



Where Is the Psyche?

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'The Soul's nature . . . is present in every point of the world's immense mass, animating all its segments, great and small.'

Plotinus

If you say to a young child, 'Point to yourself,' he or she will almost certainly point to the heart or solar plexus. Ask the same question of an adult Westerner and the finger will more likely point to the head, generally to the region above and between the two eyes. If analytical theory is correct and if it were possible to receive an answer to the same question from a new-born baby in the 'uroboric' phase, then the poor little finger would hardly know where to point,

for there is no clear boundary between the self and the world.

The word 'psychotherapy' literally translates as 'to give attention to the psyche or soul', but where is the psyche? Most psychotherapies proceed as if the psyche were located somewhere inside our heads or our bodies. This is despite the fact that we know the psyche itself has never been isolated or located in any actual area of the brain or nerve tissue. The best we can say is

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that psychic activity produces observable effects in brain tissue and measurable results on electroencephalographs. We could add that the psyche also produces observable and measurable effects outside the laboratory. These might be in the form of cities, space rockets or world wars. So where is the psyche? It has never been seen. Furthermore we can say with confidence that it never will be seen. It is not a material thing.

R.D. Laing defined the psyche as 'experience'. 'My psyche is my experience, my experience is my psyche,' said Laing. He insisted that experience cannot usefully be thought of as something that literally happens 'inside' us. Experience is simply itself, experienced however and wherever we experience it. We neither experience nor imagine our surroundings 'inside' ourselves. We experience and imagine our surroundings out there in the world where we find them. To regard the psyche as literally being inside the brain is an example of primitive concretistic thinking. It confuses the metaphor of the 'inner life' with the inside of the body. We will no more find the psyche in the brain than we will discover the essence of love by turning a scalpel to the heart.

Whether this be an obscure or an obvious point, the fact is that our way of thinking about the psyche bears heavy consequences. Consider psychiatry's gross physical intrusions of electrotherapy and lobotomy, or psychopharmacology's quest for the cure-all wonder-drug; the notion of 'psyche in the brain' is so well established in our culture that it is scarcely questioned. Psychoanalysis may be more subtle than psychosurgery, but it still perpetuates aspects of this concretistic medical think-

ing. One reflection of this is its vocabulary of 'diagnosis', 'treatment' and 'patients'.

One of the humanistic movement's contributions to psychotherapy has been to modify its terminology. Humanism prefers to speak in a less literal and quantifiable language. It uses open-ended terms such as 'personal responsibility', 'autonomy' and 'creativity'. It talks of 'personal growth', but it does not literally hope to foster a race of physical giants. It opens a broader view of the psyche that includes both the body and the spirit. Some humanistic therapies regard the body as the outward manifestation of the psyche and speak of the 'bodymind'. The body is understood as that aspect of the psyche which is perceptible to the five commonly enumerated physical senses. However, humanistic psychotherapy also perpetuates a lingering bias through its emphasis on the personal. This bias equates the psyche with an activity that goes on inside each of us as individuals.

When we think of the psyche as something that dwells inside the skin of each individual we are taking the metaphor of the inner life literally. This forces us into an alienated position of exclusion and disconnection from the world. There are computer enthusiasts who look forward to a day when telecommunications will include the 'virtual reality' of three-dimensional viewing. Furthermore we may be able to wear body-suits that enable us to touch or even enjoy virtual sex through the intermediary of our personal computers. We will then achieve 'virtual intimacy' in the privacy of our own personal living space. Technology will have succeeded in 'acting out' something that is already happening 'inside' when we

believe ourselves to be separate from the world. No matter how much we improve communications or communications technology, the separation is ultimate and complete. We will have a technological parallel to depth psychoanalysis or object relations theory. We will have a complex and refined science of interconnectedness that underlines and reinforces our separation. Psychotherapies that explore human relationships from the standpoint of assumed separation do their fair share to actively promote and preserve our alienation. Psychotherapy's true task is to facilitate healing.

Inside, outside, nowhere and everywhere

According to Laing, experience (or the psyche) may legitimately be regarded as being nowhere, or everywhere. It exists, yet has no material existence. So long as we do not forget we are speaking metaphorically we may on occasions also usefully regard the psyche as inner, or outer, or somewhere between. We could say that the inner/outer Cartesian metaphor has been developed to mythic proportions in our culture. It is the myth in which our sciences have flourished until recent times. If we are now at a point where our sense of disconnection from the environment is threatening our survival and that of the planet, we might say the myth has become a pathology.

The Cartesian myth has it that there is an inner world and an outer world. The inner world is personal and subjective and has no real substance. For the purposes of science it may be discounted. What counts is the objective fact, that may be measured

and quantified. There is no hard evidence that dogs, ants, trees, televisions or rocks are capable of reflexive thought. They don't have self-awareness, memories or intentions. If we imagine that they do, then we are anthropomorphising. To Descartes, other living creatures and the human body itself were animated by what he called 'animal spirits'. These were an apparently impersonal force that he likened to 'watch-springs'. The objective outer world was thought to be moved by a kind of clockwork, rather than by soul.

