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The Transpersonal Self:

1. A Psychohistory and Phenomenology of the Soul

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Abstract

This is the first of two papers in which I examine the meaning and significance of concepts of the transpersonal self. In this paper I focus on the development and experiential foundations of religious and metaphysical ideas about the soul. These ideas, I suggest, have profoundly influenced psychological approaches to the transpersonal self. A psychohistorical examination of the concept of the soul suggests that it encompasses a varied and complex set of aspects and meanings. The different aspects of the soul are, I suggest, based on interpretations of a wide variety of human experiences, including life and death, dreams, out-of-body experiences, hauntings, possession, self-reflexive consciousness, inspiration, and mystical experience. In general terms, concepts of the soul seem to have evolved from a primitive belief in a quasi-physical reality, through the later incorporation of psychological qualities, to what may be a relatively recent focus on spiritual experience. Conceptual difficulties can arise when we fail to recognise the differences between these levels of interpretation.

"I cannot understand what *mind* is, or how it differs from *soul* or *spirit*. They all seem one to me."

St Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, Chap. 18.

Cited in Happold, 1970, p. 352.

Some concept of a transpersonal self appears in most of the major theories in transpersonal psychology. William James (1902/1960, p. 490) refers to a "wider self" - a higher or spiritual self which is the source of religious experience. Abraham Maslow talks about a person's "highest self" which to a large degree overlaps with the highest selves of others (1973, p. 327). Carl Jung (e.g., 1991) emphasises the integration of the whole Self, often represented using spiritual images. The Higher Self (true, spiritual or transpersonal Self) features prominently in the psychosynthesis model developed by Roberto Assagioli (1993). John Rowan (1993) refers to the transpersonal self, or Deep Self, while Michael Washburn (e.g., 1994, 1995) reports the existence of a higher self at the centre of the repressed unconscious. Stan Grof (e.g., 1993) describes various experiences of the transpersonal self reported by people in non-ordinary states of consciousness. John Heron (1988) distinguishes between the transpersonal self and the cosmic self. Frances Vaughan (1985, 1986) discusses the nature and limitations of the experience of transpersonal identity, while Ken Wilber's integral psychology (e.g., 2000) describes two independent self-streams that operate at different transpersonal levels.

The purpose of this two-part essay is to examine the concept of the transpersonal self in order to assess and clarify its meaning and value within a psychological approach to the transpersonal. There are several important questions that I shall address:

1. **Do we need a concept of the transpersonal self at all?** This is not at all a frivolous question. On one hand the idea of a "transpersonal self" may strike some as a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, we have many of the world's developed religious traditions arguing that spiritual development involves a loss of self, while Buddhism radically denies the existence of any permanent self, whether mundane or "transpersonal".
2. **What kind of concept is the transpersonal self?** Is the transpersonal self most adequately understood as, for example, a metaphor or symbol, an objective reality, an experience, the subject of experience, a psychological structure, or a developmental process?

3. **Is the transpersonal self a unitary concept or do we need to distinguish between different transpersonal selves?** A related question concerns the extent to which different theorists may articulate very different concepts of the transpersonal self.
4. **What role is played by the *self* in transpersonal experiences and in the process of transpersonal development?**
5. **How do psychological concepts of the transpersonal self compare and relate to religious-metaphysical notions such as the existence of the soul or spirit?**
6. **Can we understand the transpersonal self in purely psychological terms, without assuming a particular metaphysical position?**

In this first paper, I shall consider first the religious-metaphysical questions. I do so because it is very difficult to avoid these questions when discussing the transpersonal self and because, in practice, the psychological theories I shall be discussing in the second paper are often strongly coloured by their metaphysical assumptions. Religious and philosophical ideas have so subtly and profoundly influenced everyone's thinking in these areas that it is often difficult to appreciate just how much we have been conditioned to understand spiritual concepts in particular ways. For this reason it is useful, I believe, to make explicit some of these influences.

