
PSYCHOLOGICAL MATERIALISM AND THE EGO OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

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It has been said of psychology that first it lost its soul, then it went out of its mind, and now it is having trouble with its behaviour. These are symptoms of a search for identity and the inevitable crisis that comes when we attempt to validate our own existence through internalised models which do not belong to us. Psychology, by identifying itself with the ruling scientific paradigm, has betrayed its own internal values and developed a false mask to present to the world. This mask may have been necessary for its survival as an unrecognised discipline in its infancy, but the mask is in danger of becoming stuck and proving to be a death mask.

The demands of scientific method to banish all subjective experience, leaves us in a meaningless world, a world that is bereft of spiritual nourishment. Our lives are barren to the extent that we do not see through the surface of things to their underlying meaning. Meaning is the food of the soul and a psychology which so denies itself this nourishment is surely starving itself to death.

Despite the development in Humanistic psychology and the advent of Transpersonal psychology,

psychology as a whole still suffers from the banishment of soul. It is as if the very attempts to address the reality of soul have become the means of perpetuating its exile. As I have pondered this apparent paradox, it occurred to me that psychology might be facing the same subtle seduction of the ego that Trungpa pointed out in 'Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism'. This is the seduction of the ego which absorbs new ideas as concepts through the mind and turns them into material for its own continuity and surety. Psychology today is like that most difficult of therapeutic clients, the one who has been in analysis for twenty years and knows all the answers. The very knowledge that might have freed them has been hijacked by the ego for its own defence.

All psychology has become 'ego psychology', insofar as it is run by the ego. The ego's mode of operation is to ensure its own defence and achieve what it can for itself. **THE EGO CANNOT ACHIEVE SOUL.** It can only let go to it, but even this is a great difficulty, because it is against its own survival mechanism. It is like the Zen story of the ruler who approaches the Zen master for

advice on spiritual advancement. The master continues to fill his cup with tea even after it overflows. When the ruler exclaims in astonishment, 'It's full; it will not take any more', the master responds that this is just like his mind. The way to soul can not be through any new effort on the part of ego-psychology.

In this article I want to examine some of the ways in which I see psychological materialism at work and how the psychological domain has become colonised by the ego. Firstly there is the practice of END GAINING. That is the widespread habit which many counsellors and psychotherapists fall into, of looking for a result. This seems obvious. Their client or patient is in difficulty and looking to them for help. Very often the therapist can see what is missing or what needs to happen and tries to take the client there. However accurate this perception of the therapist, this attempt to get the client somewhere other than where they are, to achieve a new state, itself becomes a struggle between two egos. The question is often then only if the client will go along with the therapist's suggestions or if they will 'resist'.

Through several years of training and supervising therapists, I have been very struck by how difficult it is to inhibit this habit of wanting to do something to achieve a result. I have come to the conclusion that it is the therapist's ego that has such great difficulties, just sitting with their client and apparently not doing anything. It is really not

alright for the ego to do nothing. It only knows it exists through trying to do something and after all they are being paid for this! The remedial practice for this tricky habit, I have called being a lazy guide. This entails the continuous inhibition of the desire to get the client anywhere and a willingness to allow them to be where they are without trying to achieve anything.

Another symptom of psychological materialism is the tendency of therapists to take the client's material literally rather than as symbolic statements of their own internal world. In this way the symbolic nature of the psyche is translated into the psychological language of neurosis, so that the egos of both client and therapist can once more feel secure in the knowledge of what has gone wrong, that it cannot recognise the cry of the soul in exile. As James Hillman has pointed out, psychology needs to develop a language that reflects the nature of soul, the language of symbol and myth.

There are two aspects of this scientific language, which are particularly antagonistic to the experience of soul. These are the use of a CAUSAL chain of thought in order to EXPLAIN a phenomenon. These two have resulted in the belief that everything can be explained if only we can find the correct cause and that there is nothing inherently mysterious in life. What this serves is to strengthen the ego by making events intelligible to the intellect through reductive interpretation. This reduction allows the ego to stay in control through

continually assimilating the unknown into what is already known. The paradigm example of this at the moment is the flood of books offering dream interpretation. If only the mystery of the dream can be 'decoded', then the ego will not have to face the anxiety of not knowing, of not being in control.

One other factor related to staying in control is the use of techniques by the therapist. Resorting to the technical immediatly brings the therapist back into the role of the expert who seems to know what he or she is trying to do. This way the therapist does not have to face that awkward uncertainty of how to respond. As James Hillman puts it, 'I have come to think that the uncertainty about what the patient and I are really there for is in fact what we are really there for'. For it is in this space where the ego does not know what to do, that something 'other' can come through. But before I can access this inner wisdom, my ego has first to be willing to relinquish it's control.

I often experience this dilemma when I am tired at the end of a long day of seeing clients. My mind is telling me that I am too far gone to offer anything creative to my client. If I do not try to compensate for this with an extra effort, then I can find myself saying or doing things that cut right through to the core of the issue - things I might not normally risk in my brighter more cautious state of mind.

Unfortunately even this idea can be utilised by the ego and turned into

a technical way of performing as a therapist rather than just being there. Carl Whittaker tells the story of how one of his students, impressed by the master's relaxed ability to fall asleep with his clients, decided to do the same. When he allowed himself to 'wake up', he was shocked to discover that the client had gone!

Fortunately there is no way of imitating authentic spontaneity. Trainee therapists are in a Zen type bind themselves. They are told that there is something that they have to learn, but every attempt to identify what exactly that is, proves ultimately unsuccessful. Techniques by themselves, especially if they are divorced from the appropriate context, become an obstacle to authentic encounter. Hopefully in the end the trainee gives up trying to find 'The Way' and in that moment of being themselves with their clients something magical happens. 'Ah! that's it!' they think and the ego enters in again for the next round of this strange game.

There is nothing really to be DONE about this. If you, the reader, were hoping that I might be giving some handy solutions then we too were caught in the play of psychological materialism! We cannot achieve a letting go of ourself to our Self. We can only recognise that we are asleep and leave the door open for our soul to enter in. The question for psychology in general and psychotherapists in particular is are we willing to open that door, risk surrendering to a power greater than ourselves and return our psyche to its home-ground?