirical basis in the subjective reported experience of those exploring psychospiritual experiences. Stanislav Grof states in *Spiritual Emergency* (p. xii):

'The 1960s brought a wave of interest in spirituality and consciousness exploration that manifested itself in many different ways, from a renaissance of the ancient and Oriental spiritual practices to experiential psychotherapies and self-experimentation with psychedelic drugs.'

Religion, with its trappings of guilt, sin and judgement, and intercession, was 'out' and spirituality was 'in' - the Mahareshi came to Bangor and the young seekers made the Indian pilgrimage. The wave of interest amounted to a creative ferment. The 1960's proliferation of opportunities and approaches to individual self-growth occurred within a time of great geopolitical change, cultural upheaval and social experimentation. This was its particular and specific context.

The word 'transpersonal' was used to denote a context beyond the personal, and has been tracked back to Dane Rudhyar's astrological work in the 1920's. Maslow wrote to Grof in the 1960's saying he was using the word transpersonal instead of the clumsier 'transhumanistic' or 'transhuman'. Boorstein says that the term transpersonal means literally 'lying beyond or going beyond the personal'. The experiences that originate on this level involve transcendence of the usual boundaries of the individual [sometimes named as the skin-encapsulated ego] and of the

limitations of three-dimensional space and linear time that are our [restricted; partial] perception of the world in the ordinary state of waking consciousness.

One of the constraints that has always operated in terms of psychoanalysis and depth psychology is the issue of proof: how to demonstrate that what can appear as a rather arcane process has value, in ways that can be measured. Behavioural psychology was scientific, having no truck with anything subjective or metaphysical and seeking clearly measurable data. Psychoanalysis focused on neurosis and mental illness and struggled to have itself accepted as a scientific discipline. Humanistic psychology had to develop a different vocabulary and assessments as the subjective experience of mental health was its focus, and transpersonal psychology, focusing on soul and spirit, had to bridge the widest spectrum. An irony is that those interested in consciousness exploration, while challenging the modern scientific view of a mechanical universe in which the earth was a lump of rock revolving purposelessly in a Euclidian void, were also attempting to provide proof consistent with the methodology of that scientific view to validate experientially based theory. The paradigm shift from Euclidian void to Quantum field did not address this conundrum. So how do you measure life experience with tools designed to measure matter only?

The way it was attempted was primarily by claiming empirical validation for individual intrasubjective experiences of a consensually validated independent universal spiritual reality. This led to what has been named as the perennial philosophy becoming the theoretical underpinning for transpersonal psychology. Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, published in 1945, described this as:

'the metaphysics that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.'

Essentially, with the core underpinning of the concept of the Ground of all Being, the perennial philosophy claims there is a single truth that is at the mystic heart of the world's religious traditions. For all that the immanent experience is named, in fact it is more often the transcendent version that is favoured. And the connection to this ground is essentially a matter of the experience of the individual in relation to the whole. This assumption, that it is the individual experience that is reified, exemplifies the heroic mythos writ large. This may be another reason for its attraction, as it is heroic mythology which underpins cultural expression in the West.

Assagioli certainly belonged in that scientific camp. He was, we must remember, a medically trained psychiatrist. He said:

'I think that most discussions about identity have gone wrong because academic psychologists don't take the trouble to experiment in appropriate ways. They run rats through mazes but they don't go into the inward laboratory and examine their own experience They might be compared, with some irreverence, to those theologians who refused to look through Galileo's telescope because they were afraid of disturbing their world view. They neglect introspection, which is the best laboratory a psychologist has.'

So Assagioli subscribed to the notion that tried to empirically validate experiential experience.

"It is clear that the Higher Self exists because it is proven by direct experience; it is one of those primary experiences which are evidences of themselves and therefore have full scientific value, in the broader sense." (Interview with Sam Keen, *Psychology Today*, 1974)

He was deeply attracted to the perennial thesis, as articulated by Helena Blavatsky and Alice Bailey in Theosophy, and by Teilhard de Chardin. This is his own vision:

“From a still wider and more comprehensive point of view, universal life appears to us as a struggle between multiplicity and unity - a labour and an aspiration towards union. We seem to sense that - whether we conceive it as a divine being or as cosmic energy - the Spirit working upon and within all creation is shaping it into order, harmony, and beauty, uniting all beings (some willing but the majority as yet blind and rebellious) with each other through links of love, achieving - slowly and silently, but powerfully and irresistibly - the Supreme Synthesis.” (Assagioli, 1984: 34)

