

# The dialogical self and the transpersonal: new thinking in psychotherapy

John Rowan

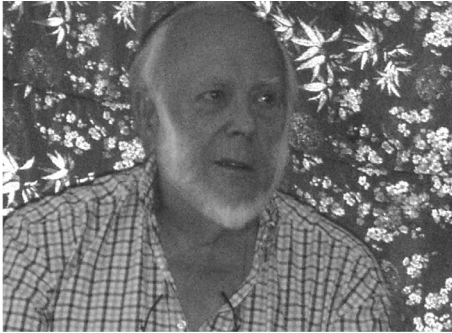
One of the most exciting developments in the field of counselling and psychotherapy is the current work in the area of multiplicity within the person. Of course we are all familiar with this idea through the notion of subpersonalities, and similar ideas such as ego states and subselves and parts. The trouble with the term subpersonalities is that it lends itself too easily to reification. Reification is that all too easy process by which we turn a theoretical construct into a solid object. I know from my reading of student essays how easy it is to speak or write as if 'the oral type' really existed out there in the world, and similarly with 'the unconscious', 'the schizoid character', 'the ego' and all the rest of these concepts.

The new thinking simply speaks of I-positions. I-positions come and go many times a day, they do not condense and have a history. This new way of conceptualising the issue comes from a number of different angles. The first and most prominent is the work of Hubert Hermans at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands. It was he who coined the term 'the dialogical self'. The fifth international conference on the dialogical self takes place next year in Cambridge. What he did was to shift the nomenclature from the older ideas of subselves, subpersonalities, ego states and so forth, all of which lent themselves to misunderstanding as solid entities all too easily, and introduce instead this new vocabulary based on I-positions. Hermans and his

colleagues, for example Giancarlo Dimaggio, have conducted many research studies to explore their theory, and it is now well established.

What is remarkable, however, is that this is not the only approach which is now opening up the realm of multiplicity within the person. William Stiles, who goes back and forth between Ohio and Sheffield, has developed what he calls assimilation theory, which again has produced a large research programme to explore the idea of listening to the different voices which emerge during the course of therapy. (Stiles et al 2002).

The person-centred school of Carl Rogers has in recent years begun to use the concept, under the heading of



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configurations of self, particularly in the hands of Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper. And this has enabled them to speak freely of the parts of the person which are negative.

'It is important that the person-centred therapist offer an equally full therapeutic relationship to *not for growth* configurations, like: the "me that just wants to curl up and do absolutely nothing" ; "the part that wants to go back"; and "the bit of me that wants to destroy this therapist"' (Mearns & Thorne 2000, p.115)

This is quite a new departure for the person-centred school, and begins to sound much more like the psychoanalytic position about resistance.

Philip Bromberg, in the psychodynamic school, has made some very interesting points, showing that multiplicity is not at all foreign to that outlook. 'A noticeable shift has been taking place with regard to psychoanalytic understanding of the human mind and the nature of unconscious mental processes - away from the idea of a conscious/preconscious/unconscious distinction per se, towards a view of

the self as decentered, and the mind as a configuration of shifting, nonlinear, discontinuous states of consciousness in an ongoing dialectic with the healthy illusion of unitary selfhood.' (Bromberg 1998, p.xxxii)

Of course it is well known that Transactional Analysis and Gestalt therapy speak often of different parts of the person, but recently the torch has been taken up by process-experiential therapy – again much more interested in research than these earlier advocates.

'Process-experiential therapy has attempted to provide a comprehensive theory of treatment by integrating Gestalt and client-centered approaches. It combines the relationship conditions of empathy, prizing and congruence with more active interventions like empty-chair and two-chair work from Gestalt therapy, and focusing and evocative unfolding from Gendlin's and Rice's developments within client-centered therapy.' (Watson et al 1998, p.14)

The handbook edited by Leslie Greenberg and his collaborators (Greenberg et al 1998) makes creative use of these ideas to intervene very effectively in research terms with people who have problems such as depression, posttraumatic stress, anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, sexual trauma, borderline personality disorder, dissociated and fragile process and so forth. This is exciting new work which needs to be better known

And of course we must not forget the recent work in narrative therapy, based on the pioneers David Epston and Michael White at the Dulwich Centre in

Adelaide. They and their collaborators (such as Michael Durrant and Cheryl White) have developed some fascinating ideas using personification to bring to life some important creatures, such as the Fear Monster, Sneaky Wee, Sneaky Poo, Concentration, Tantrums, Misery, Guilt, Bad Habits, Zak (cannabis) and Sugar (diabetes). By working directly with such characters, they found that they could confirm the adage – 'The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem.' Jill Freedman and Gene Combs have added such things as Bravery and Self-Blame. (Freedman & Combs 1996).

