



Psychophonetics, Rudolf Steiner and the psychological therapies: part I

Robin Steele^a interviewed by Richard House^b

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Richard House [RH]: Robin, as a former counsellor-psychotherapist for nearly two decades, and being someone with a deep interest in Rudolf Steiner's spiritual cosmology since training as a Waldorf teacher in the late 1990s, I'm somewhat ashamed to say that I know very little about Psychophonetics. Could you say something about the Psychophonetics approach, and where it might sit in relation to other approaches to psychotherapy?

Robin Steele [RS]: Psychophonetics was developed in Australia in the late 1980s–early 1990s by Yehuda Tagar and was called Philophonetics-Counselling. In 2003 the name was changed to Psychophonetics and courses were established internationally – in South Africa, the UK, Europe and Israel. Psychophonetics is an expressive holistic approach that includes the whole human being as body, soul and spirit. Its theoretical and methodological roots are in the spiritual work of Rudolf Steiner in anthroposophy and psychosophy (Steiner, 1999), as well as in Humanistic Psychology and the expressive arts.

Being a phenomenological approach to human experience, life's challenges become potential opportunities for personal and spiritual development. In the bigger picture, it's about encouraging the evolution of human consciousness. That is, therapy takes place within the context of the soul's development and from the perspective that we have an 'I' as our spiritual centre. The position of the 'I' in the soul is important for our development, in leaving each person free to be the source of information, observation, choices, meaning, direction and action regarding their experience, especially in therapy. By including the wisdom of the body, there is a trust in the knowing and truth coming through body and soul, into conscious awareness. The being-ness of the practitioner is important, in terms of their capacity to be non-judgemental, empathic, and confident in being in the unknown as a starting point with each person's lived experience.

A person-centred conversation together with an action phase in each session incorporates experiential, creative and expressive processes, in which issues are explored using a range of non-verbal skills, including body awareness, sensing, movement, visualization and the sounds of human speech, as the literacy of experience. Developing faculties of self-knowledge through direct experience requires teamwork, facilitating the developing of a common picture of the presenting dynamics. With the client's wish as a guide, he/she enters an experiential process focusing on a relevant recent example from life – to explore inner dynamics, to overcome any inner hindrances, and to connect with needed inner

resources. The body becomes a mediator between inner and outer dimensions of experience and a source of knowledge – as embodied knowing. The body is seen as multi-layered, with a vibrating resonating life-body in which the memory of life experiences is stored. These memories can be triggered by similar current life experiences which affect the life-body and soul life, influencing how we think, feel and act in life (Tagar, 1997).

Forms of knowledge are less visible in this embodied/expressive way of knowing than in cognitive forms of knowledge. Each person is encouraged to connect with their experience through *sensing* and extending this process in gesture, visualization and sounds. For instance, sensing and gesturing an experience of a knotted sensation in the stomach and exiting this experience may bring up anger or sadness – creating insights, connection with needed inner qualities, a shift in consciousness – allowing for healing and transformation (Steele, 2011).

Psychophonetics creates a bridge between those approaches using talk therapy, and those using body awareness and experiential dimensions. Cognitive, experiential and behavioural aspects are combined into the process, facilitated by the 'I', giving a transpersonal dimension. With conversational and expressive aspects in each session, each client can access experiential content and integrate it consciously (Steele, 2011).

Psychophonetics counselling/psychotherapy has similarities with expressive, experiential and Gestalt therapies. However, it differs with its philosophical foundation in anthroposophy; its understanding of the human being as body, soul and spirit; and use of body awareness/sensing, gesture, visualization and sound therapy. Gestalt uses empty-chair role plays, whereas any *characters* experienced in a Psychophonetics process are real events in the client's experience in which they can see/explore their own inner characters and inner dynamics with perspective (Steele, 2005).

RH: That's a very rich and engaging description, Robin – if I were thinking of entering therapy, I'd be saying 'sign me up!' I'm particularly interested in the holistic, embodied nature of the therapeutic process you describe. I've long thought there's scope for bringing together the thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Rudolf Steiner – and I'm wondering whether Psychophonetics might be it. I'm also thinking about Robert Sardello and his work around 'soul and the world', and whether that kind of thinking might have a place in Psychophonetics practice.

Could you say something more about a specifically Steiner-informed cosmology/anthroposophy that adds something qualitatively different to Psychophonetics, compared with other holistic therapies – as this feels like something that's important to understand in this theme issue of the journal. And relatedly, I assume that from an anthroposophical viewpoint, 'Psychophonetics *minus* Steiner' would be losing something that's regarded as essential within a Steinerean cosmology.