The belief that there is a spiritual aspect or dimension to human personality is one that is shared by most of the world's religions as well as by quasi-religious philosophical systems such as Neoplatonism. This commonly held notion has, however, been understood and expressed in a variety of ways by the different traditions. Some of the most important concepts and terms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Concepts of the soul and spirit in religion and philosophy (examples)

Religion / Philosophy	Concepts
Shamanism	Soul-Spirit, Spirit helpers (guides, companions, friends, ancestors, power animals, teachers, gods, goddesses)
Egyptian religion	<i>Khaibit</i> (shade), <i>Ka</i> (double), <i>Ba</i> (soul), <i>Akh</i> or <i>Khu</i> (spirit), <i>Sahu</i> (spiritual body)
Zoroastrianism	Individual judged soul, Guardian Spirit / Guardian Angel, evil spirits.
Homer	<i>Thymos</i> (arousal), <i>Nous</i> (thought), <i>Psyche</i> (shade-soul)
Pythagoras	Self-moving, immortal, transmigrating, perfectable soul (<i>psyche</i>)
Plato	Immortal <i>psyche</i> . Tripartite <i>psyche</i> : <i>epithymia</i> (appetite), <i>thymos</i> ("spirited"), <i>nous / logos</i> (reason)
Old Testament	Soul (<i>nefesh</i>), Spirit (<i>ruach</i>)
New Testament	Soul (<i>psyche</i>), Spirit (<i>pneuma</i>)
Gnosticism,	Mind (<i>nous</i>), Soul (<i>psyche</i>), Animal soul, Human soul, Divine soul, Divine spark, Divine light, Spirit (<i>pneuma</i>), Good and evil "companions", Original Man.
Islam	Perfectable soul, "Heart"
Jewish mysticism	<i>Nefesh</i> (animal soul), <i>Neshamah</i> (human soul), <i>Ruach</i> (spirit), Ten <i>Sephiroth</i> (emanations) <i>Yechidah</i> (divine spark), <i>Adam Kadmon</i> (heavenly man)
Sufism	Empirical self, Union or extinction (<i>fana</i>) of soul with God
Middle Platonism	<i>Nous</i> (intellect), <i>Ego</i> ("I"), <i>Daemon</i> (semi-divine guide)
Neoplatonism (Plotinus)	Soul, World-Soul, <i>Nous</i> (higher intelligence), the One (Godhead)
Jainism	<i>Jiva</i> (life-monad)
Vedanta	<i>Atman</i> , <i>Atman-Brahman</i> (non-dualist), Three bodies (gross, subtle, causal), Five sheaths (physical, vital, mental, intellectual, blissful).
Samkhya, Yoga	<i>Purusha</i> (consciousness / spirit), Supreme Self
Taoism	<i>Kuei</i> (shade / ghost), <i>Po</i> (earthly yin soul), <i>Hun</i> (heavenly yang soul), <i>Shen</i> (spirit)
Buddhism	5 <i>skandhas</i> (aggregates), <i>Dharma samtana</i> , (karmic stream), <i>Pratityasamutpada</i> (dependent arising) <i>Anatta</i> (no-self)
Zen	Original Self, Formless Self
Kant	Noumenal self, Phenomenal (empirical) self
Theosophy	Etheric body, Astral body, Mental body, Causal body, <i>Atman</i>
Aurobindo	Psychic being, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind, Supermind, Sachchidananda, Atman, Jivatman, Spark-soul

While there appear to be close similarities between many of these concepts, there are also important distinctions to be made among them. We cannot simply conclude that they are all referring to the same thing - i.e., to commonly shared ideas of *the* soul or spirit. Most obviously, within most of these traditions it has been found necessary to make specific distinctions between different aspects (or levels) of the human constitution, such as the mind, soul and spirit. Secondly, there appear to be substantial differences of meaning between the sets of concepts found across, or even within, several religions. Thus the Original Self or Formless Self of Zen appears to represent a very different idea from that of the soul/spirit in shamanism. In turn, both of these are quite distinct from the Jain concept of *jiva* (life-monad).

