

T h e M y s t e r y o f I

Notions of the Self that Grows



L e i g h S a w a r d

Notions of the Self are at the heart of every personal growth path. This short ebook explores various theories of the Self, including the idea of the *Essential Self*, as well as the notion that the human psyche contains a multiplicity of parts, or sub-personalities.

I explore these ideas alongside Gestalt Therapy's approach to Self as an *emergent process at the contact boundary* and the Gestalt idea of growth as the *increased capacity for complexity in relational contact*.

The inspiration for this ebook is both personal and professional. Both of my parents passed away recently and the direct experience of being with both mum and dad as they passed, deepened my desire to understand the nature of the Self that appears to change over our lifetime and then leave as we pass away.

As a therapist, I work with many adults who, despite their natural intelligence and warmth, often present to counselling with a deeply conflicted sense of Self. Some of the most helpful therapeutic processes I have worked with both personally and professionally, have involved an integration of polarised internal parts, or *aspects of the Self*, that pull in opposing directions. Integration of these selves can occur via an experience of *intra-personal relational contact* between the present-centred adult Self, and the emotionally flooded personality part(s). In many cases, this also occurs through contact between the conflicted parts and a more expansive *Transpersonal or Witnessing Self* - that seems to guide and heal the distressed sub-personalities in the system.

I continue to work with clients in this way, supporting the integration of conflicting aspects of Self, towards a coherent Self Identity - and the sense of a meaningful and authentic path towards Sovereignty and Self-Actualisation.

I hope that this exploration is helpful...

Chapter One: Theories of the Self

Theories of Self tend to range across two broad ideas within psychotherapy: that of an *essential self-structure* at the core of the human - perhaps overlayed by various personality processes - and a *fully emergent self-process* at the self/other contact boundary.

Whether the Self exists as an existential reality or an ongoing construction, as a noun or a verb, it is generally agreed that one of the main roles of psychotherapy and spiritual practice is to strengthen the experience of an *authentic sense of Self*.

Multiple Centres of Awareness

The theory of multiple centres of awareness within the human psyche has been a serious exploration for over a century, with investigations into the conscious and unconscious mind beginning prior to both Freud and Jung. Where Freud spoke of a *single subconscious centre*, comprising urges, instincts, repressed psychological material and introjects, early psychologists William James and Frederick Myers suggested that there are multiple, distinct personality aspects or parts within the human psyche. It was noted that these personality parts were not only aware of each other, but of each part's role in the overall self-structure.

Carl Jung developed a theory of multiple splits within the psyche, including the notion that personality aspects tended to cluster around feeling tones *and themes*, which he named *complexes* and *archetypes*. Jung created a map of the human psyche naming five main archetypal elements that interact in both cooperative and oppositional force: the persona, the ego, the shadow, the anima/animus and the Self. Jung saw *the ego* as the centre of conscious awareness, *the persona* as the front facing aspect that mediates between the inner world and the environment and *the Self* as the overarching centre of both the conscious and unconscious organism.

Psychoanalyst Paul Federn became the first theorist to develop a specific framework around the notion of personality parts, which he named *Ego States*. This work was further developed with Eric Berne's *Transactional Analysis* and John Watkin's *Ego State Therapy*. Within recent years a number of therapeutic modalities have arisen that work explicitly with sub-personalities, generally named as *Parts-Work*, including John Rowan's *Subpersonalities*, Dr's Hal and Sidra Stone's *Voice Dialogue*, Dr Richard Schwartz' *Internal Family Systems*, and Gordon Emmerson's *Resource Therapy*. Similar to Jungian Therapy, parts work processing include the healing *or unburdening* of introjected beliefs, protective mechanisms and socialised personality roles, in a movement toward internal coherence and regulation.

There are a number of distinct theories within parts-work therapies, and one of these is the idea that each sub-personality has unique agency and the ability to "take control" of the behaviour of the organism, as distinct from actions produced by a different sub-personality. It follows from this that if an aspect of the psyche has agency, it is capable of *relationship with other aspects within the psyche* and it is this quality that helps define a sub-personality as its own unique centre of awareness.

This capacity for intra-psychic relational dialogue forms a basis for healing within parts-work and includes the possibility of contact with the *Transpersonal or Aware Self*. And it is this particular form of intra-psychic relationship - with the *Aware Self*, or *Essential Self*, or even *Soul* - that appears to create the most profound psychic integration and growth.

The *Aware Self* constitutes the centre of most parts-work and Integral models. The hypothesis of an Aware Self supports the possibility of a multiplicity of sub-selves as it performs the role of coordinator, a unifying force holding the federation of personality parts together. This allows the person to meet life with some coherency. Awareness and Essence can be felt to exist as a fundamentally different quality of presence and clarity. The Internal Family Systems model names the distinguishing qualities of this Aware Self-Energy as the 8 *C*'s: curiosity, calm, clarity, connectedness, confidence, courage, creativity and compassion.