RS: I remember reading Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and being impressed by his acceptance of the wisdom of the body with attention on the body of experience. Pondering on the relationship of body, perception and cognition, the connection with Steiner, and in particular how these aspects influenced the development of Psychophonetics, I'm reminded of how these aspects were developed from Tagar's research into Rudolf Steiner's speech and drama methodology combined with the lectures on anthroposophy and psychosophy, together with experimental work in theatre and

participation in the First Class of the School of Spiritual Science. In relation to awareness of our own experience, Tagar (2007, p. 5) says there are two main activities:

Direct contact with any layer of experience by re-experiencing it, and a perspective created out of reflecting on the re-experience. This newly created perspective becomes a 'window' into awareness of the surrounding world. Before that perspective is created, one is bound to project one's un-owned experience into it, colouring our perceptions with one's past imprints.

A Psychophonetics process called *enter–exit–behold* is a way of observing the dynamics of our own experience. By consciously entering 'in' to an experience activated mostly through bodily sensation and gesture, emotional dynamics associated with a specific life situation can be accessed, allowing a direct connection with the core and life of the experience underlying a current issue.

Being 'out' means consciously exiting the gesture of that experience, allowing a clear position for reflection, observation, learning, integration, taking care of needs and making informed decisions about the situation.

'Beholding' is when the person is in a position to look back into the space they were 'in' before, and see an image in that position – like a visible air-imprint of their previous gesture – so as to observe and explore with perspective.

In practical terms, Psychophonetics means a path of awakening to awareness of experience and facilitating authentic self-knowledge as the basis of knowledge of the world. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's initial focus was primarily on the body, Sardello offers a deeper way of being in the world, body and soul, and says the individual body and the body of the world are the container and reflector of the soul (2001), which view is certainly compatible with Psychophonetics. Tagar (1995) says Psychophonetics is a path of awakening to the inner life through the outer life; and to the outer life through the inner.

Other approaches assume a mind–body connection; however, Psychophonetics extends body awareness/sensing to include gesture of the sensation, visualization arising from the gesture of sensing, and the application of the sounds of human speech (consonants/vowels) that match the client's experience as specific therapeutic processes.

Some aspects embedded into the foundation of Psychophonetics which differ from other approaches include an understanding of:

- The four-fold structure of the human being – as a way of thinking, as a tool of observation, a frame of processing information, a source for finding connections, enabling the practitioner to trace the phenomena shared by the client, as inter-relationships between the various sheaths/layers of the physical/life/astral bodies, and the 'I'.
- The dynamics of *thinking, feeling, willing*, and the spiritual dynamics of cognition – imagination, inspiration, intuition – which are a map for being orientated in the phenomena of the human being. For the 'I' to be present, there needs to be a sense of equilibrium within thinking, feeling and willing. Practically, this means being orientated in thinking, empowered to act in the will, and resourceful in connecting with one's needs in the feeling life.
- The methodology of experience-awareness developed by Tagar during the 1980s. Its essence is in the distinction between experiences and the 'I' as the source of awareness and consciousness. Being conscious of what position 'I' am within myself and also what position the client is in makes a difference – to know if I am reacting, sensing, feeling ...

What position am 'I' in now? To be able to discern the differences is empowering. I'm not sure whether other approaches make these distinctions as clearly as Psychophonetics does, with its specific definitions for sensing, feeling, reacting, beholding, speaking (Steele, 2011, pp. 35–40).

- The seven life processes that are an essential foundation of psychosomatic connections and, therefore, of all holistic therapies, but they possibly aren't articulated as clearly as they are from the anthroposophical perspective (Steiner, 1996). These processes can be named, observed, and their connections made traceable and conscious. An understanding of the life processes is important for well-being, and became a crucial theme emerging as soul processes in therapeutic change and transformation in my doctoral research (Steele, 2005).
- The use of sounds in therapy – developed after years of experimenting with the sounds of the alphabet as described in Steiner's 1924 speech and drama lectures, and other writings (Steiner, 2007). We can experience a direct connection with the impact of speech sounds on our inner experience, body and soul. Each sound/sound combination resonates, awakens, stimulates and echoes specific experiences in our body, memories, sentient experiences, pictorial awareness, emotions and feelings, with an exact connection between a specific sound and specific experience. The sounds of consonants and vowels, when spoken on their own, become forms of vibrations which can echo in the whole range of human experience. The correlation between speech sounds and inner embodied experiences becomes a major tool for exploration, confrontation, transformation, representation and healing of inner patterns. When human experience is expressed in a gesture, the precise counterpart can be found in a particular combination of sounds – sensed, spoken or visualized. The sound/sound combinations are created to match the client's experience through a process of sound-naming, and the client confirms when the sound exactly matches their experience. As sounds aren't prescribed, this makes it different from many other sound-therapy approaches (Tagar, 1995; Steele, 2004).

Finally, I cannot imagine 'Psychophonetics *minus* Steiner' as it's so deeply embedded in anthroposophy – with its distinctive processes also grounded in psychosophy as a psychology of freedom; in anthroposophical ethics; and in its understanding of the human being as a living body, soul and spirit.

Part II of this interview will appear in the second part of this theme issue.

Notes on contributors



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