We also need to recognise that the common use of a term such as *mind* or *soul* or *spirit* does not necessarily imply that it always carries the same meaning. To a large extent this may be attributed to problems of translation and the relative paucity and lack of sophistication of the English language in the areas of spiritual experience (in comparison, say, with Sanskrit or even ancient Egyptian). However, the problem is not entirely one of vocabulary. Thus Egyptian scholars have observed that words such as *ka*, *ba* and *khu* themselves changed in meaning and application over the centuries. The Sanskrit *atman* may also be used in very different senses, ranging from the self of ordinary experience to the divine immortal soul. Similarly, in the Old Testament, the meanings attributed to *nefesh* (soul) or to *ruach* (spirit) are not always constant or consistent.

It seems very likely that many of the historical changes in the meaning of words such as soul and spirit reflect actual developments in human consciousness and our awareness of ourselves (i.e., our *selves*). Julian Jaynes (1993) has argued, for example, that when the *Iliad* and the early books of the Old Testament were written (c. 1000 - 800 BCE) people were not fully self-conscious or self-reflective. They functioned largely on autopilot. If a choice had to be made, they did not think, plan or decide what to do. Rather they were "told" what to do by the voices they hallucinated from another

"chamber" of the mind (hence Jaynes' description of the human mind at this time as "bicameral", i.e., having two chambers).

Iliadic man did not have subjectivity as do we; he had no awareness of his awareness of the world, no internal mind-space to introspect upon. In distinction to our own subjective conscious minds, we can call the mentality of the Myceneans a bicameral mind. Volition, planning, initiative is organized with no consciousness whatever and then 'told' to the individual in his familiar language, sometimes with the visual aura of a familiar friend or authority figure or 'god', sometimes as a voice alone. The individual obeyed these hallucinated voices because he could not 'see' what to do by himself.

Jaynes, 1993, p. 75

According to Jaynes, humankind did not develop self-consciousness (including intellectual and moral consciousness) until around the period when the *Odyssey* was written (c. 750 BCE), as may be shown by a critical psychological comparison between this text and the *Iliad*.

Wilber (1996) has developed an even more controversial thesis that attempts to trace evolutionary changes in consciousness from the mystical participation in nature experienced by the earliest humans, through a series of "eras" involving magical, mythical, and mental-egoic consciousness, up to our present-day capacity for existential authenticity and transpersonal identity.

Whether or not we agree with the precise formulations of Jaynes or Wilber, there seems little doubt from the historical data that the earliest conceptions of the human soul saw it as some kind of *quasi-physical reality*. This might be a "spiritual" substance, such as a vapour, perfume, fire, or the breath, or an actual body of some kind (a shade, or double). It seems to be very recent - perhaps only within the last 3000 years - that the soul came to be associated with *psychological* capacities of any kind. When this occurred, the emphasis appears to have focussed originally on desire and "spiritedness" (the kinds of qualities shared with animals such as pigs or horses). Only later were what seemed to be strictly human capacities for thinking and self-

reflection added to the equation. As our self-experience evolved further, concepts of the soul began to incorporate the more sophisticated psychological capacities of free will and "higher" modes of thought and consciousness such as logic and reason, contemplation, intuition and mystical experience. It was, I believe, as a result of recognising our own capacity for such "higher" consciousness, that the soul came to be understood as *itself* participating in the nature of *divinity*.

In order to understand the historical changes and variations in views of the soul and spirit, it is useful to consider in more detail the *phenomenological bases* of these concepts. My assumption here is that if these concepts mean anything at all, they must refer to important common human experiences. One reason, therefore, why we have different terms and concepts is that different experiences have given rise to them. A quite *secondary* consideration is that the various religious, philosophical and psychological schools have engaged in their own (although, as history shows, often mutually influenced) forms of phenomenological analysis, philosophising and exegesis.