While some modalities organise around the Essential Self as a distinct interior world experience, both Integral and Transpersonal Psychology describe the Essential Self as neither contained within, nor dependent upon, the physical organism and more an *animating force* that the personal self-sense is contained within.

In particular, the Diamond Approach is one of several Transpersonal therapeutic schools that explicitly states that the ultimate goal of psychotherapy is the realising of a non-localised Transpersonal Self, experienced as "...a substantial, (although often subtle)...ontological presence" (Almaas, 1986, p. 75).

The suggestion that the Essential Self is transcendent and not solely localised in the human body/mind, becomes an important concept in understanding which aspects of the personal self actually grow and develop and what is the Self that exists beyond the idea of growth.

Chapter Two: The Self and Development

Whether viewing the human psyche as a multiplicity of parts or a single whole, an essential structure or an emergent process, theories of development go hand in hand with their underlying notions of Self.

Integral Psychology discusses self-development as a *transcend and include* process where, “...the subject of one stage becomes the object of the subject of the next stage” (Kegan, as cited in Wilber, 2016, p. 45). Put in simple terms, as a person moves to a new level of development, what was once a subjective, interpretive lens through which life was viewed, becomes an *observable perspective* from the new, higher, subjective lens.

The person no longer identifies with the perspective they previously and to some degree unconsciously occupied, and can instead view this prior perspective, with objectivity and awareness, as a tangible structure. What was once *looked through* becomes *seen*.

These perceptual lenses cannot easily be observed until we are able to dis-embed from them, because the worldview itself cleverly filters out the information that would ask us to examine our sense of reality. This is an important concept to understand when it comes to the idea of "Shadow Work" or the ability to honestly face exiled aspects of the Self System (and indeed, the shadow or hidden aspects of groups and cultures and cultural narratives).

Describing this *transcend and include* process through an early developmental lens, an infant experiences its body subjectively as the *proximate I*. At this early stage, s/he can't yet distinguish or observe her/his own body as a separate object. When the capacity for conceptual thought emerges, the child's sense of identification, or Self, moves more to the mind, which is then experienced as the new *I* or subjective lens. The child is able to view its own body objectively as a *distal self*, or *me*.

In other words, the body can now be viewed as an object by the new subject, the mental self.

In an example of psychological development, consciousness transcends a previous level of functioning and subsequently functions at a more complex level of organisation. The person experiences their field differently, seeing things not seen before and integrating previous perspectives as *helpful insights* in new meaning making.

The transcend and include process occurs slightly differently, depending on whether the view of the psyche is that of a multiplicity of selves, or an integrated, centralised whole. In the theory of sub-personalities, the transcend and include process occurs when a distressed part is able to step aside, revealing the more resourced perspective of the present-centred Self. When a person is able to respond from an aspect of themselves that is no longer in the grip of overwhelming feelings, this is termed as being *un-blended or un-flooded*. The *inclusion* part of the process occurs when a personality part can be consciously called upon as a functional resource or response, by the present-centred Aware Self.

A coherent internal system will have a critical mass of Aware Self-Energy, and be able to reconcile different inner voices by understanding each part's role in supporting the person as a whole.

So, whether discussing a single centre of consciousness or a multiplicity of parts, to *transcend and include* refers to the integration that occurs when *hidden or exiled aspects* become consciously accepted and included aspects, in ever expanding Self awareness. This then mirrors the external processes with *the other* - where relational maturity refers to the ever increasing capacity to include and be with the other, while holding to one's sense of sovereignty and individuality.

What is unique to the work of Ken Wilber and his Integral Psychology model, is the articulation of the difference between psychological development, or *structural change*, and the process of spiritual awakening, or *state change*. These two paths combined form a holistic and progressive movement of *growing up and waking up*.

According to Integral theory, psychological structures are patterns of self-identity and behaviour, whereas *states* refer to experiences of consciousness (i.e. expanded states or peak states). The terms *self-actualisation* and *self-realisation* have sometimes been used in relation to these processes and each is regarded as important in an overall, integrated growth process. An example often given by Wilber that strikes a chord, is that a person "awakening" will play out behaviourally at the level they have grown to. So a person experiencing a genuine spiritual awakening or state change, may still continue to act in immature ways at the relative level if they have not "grown up" psychologically. This is demonstrated in gurus who fall from grace when their behaviours are exposed, despite their capacity to share deep wisdom with their followers.

Experientially, a state change occurs as a shift in the felt-sense experience - for example, a sense of spaciousness as opposed to an experience of contraction. This experience may also transcend a sense of a localised or embodied self.