However, as transpersonal theory keeps evolving, there is developing a robust critique of this underlying conceptual framework and epistemological methodology. Transpersonal theorists such as Richard Tarnas, John Heron, and Jorge Ferrer point out that in order to fully express the breadth of the original transpersonal vision, transpersonal psychology needs to free itself from the constraining assumptions of its initial formulations, acknowledge the epistemological errors, and engage a pluralistic perspective. Of other transpersonalists, Ken Wilber has consistently developed the evolutionary and transcendent perspective. While very much in line with the perennial philosophy, his articulation of levels and stages of emergence brings a new focus. His four-quadrants approach, uniting inner and outer, individual and collective, allows the consideration of the relationship of individual psychological and spiritual understandings and worldviews with possible correspondences in social structures, culture and technological innovation.

Perhaps the perennial philosophy was a necessary spiritual beacon after World War 2, offering profound reassurance that even though there had been terrible conflict, essentially there was a pre-given ultimate wholeness. It was the ultimate expression of a modernist philosophy that dealt in the existence of moral and ethical absolutes and the comfort that those times derived from that. Perhaps also it was the articulation of a wider spirit of moving towards a greater wholeness, manifested in institutions such as the United Nations and other “world” organisations in health, law and finance.

The world moves on. Living memory moves through the generational timeline. Yesterday’s comforting wholeness can become today’s fundamentalism. We are coming to terms with a post-modern worldview that values the complexities of *multiple* contexts. The perennial philosophy is now to be understood perhaps as one rich strand of meaning-making, which can be woven with other spiritualities, in order that we participate in what may be a highly indeterminate and dynamic universe of spiritual mystery. We can hold Wilber’s hierarchical model of nested holons and the quest for a grand unified theory of spiritual experience, which parallels the direction of other scientific, spiritual and philosophical enquiries. We can consider other directions such an enquiry might take. In *Revisiting Transpersonal Theory* Jorge Ferrer (2002) is calling for transpersonal psychology to be based on what he calls participatory knowing, which identifies spiritual experience not just as an individual inner experience but as a participatory experience of an individual consciousness in a multilocal transpersonal event, shaped and communicated in the modalities and functions available to our normal waking awareness.

‘...participatory knowing refers to a multidimensional access to reality that includes not only the intellectual knowing of the mind, but also the emotional and empathic knowing of the heart, the sensual and somatic knowing of the body, the visionary and intuitive knowing of the soul, as well as any other way of knowing available to human beings.’ (Ferrer, 2002: 121)

One of the exciting features of psychosynthesis is understanding that even though Assagioli’s thinking is open to critique from a postmodern perspective, his vision continues to stand up, essentially because of his emphasis on Will. It is congruent with Wilber’s evolutionary and four quadrants hypotheses. It is also apparent he was most fundamentally interested in facilitating exactly the kind of spiritual embodiment and expression Ferrer articulates. Here is what Assagioli wrote in 1961:

“The experience of loneliness is not considered in psychosynthesis either ultimate or essential. It is a stage, a

temporary subjective condition. It can and does alternate with, and finally can be substituted by, the genuine living experience of interpersonal and interindividual communications, relationships, interplay: by cooperation between individuals, and among groups - and even by a blending, through intuition, empathy, understanding and identification. This is the large field of interindividual psychosynthesis, reaching from the interpersonal relationship of man and woman to the harmonious integration of the individual into even larger groups up to the 'one humanity'. It can be and has been expressed in other words as the reality and the function of love in its various aspects, and particularly in that of agape, altruistic love, charity, brotherhood, communion, sharing.” (Assagioli, 1993).

References

- Assagioli R.(1975). *Psychosynthesis*. Oxford: GreenSleeves Books.
- Assagioli R. (1984). *The Act of Will*. London: Turnstone.
- Boorstein S. (ed). (1996). *Transpersonal Psychotherapy*, 2^a ed. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ferrer, J. (2002). *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. Albany: State Univ. New York Press.
- Huxley A. (1945). *The Perennial Philosophy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Maslow, A. (1968). *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2^a ed. Princeton, NJ.: Van Nostrand.
- Tarnas R. (1991). *The passion of the Western mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Wilber K. (1995). *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala

***Helen J. Palmer and Peter Hubbard** are the directors of the Institute of Psychosynthesis N.Z. (New Zealand). They offer professional training programmes in psychosynthesis counselling and psychosynthesis psychotherapy, as well as courses and workshops in psychosynthesis.
Address: P.O. Box 67-136, Mt Eden, Auckland 1349, New Zealand.
Email: institute@psychosynthesis.co.nz Website: <http://www.psychosynthesis.co.nz>