Fellow human beings were, and are, seen as the one exception to this rule because they think. They can tell us about their inner lives. This rule puts enormous significance on the spoken word as the main evidence of self-awareness. However, research into human communication has found that only 7% is conveyed by the meanings of words alone. A further 38% is attributable to voice, or the way in which the words are delivered. The remaining 55% of communication is strictly non-verbal. The exact figures may well be disputed, but there is a widespread agreement amongst researchers that by far the greater part of human communication is non-verbal. Most of what we know about one another is conveyed by presentation or presence. 'The medium is the message,' said Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s. We are convinced that fellow humans are neither purely objective automata nor purely subjective figments of our imagination. We are convinced of this not by words, but by the whole of our self-presentation.

If, as research indicates, as much as 93% of human communication is non-verbal we might perhaps be in a position to

learn something directly from the highly communicative world around us. This is neither sentimentality nor anthropomorphism. The world about us ceaselessly buzzes and clamours with non-verbal messages of every description. Some of these messages are aimed at us and are in effect 'meant' to be understood by us, although the overwhelming majority are not specifically aimed at humans. There is no need to 'project' aspects of ourselves into the world, or to 'introject' aspects of the world into ourselves in order to 'relate' to it. We are already in the world. We are inextricably involved. If Monsieur Descartes' metaphor makes this obvious point 'unthinkable', confusing or difficult to grasp, then we are using the wrong metaphor.

Coalescence

While bearing in mind that the psyche is not a material thing and is not literally located anywhere, there is an alternative metaphorical 'location' that we might productively consider. James Hillman raises the interesting possibility of such a 'place' in his use of the term 'coalescence'. He talks of all objects expressing their being in their 'self-display' or presentation to the world. He extends the meaning of the word 'psyche' or soul to include more than reflexive consciousness. Like the 93% of communication that is not conveyed by the meanings of words, he suggests that animals, plants and objects too have something to say about themselves non-verbally. A flower might convey an effective message to an insect, for instance, whether or not there is a human observer to give the message a meaning. The world can and does speak for itself. No gestalt dialogue is required, nor is there any need for

an analysis of projections and introjections. Coalescence might be thought of as the point between a communicating pair. Something creative happens in the mid-ground that tailors the needs of the flower to the those of the insect and *vice versa*.

We could imagine a similar process in the human sphere. There may for instance be a third party present in couple relationships. This would be the point of coalescence. It could also be thought of as the spirit of the relationship. It is that creative thing which happens 'half-way' between two people. It is more than the sum of the individual parts, and beyond the sum total of the projections and introjections. It is not an arrangement between two egos and cannot be understood as a contract or agreement. Neither is it a symbiotic merging of identities that erodes the integrity of the individuals involved. It is more like the popularly acclaimed 'chemistry' or alchemy that occurs between two people and creates something unique. It is an entity distinct from, yet composed of, the qualities of both. With a strengthened awareness of the point of coalescence we recognise that there is no literal separation and no isolation. 'When two people are at one in their inmost hearts,' said Confucius, 'they shatter even the strength of iron and bronze.' We are not hidebound and our psychological thinking does not need to be either.

What if we were to apply the metaphor of coalescence to more than our intimate relationships? We could consider our relationships with other people, animals, plants, machines and the world at large. We would then view everything that presents itself to our awareness as in some

sense actively communicating its existence to us. We would regard our perception of the other as genuinely to do with the other *as we experience it*. From this perspective the primary therapeutic task would not be to find the personal meaning of an event by free association or to regard the object of our attention as a background configuration to be reclaimed by means of a gestalt exercise. Our task would be to discover how we find ourselves to be responding to the messages with which the world presents us.

This piece of self-reflection and self-knowledge could be regarded as the point of coalescence. We would reject the egocentric and alienated idea that the world is dead and passively waiting for us to give it a significance. Jung used to talk of the 'objective psyche'. This concept allows us to observe our psychological processes without necessarily laying personal claim to them. When we are not automatically identified with our thought processes and emotional responses, we are in a position to observe our 'inner' life in an objective way. We can deal with the world with an awareness of what *it* makes of *us*. What purposes does it put us to? What feelings does it provoke? What actions does it inspire? We can then be aware that the environment fashions us as much as we fashion it. Its well-being is our well-being because we do not exist inside our skins. We exist 'out there' in a coalescence with a living and communicating world.

From this perspective, concepts such as 'mastering matter', 'conquering nature' or 'manipulating the environment' begin to sound like hollow and empty egocentric delusions. The world-wide eco-crisis is gradually forcing this particular realisa-

tion on even the most reluctant and resistant of human souls.