A *growth* change occurs experientially as expanded perception and capacity for meaning making and an expansion of available behavioural options at choice points through life.

At certain points in an integrated growth process, contemplative and meditative practices are vehicles to non-ordinary *states of consciousness*, or *peak experiences*. In order for such experiences to affect psychological or structural development they need to convert from a temporary state experience into a permanently integrated trait, (*state to trait*). Similar to the neurobiological understanding of brain plasticity, this organic *rewiring* process renders a peak state experience of awareness into an integrated and available awareness, able to be accessed in moments of choice. According to integral theory, this occurs through the process of *psychological metabolism*, where the peak state is *identified with* and integrated as an expanded continuation of the self-sense. Spiritual traditions might name this integration process as *non-abiding to abiding awakening*, which eventually becomes the *structure of permanent self-realisation*. Integral literature might describe this phenomena with two slightly differing perspectives:

1. As a *continuous revelation* of an already existing Essential Self or;
2. As an expansion of the self-sense to include more and more of All-That-Is into the *experience of "I"*.

In the first example, identity remains largely embodied, characterised by a sense of *internal expansion* or spaciousness. In the second theory, the self is experienced without a sense of interior/exterior boundary. Perception is not divided into a separate inside self that perceives the separate outside object or world. There is just perceiving in which both the apparent subject and object are as one.

Neurobiology describes this idea as the *non-situated* or *distributed mind*, implying that the mind is not only able to process information through the body, but also through wider field-relational sensing. Although a *functional self* continues to make contact with the conventional world, when the lens of awareness widens, a person may experience the interior/exterior or body/field as one boundaryless whole (Spira, 2016).

It is as though one of the main purposes of the body/mind is to ultimately grow beyond itself. Each expansion of subjective identification brings a wider embrace of All-That-Is, until eventually, all of life itself is embraced *as the Self*. This is the ultimate *transcend and include* process, where the, "...individual I...or inner subject becomes an object of the ultimate I...as ultimate Subject or pure Consciousness...absolute Witness" (Wilber, 2000, p. 34).

In the end, it isn't a *me* that awakens... Consciousness itself awakens *from* the limited "I".

Gestalt Therapy

The Gestalt Therapy notion of Self is as an *emergent process*, “...the function of contacting the actual transient present” (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, p. 371). Integral to the theory of an emergent Self is the concept of the contact boundary. Whether referring to the person/environment boundary or the Self/other boundary, the concept of Self cannot be considered meaningful without relationship with the *other*.

However, Gestalt Therapy does not limit the definition of Self to a separate individual acting independently at the contact boundary, but considers the holistic person/field unit as irreducible. Both Self and situation operate as potentiality that is actualised in contact, in an ongoing process of organismic co-regulation.

In other words, “The fundamental personality structure is the dynamic person-world unity and not some internal organisation of a self isolated from the environment” (Wollants, 2012, p.6). The Self emerges from within the given field, that both impacts and shapes the ongoing selfing-process.

A given field is not always experienced as supportive in a person’s efforts toward desired contact. Explicit and implicit messaging from the environment may run counter to the needs of the person’s inner world. To survive these environments, each person copes by creatively adapting their behaviour. When attempts at either *task completion* or *relational contact* are interrupted, modulations may occur to further attempts. These modulations, or *creative adjustments*, can recede out of conscious awareness and into the background of self as *fixed gestalts*, continuing to shape the structuring (or *gestalting*) of the Self-sense. Whereas flexible Self-functioning can adapt creatively to different situations, fixed Self-processes will engage life in ways that *hold the awareness of choice at bay*.

In this way, the environment is an ongoing feedback mechanism, where events, possibilities, patterns and options form a background, until engaged by a person in their urges toward good contact.

Gestalt therapy names the sensing of what is *me* and what is *not-me* the *figure/ground* process. Figures emerge as patterns or choices that contain meaning and support for the optimal functioning of the person. This ongoing process sharpens a cohesive Self-sense. By consciously making contact with what is figural, the Self turns what was once ground, or potential, into an assimilated experience, expanding and further defining the Self in ways that feel meaningful.

Emphasis is placed within Gestalt Therapy on the ability of a person to make flexible and full contact with clearly defined figures, and a stable, yet fluid and choiceful ground has crucial impact to the health of this self-process.

Although Gestalt Therapy does not view the self as fixed, the figure/ground process can suggest a *true-self process*. Gestalt Therapy authors have discussed the Self using terms *authentic, core or real*, referring to a kind of *original and whole Self* that has been obscured to varying degrees under layers of unconscious processes.