Experiences of the soul

What *experiences*, then, could have given rise to the various notions of a *soul, spirit or transpersonal self*? In my view, we must include at least the following:

1. **Life and death.** The precise difference between a living, breathing person and a corpse remains a profound mystery to this day. Little wonder, perhaps, that our early ancestors attributed the difference to an *animating spirit* that left the body at death, a spirit often identified with the life-giving breath, the beating heart, or physical warmth. Such an interpretation leads almost inevitably to the animistic belief that all living things possess a spirit of their own. Because the animating spirit is the principle of life whereas death is the loss of spirit, it would seem to follow that the spirit itself cannot die, but must be immortal. This argument is, indeed, the basis of one of the Socratic "proofs" of the soul's immortality (Plato, *Phaedrus* 6, 245c-246a).

2. **Sleep and dreaming.** In dreamless sleep, "I" seem to disappear. Where have I gone during this time? I cannot have been annihilated because I return in the morning - so it would seem that I must have been somewhere all the time, even though I cannot recall any experience. However I do remember dreams. In these I appear to travel (in my own shape) to other times and places. Although normal dreams may be confused and hazy, in lucid dreams I am fully conscious, can think rationally, act upon intention, and "return" to the waking body with complete recollection. The simplest explanation for these experiences is that each person can continue exist in an independent "dream body" that is an exact double or replica of the physical body.
3. **Out-of-body experiences.** Dramatic experiences that seem to offer further experiential confirmation of the reality of the dream body.
4. **Hauntings and apparitions.** Experiences that suggest that a person can survive death in some quasi-physical form. However, the ghost or apparition may appear to be just a shade or shadowy presence that lacks the intelligence, vitality, warmth or 'spark' of a real living person. For this reason it makes sense to distinguish between the animating soul, spark or personality, and the shade or ghost, although both may be immortal. In Homer, for example, the souls (*psyche*) of the dead experience eternal life in the Underworld, but as mere pale shadows of their former selves.
5. **Loss of Soul.** Our ordinary experience of ourselves is that we possess will, vitality and a sense of personal control. However, there are unusual trance states (such as of *latah / olon*, and *amok / berserk*), experienced in shamanistic societies, where these personal functions seem to be temporarily lost (see, for example, de Martino, 1988). In these states, the person's behaviour seems to be completely controlled by external events or by some invading outer force. These occurrences are generally interpreted as a "loss of soul" and are states to be feared. Such states imply that a person can temporarily lose their own will and identity while the body lives on, animated or "possessed" by some outside power.

6. **Spirit possession.** In cases of spirit possession (which can often result from an experience of soul-loss), the person's body seems to be taken over involuntarily by another *personality* rather than simply by an alien force or power. The possessed person may therefore speak and act with intelligence and purpose.
7. **Mediumistic trance.** Experiences in which the shaman or medium *invites* another spirit or entity to take full control of their body in order to communicate or perform some other valuable function (such as healing). This is similar to modern-day channelling, although the latter does not always involve the complete dissociation of the ordinary personality in the way that is typical of trance mediumship.
8. **Shamanic journeying.** Ecstatic trance experiences in which the shaman's soul or spirit (dream body) seems to travel to another world, where it communicates with spirit helpers or friends.
9. **Invocation and evocation.** Magical practices that (a) invite or invoke a "divine spirit" to manifest within consciousness, or (b) summon or evoke a "spirit" to manifest itself to the senses.
10. **Energetic and "subtle body" experiences.** Experiences such as *kundalini* awakenings, subtle sounds (*nada*) and lights, and psychic powers (*siddhis*) in which the self seems to be plugged into a powerful source of psychic or spiritual energy. This source may be experienced as a vital or "subtle" inner body that is somehow intimately connected with the physical body. The energy itself may vary in its form or quality, and these variations are often experienced as correlated with different psychic centres (*chakras*) within the subtle body.
11. **The mental life (Idealism).** Withdrawing into an inner mental world. This may take various forms - introspection, day-dreaming, contemplation, meditation, mental play, mathematical or philosophical reasoning. The implication of such experience is that "I" (the conscious thinking self) can exist as a purely mental being in a world of ideas that transcends and has,