Ecopsychology

What would be the implications of shifting the imagined centre of psychological activity from inside our heads to the point of contact between us and all beings that present themselves to us? For a start we would have a reversal of the Cartesian position. Instead of a situation of total and irreversible alienation and separation from all and everything around us, we would have a position of total involvement with the environment. The centre of psychological life would be seen as the point where subject and object come together. There could be no 'inner' without an 'outer'. The terms would be meaningless without each other. What happens in the environment happens in us. These are simply two aspects of the same process. Everything 'out there' would matter in the most intimate way. Disengagement and detachment would be fundamentally impossible. We would have a style of consciousness which took the world into account with every breath, thought and feeling.

This would be more than a different of way of viewing our psychological life. It would be a different way of *experiencing*. Many people today are looking for an ecopsychology that will put our personal concerns into a planetary context and achieve this sense of connection. Sometimes we are encouraged to persevere in our efforts to heal and care for the planet and are reminded of the 'hundredth monkey' principle. If enough of us feel deeply and sincerely enough and if we work effectively on a personal and political level, we may achieve a 'critical mass' and a shift of

the planetary consciousness will happen far sooner than we might otherwise imagine. Others believe that as the human population of the planet reaches roughly the number of cells in the human brain, an evolutionary shift will occur. Just as the human brain has evolved to support self-awareness, so too may the planet achieve 'planetary awareness'. Perhaps, say some, the 'nervous system' of the Internet will play a role. All this could well be, but it seems that these ways of thinking effectively keep us isolated and encapsulated inside our skins. They emphasise the importance of numbers, dwarfing and isolating the lone individual.

Others look more to a shift of personal consciousness. Eastern and Native American teachings emphasise our interconnectedness with the images of 'Indra's net' or the 'web of life'. We are each seen a jewel or a strand in the cosmic web. A change to any part of the web is seen as a change to the whole of the web. Sometimes this image is taken as a way of viewing life rather than as the description of an experience. Once again we may find ourselves wishing to make a change in order to affect the web. Perhaps we may reason that the more people who affect the web in a positive way the better. The metaphor of 'at-one-ment' then becomes one of isolated individuals bonding together to effect change. While this may be a worthy enterprise in its own right it is not a shift of consciousness. As Ken Wilber emphasises, 'In the nature-mystic experience you are *not* a strand in the web. You are the entire web. You are doing something no mere strand ever does — you are escaping your 'strandness', *transcending* it, and becoming one with the entire display.'

Remembering and re-membering

In terms of 'attending to the psyche' or working in a psychotherapeutic way we would be looking for ways to locate and build on the experience and sense of involvement with the world that we already have. To a degree this might simply be a new (but greatly significant) perspective from which to view present forms of working. However psychotherapy might also need to step out of the consulting room and into the environment with which we hope to realise our connection more deeply. This might be into the community and the open air. Given that many of our present-day cultural institutions emphasise individual separation, an important principle might be that of what we could call 'cultural remembering'. We could find ways to recollect the traditions and forms of the days before we adopted the scientific world view. In Britain we could look through and beyond the Christian world view to the classical and Celtic worlds. These frameworks have a lingering influence on our present day language, customs and traditions. They have a corresponding hold on the deeper regions of our psyches. When we lived in an agricultural society, or even earlier as hunter-gatherers, we were of necessity far more sensitive and attuned to the natural world. Our customs and traditions reflected a sense of participation and involvement from which many of us have become estranged on a conscious level today.

The purpose of this work would not be to reject the modern world or an exercise in nostalgia. Nor would it be a sentimental attempt to recreate a bygone and

'better' age. Rather it would be a process comparable to that of regression or 'inner child' work in one-to-one therapy. We would aim to contact the past in order to reclaim our split-off energies. Remembering would become 're-remembering', or reconnecting with a lost and vital part of our being. As in individual therapy our ultimate intention would be to open new possibilities for authentic and fulfilling self-expression in the contemporary world. Science assures us that the atoms of our physical bodies share the same stellar history as those of the world about us. There is nothing in our physical being that is not also of the entire universe. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary,

we extend this same principle to the psyche. We reject the idea that the psyche is an entity literally contained within the human brain. Instead we suggest that because the psyche is non-material we can legitimately regard it as being both nowhere and everywhere. We may locate it spatially wherever we please, so long as we do not forget we are speaking metaphorically. As psychotherapists we need to be discriminating in our use of metaphors. We need to strive to maintain an awareness of the shadow side of our use of language and its implications. Our overriding aim must be to facilitate healing, with the aim of enabling clients to live more fully and authentically.

'You would not find out the boundaries of the soul, even by travelling along every path: so deep a measure does it have.'

Heraclitus

Further reading

Lowell Bair, *The Essential Works of Descartes*, Bantam, 1966

James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World*, Spring, 1982

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