Although Gestalt Therapy's phenomenological and field orientation doesn't tend to view the Self as an individualised, fixed structure, a dis-integrated self-sense ("I'm not myself") can become an integrated configuration, creating for the experiencer a sense of *becoming who they really are*.

The Gestalt notion of *the emergent Self at the contact boundary* is unique because it is not just the individual who grows, but the person/field that develops as a whole. According to several Gestalt Therapy theorists, the drive toward growth originates as a sense of *potentiality* within the person/environment whole, finding expression in the human organism as the one capable of acting.

Certain conditions support change, others enforce stasis, attempting to hold an individual in familiar relational patterns. This can be described as *the force for change and the force for same*. "The demands of the total situation organise the field ..." (Wollants, 2012, p.9). For growth to occur, there must be support in the field and whatever occurs in the person/situation whole, happens because the current field supports it.

The term *embeddedness* describes the immersion of a person in an environment without clear self/other boundaries, resulting in creative adjustments such as confluence in relationships. It is through the ongoing figure/ground process that a person's Self-sense is gradually differentiated and clarified.

In this way, Gestalt Therapy describes growth as ongoing *sequences of expansion* similar to the *transcend and include* process, where previous perspectives are integrated as part of the new ground, in an ever-expanding capacity for flexible contact and multi-dimensional meaning-making within complex situations.

...the ongoing coconstruction of wider and more complex wholes of meaning and action... serv(ing) to enable the person to continue growing, creating, and resolving ever-more complex understanding, which serves in turn as a platform for ever-more creative and complex actions and experiences. (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015, p.61)

The *practice* of Gestalt therapy emphasises awareness of where and how clients interrupt contact with the actuality of their situation.

Grounded in phenomenology, Gestalt practice works with historical (i.e. family of origin) contact interruptions in the here and now of the therapeutic relationship, as both body and psychological tensions and unhelpful relational processes. A Gestalt therapist uses his/her senses, alongside an open and available relational stance, to support the hope within the client that mobilisation toward contact will be received. As the client's experience is welcomed, that which was previously experienced as incomplete or an *absence*, is transformed into a fully experienced, *presence*. In this way, the *safe emergency* of the Gestalt therapeutic experiment becomes the ground that supports the completion of interrupted self-processes. This completion of a cycle of contact makes room for the *new* to emerge. While it is often this critical impasse, between *the force for same* (safety) and the *force for change* (growth), that draws a client into therapy, challenging situations also contain clues about the person/field organisation. The impasse itself can become the guide toward longed for contact and Self-actualisation.

Self-actualisation is defined in terms of the immediate and obvious: the *actuality* of fully contacting the present and Gestalt field/relational understanding means that individualised actualisation is viewed holistically as *field actualisation*.

Similarly, although Gestalt therapy does not focus on the existence of an essential self with a goal of its own revelation, *or Self-realisation*, it does perceive each relational/field whole as containing intentionality. This intentionality, a *now-for-next*, could be described as movement that contains intelligence, toward revelation. There is creativity at play, reflexively shaped by the evolving situation.

Although the Gestalt Therapy emphasis remains on the *contact boundary as the location of all experience*, Gestalt authors do speak of a *unity* preceding the differentiation of the interior/exterior boundary - a subtly felt perception, prior to the separation of figure and ground, or subject and object. Although Gestalt therapy rarely describes this subtle, non-localised perception in terms of an explicit *Transpersonal Self*, it acknowledges transcendence as a sense of Self that lies before the experience of duality.

“In other words, self-realisation is the experience ... in which we know ourselves by directly being ourselves rather than having our experience mediated through the constructs about ourselves that we have in our mind” (Haarburger, 2014, p. 45).

Conclusion

Whether the Self is an essential structure, a process, a multiplicity of awarenesses, or simply consciousness itself, the nature of the Self is mysterious. While it is clear that humans experience developmental change over their lifespan, growth is complex, non-linear and multidimensional. Self-development is deeply connected to the development of our environments and our capacity for relational contact.

But it is not just an understanding of relational contact between self and other that links Integral Psychology, Parts-Work and Gestalt Therapy modalities. They share an understanding of the need for aware, relational contact with the exiled, fixed or polarised aspects within ourselves and the facilitation of this intra-psychic contact is an important therapeutic intervention.

And while psychic integration supports a sense of coherent Self, locating Self in the person/field whole widens that sense of what is "I", providing ground for more compassion toward all sentient beings as *part of our "I"* and therefore our expanded circle of care.

"...after the butterfly (soul) emerged from the death of the chrysalis (ego), so now the little butterfly must die...(and) when the witness releases its final hold and dissolves into its ever-present ground...the final form of the self-contraction unfolds...then Spirit itself, as ever-present awareness stands free of its own accord, never really lost".

Ken Wilber

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