Nor must we forget the recent work of Jeffrey Young and his collaborators in schema therapy. Their research has suggested that there are only eighteen basic early maladaptive schemas, and only three modes of dealing with each one. This theory comes out of cognitive-behavioural therapy, and represents a much more sophisticated version of that basic outlook. 'Schema therapists view experiential techniques as one of four equal components of treatment and devote considerable time in therapy to these strategies.' (Young et al 2003, pp.51-52.) In a later discussion, the authors have this to say: 'Patients learn to conduct dialogues between their 'schema side' and their 'healthy side'. Adapting the Gestalt 'empty chair' technique, the therapist instructs patients to switch chairs as they play the two sides: In one chair they play the schema side, in the other they play the healthy side.' (p.100) This again is personification, and it seems clear that it fits well with the basic orientation.

Most of these approaches make some use of empty chair and two-chair work, but let us not forget the earlier work in

psychodrama and the more recent work in Voice Dialogue, where many more chairs or cushions may be used. Nor should we omit to mention the fascinating work of Genpo Roshi, who runs workshops where people get in touch with genuine mystical states through the use of I-positions of one kind and another.

### **Practical applications**

So what is the point of all this? The point is that all therapists can now use these ideas without having to join a new movement or sign up to another school: all we have to do is to use personification in conjunction with our own existing outlook.

This is of course just one possibility. As I have already indicated, there are many approaches using this basic thinking, and any one of them make be suitable for a given case.

If we listen carefully, we can begin to hear the emergence of different voices within the person. And armed with this new thinking, we can identify each voice as an I-position and treat it as such. There is then no problem about what status to give each voice – each one just represents another I-position. Ragnar Rommetveit is an eminent psychologist who has pointed out that children are speaking in a dialogical way from the start. He says that 'The human infant is, as far as mental development is concerned, dyadically embedded and dialogically operative. The developing human mind is hence dialogically constituted.' (Rommetveit 1992, p.22) He goes on to say that adult verbal communication develops out of preverbal interaction between infant and adult caretaker as a dyadically structured and in some important sense circular activity. And this means that a distinctive and pervasive feature of the

prototypical human discourse situation is thus a peculiar 'attunement to the attunement of the other'. (ibid) This is well said, and it seems clear that this new thinking about the client is soundly based.

Of course the astute reader will have noticed that all this material is highly compatible with the basic case of constructionism, while avoiding the excesses of a one-sided postmodernism.

The international conference in August 2008 will be held in Cambridge, and it will be fascinating to see these ideas being seriously discussed and examined.

### **THE TRANSPERSONAL**

But how does all this relate to the transpersonal? The transpersonal is not nearly so well known as many of the other aspects of psychotherapy, and because it has to do with spirituality and the world of the numinous, the sacred, the holy and the divine it is hard to be clear about it. However, there has appeared a wonderful map-maker of this world in the shape of Ken Wilber. What he says is that there is a process of psychospiritual development which we are all going through, both as individuals and as members of a historically located culture. In a series of books he has outlined this process, and shows that we are very familiar with its early stages. The later stages are much more controversial, but follow exactly the same form.

There are three broad sections, labelled as prepersonal, personal and trans-personal. One of Wilber's most insistent themes is that we tend to suffer from the pre/trans fallacy - that

is, we confuse what is pre-personal with what is transpersonal. Some do it (like Freud) by saying that the transpersonal does not really exist - it is just a projection from the prepersonal; others do it (like Jung) by saying that the pre-personal does not really exist - anything beyond the personal must be transpersonal.

The term 'transpersonal' is still unfamiliar enough so that it needs some explanation. I like Grof's succinct description, where he says it is concerned essentially with 'experiences involving an expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual ego boundaries and beyond the limitation of time and/or space.' Many of us have had moments at least of this kind of experience - surveys show that something like a third of the population have had peak experiences at one time or another. These are experiences where, as Maslow says, 'the whole universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole' and where the ego boundaries seem to be stretched or removed. (Such an experience can sometimes be remembered for the rest of a person's life, and can have a profound effect on how the person lives that life.) Many people working in this field feel that the proportion is probably much higher, except that people push the experience away as too disconcerting, and do not like the idea of changes in consciousness which go this far.

Now what Wilber says is that these experiences are really intimations of a possible transition from one level of consciousness to another. What is so reassuring about Wilber is that he says this is no great leap into the deep waters of spirituality (or religion, or occultism), but a change no greater than that which we have experienced several

times before, in the course of our development so far. We have already gone from symbiosis with the mother to separation, and from body-self to membership-self, and from there to the mental ego. At each of these transitions we had to revise our whole notion of who we were, and even what kind of self we were. So we know what it is like to revise our self-definition. The move from mental ego to the centaur stage is just another such change, and peak experiences are a very common harbinger of this particular transition.