at best, only an indirect relationship to the body or emotions. For Plato, the mental contemplation of ideal Forms represents the highest activity of the human soul. In some philosophies, mental purity is sharply contrasted with a sense of the inadequacy or corruption of the physical world. The pure eternal mental being may then be viewed as somehow weighed down or imprisoned by physical existence, from which it seeks liberation. In extreme cases, this may lead to the belief (e.g., in Gnosticism) that the entire material universe is evil.

12. Subjectivity and self-reflexive consciousness. This *mental-intellectual* realisation of our own subjectivity occurs at the moment when I have the *thought* that I as exist as an experiencing and active centre. It is therefore based on the simple ideas that "*I experience this*" and "*I do this*". Such thinking immediately sets up a dualism between subject and object. Since I also realise that any *ideas* about myself are themselves *objects* of experience then "I" cannot be any *thing* I think I am. The real "I" must therefore be the *subject* - the witness or agent who is distinct from any mental contents such as perceptions, thoughts, intentions or self-concepts. The Catch-22 in this realisation, however, is that once we recognise or identify with (i.e., *think about*) our own subjectivity, we have thereby turned the subject into an object. The eye, therefore, cannot see itself, and any attempt to do so involves us in the hall of mirrors of an infinite regression. Yet we are still left with what seems to be a valid conceptual distinction between subject and object and, on this basis, we may readily erect a philosophy that identifies the pure subject as the "true", noumenal, transcendent or transpersonal self. Wilber, for example, makes this very point:

But what could an actual "transpersonal" experience really mean? It's not nearly as mysterious as it sounds ... You yourself can, right now, be aware of your objective self, you can observe your individual ego or person, you are aware of yourself generally.

But who, then, is doing the observing? What is it that is observing or witnessing your individual self? That therefore transcends your

individual self in some important ways? Who or what is that? ... The observer in you, the Witness in you, transcends the isolated person in you.

Wilber (1995) p. 280-281.

13. **Intuition and inspiration.** There are times when we are surprised by insights and knowledge whose source is unknown, but appears to come from some deep place within the self. It thus appears that we have access to a larger or higher wisdom that is not directly accessible to the conscious mind. Such experiences may be experienced as a sense of a relationship with an inner Muse.
14. **Guiding Impulse.** This refers to experiences that seem to indicate a sense of direction, purpose or inevitability to our individual lives that we cannot consciously fathom. It is as if an unseen force is driving and directing our lives according to some prior agenda. Such experiences may be variously attributed to fate, divine prompting, or karmic fulfilment.
15. **Groundedness.** The sense of connection to a deeper, more authentic self. This is typically associated with an experience of clarity, wholeness, "rightness" and harmony.
16. **Reincarnation experiences.** Memories, desires, phobias, behaviours or physical characteristics apparently associated with a previous personal existence. Such experiences seem to carry the implication that *co-ordinated aspects of human personality* (rather than simply the animating soul, shade, spark, or subject of experience) can survive death and return to another body.
17. **Near-death experiences.** Typically characterised by an out-of-body experience followed by moving towards a loving spiritual light or presence. The NDE offers convincing experiential confirmation of some form of personal survival and also of the reality of our connection with the Divine.
18. **Revelations.** New knowledge that appears to be revealed or communicated by a higher or divine intelligence, often associated with

ecstatic visions. Generally the source is experienced as an "other" being (e.g., an angel or God) although there is usually a sense that I (or my group) have been specially "chosen" or share a privileged relationship with this being.

19. **Conversion / rebirth.** Experiences, often triggered by a personal crisis, in which consciousness and personality undergo a profound spiritual transformation.