I suppose this trip from mental ego to unified bodymind self (centaur) through the biosocial bands is one of the most interesting changes in consciousness, because it is quite close at hand for many adults. It always seems to involve a lot of pain and discomfort, because it means questioning all the roles one has been playing. Like all these transitions, it is dialectical - it involves negating the previous stage of development.

Incidentally, what Wilber means by 'bands' is a set of experiences, possibly but not necessarily traumatic, which follow one another in quick succession, rather like going on a roller-coaster, or through the white water in a set of rapids; once the process starts, it seems to take over and to be inescapable.

Wilber is particularly interesting on the process of transition from one stage to another. He says that two dimensions are necessary to it - firstly a creative urge or impulse or drive (creative as opposed to destructive) and secondly a willingness or desire to let go (as opposed to holding on). If we have the creative urge, but also a desire to hold on, many good things may happen, but they will all happen at our present level - no development will take place. If we

have the willingness to let go, but also a destructive urge, we may actually move back to an earlier level. Real development, he says, always involves incest and castration - incest because we want to hold on to the one thing we have to let go of, and castration because we fear we may have our power cut off anyway, whether we like it or not. By letting go creatively, we can overcome this and move on.

The relevance of all this to social science is that most of us stick to the central period in our lives. We say, as it were - 'I am only interested in the personal'. But just as in recent years research has shown that there is far more than we thought in the early stages - the baby is far more competent than we thought, the birth process is far more meaningful than we thought, the foetus is far more competent than we thought, and so on - now we have to recognise that there is much to take account of in the later stages too. I have noticed people talking about the transpersonal and about spirituality generally, in a way which was not on twenty years ago. People are coming out of the closet, as it were, and admitting or affirming that they have indeed had subjective experiences which fit in with Wilber's objective analysis. Certainly in my own case I have found Wilber to be a very good guide to my own experience, making sense of it all along the line.

Wilber distinguishes between three main realms of the transpersonal, once we have passed through the Centaur stage of authenticity and bodymind unity. They are the Subtle, the Causal and the Nondual. Of these, the Subtle is the most relevant to therapists, because it is the great heartland of the soul, of symbols and images, of deities and saints, of visions and inspiring

voices, of the spiritual heart. This is the land so brilliantly tilled by Jung, Assagioli, James Hillman, Jean Houston and many others. It is where we find creativity, intuition and inspiration not as chancy encounters, but as the main way in which we think.

Beyond that, if we continue with out psychospiritual development, is the Causal, where we have to give up all the symbols and images, all signposts and landmarks, all descriptions and labels, and admit that we are in the deep ocean of spirituality.

And beyond that again is the Nondual, which is so hard to talk about that I do not intend now to even try.

Coming back now to the Subtle, I would like to try an experiment with you. You will need pencil and paper for this. Just see if you can access the Subtle realm.

This is a realm with which we are all familiar, because we all have dreams, and Wilber says that when we dream we are in the Subtle area. I suggest that you get in touch with it by remembering a time when you actually experienced that great country of symbols and images that Jung talked about so well. A time when you felt inspired or ecstatic or filled with a heartfelt glory. Close your eyes and get in touch with this wild country, and visualise your soul. And then let's pretend that your soul is an I-position and can talk to you, just as if on an empty chair. And when you are ready, start writing a dialogue with your soul. You have ten minutes for that.

[There then followed a time for questions and discussion.]

And to finish with, here is a short poem I wrote this morning:

## THE LECTURE

Hovering above the audience  
The ever-present awareness  
Notices the expressions, the breathing, the fidgeting  
And tips the wink to the lecturer

Speed up, slow down, give more eye contact, put in a joke, move around bit more, go very quiet, shout out now, stand on your hands, gallop and neigh, breathe fire, fly about the room, set off fireworks, soothe with your violin, end with an 'OM' .

**John Rowan August 2007**

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## COME AND JOIN IN THE FUN!

We are hoping to run a children's festival within the next conference, so that the children have something fun to look forward to and the adults don't have to worry about them whilst attending workshops. There are currently two teachers who are going to be teaching Yoga and Music/singing Classes. Do you know of any teachers who have a talent they would like to bring along and share? For example, we thought it might also be nice to offer a Creative Art workshop of some kind too... Would anybody who has

experience of working with children like to either offer a workshop or be a workshop assistant?



If you or anybody you know would like to be a part of the team, please do email Julie on [happy.notes@hotmail.com](mailto:happy.notes@hotmail.com).