20. **Cosmic consciousness.** A term coined by the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Bucke (1901) for a sudden, exalted and joyous experience of the whole universe as a living, ordered and loving Presence, or expression of the Divine. At the same time there is a *direct realisation* of (rather than simply an intellectual belief in) the self's immortality.

Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a conception (a vision) of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise - is in truth a living presence. He sees that the life which is in man is eternal ... that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love ... Especially does he obtain such a conception of the whole - as makes the old attempts mentally to grasp the universe and its meaning petty and ridiculous.

R.M. Bucke (1901), cited in Happold (1970, p. 55)

21. **Unitive experience (spiritual marriage).** Ecstatic, loving surrender and embrace with the divine. A kind of abiding with or union of the soul with the Divine (God). This union may be variously described as one of *identity* (One-as-God) or of *communion* (One-with-God).

this secret union takes place in the deepest centre of the soul, which must be where God Himself dwells, and I do not think there is any need of a door by which to enter it. I say there is no need of a door because all that has so far been described seems to have come

through the medium of the senses and faculties ... But what passes in the union of the Spiritual Marriage is very different. The Lord appears in the centre of the soul ..., This instantaneous communication of God to the soul is so great a secret and so sublime a favour, and such delight is felt by the soul, that I do not know with what to compare it, beyond saying that the Lord is pleased to manifest to the soul at that moment the glory that is in Heaven, in a sublimer manner than is possible through any vision or spiritual consolation. It is impossible to say more than that, as far as one can understand, the soul (I mean the spirit of this soul) is made one with God, Who, being likewise a Spirit, has been pleased to reveal the love that He has for us by showing to certain persons the extent of that love, so that we may praise His greatness. For He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another: even so He will not separate Himself from her.

St Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, chap. 2, 224-226.

As a result of this participation in or with God, the person is generally reborn or spiritually transformed, becoming a more or less perfect vehicle for the Divine. The temporary ecstatic experience of union thus leads to a permanent sense of living the divine or *unitive life* (Underhill, 1911/1995). On the other hand, if not permanently integrated into the life, unitive experience can also lead to a sense of spiritual loss and to the *Dark Night of the Spirit* (St John of the Cross, 1991).

22. Formless consciousness. Abiding in stillness as the Transcendent Witness - in pure, formless Peace, Being, Ground, Consciousness, Heart, or "Godhead". Here the experience is of existing as a Void or silent centre, lacking all distinctions or manifestations, but containing all as dynamic potentiality. In Buddhism this is referred to as *sunyata* (emptiness, voidness). In Vedanta it is called *nirvikalpa samadhi* (i.e., yogic trance without qualities or forms).

[silence] is in the purest part of the soul, in the noblest, in her ground, aye in the very essence of the soul. That is mid-silence, for thereinto no creature did ever get, nor any image, nor has the soul there either activity or understanding, therefore she is not aware of any image either of herself or any creature ... there is no activity in the essence of the soul; the faculties she works with emanate from the ground of the essence, but in her actual ground there is mid-stillness; here alone is rest ... Call it, if thou wilt, an ignorance, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than in all knowing and understanding without it.

Meister Eckhart (from *Sermon I*, cited in Happold, 1970, p. 276-278)

To abide as the Self is the thing. Never mind the mind. If the mind's source is sought, the mind will vanish leaving the Self unaffected ... Tracing the source of "I", the primal I-I [the pure Witness] alone remains over, and it is inexpressible. The seat of that awareness is within and the seeker cannot find it as an object outside him. That seat is bliss and is the core of all beings. Hence it is called the Heart ... If the diversity [of the mind] is not manifest it remains in its own essence, its original state, and that is the Heart ... To remain as one's Self is to enter the Heart ... Find the source of thoughts. Then you will abide in the ever-present inmost Self.

Sri Ramana Maharshi (from *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, cited in Wilber, 1995, p. 307).

It is important to realise that this *direct mystical experience* of the Transcendent Witness is very different from the simple *intellectual realisation* of the subjective self previously discussed (No. 12).

23. Non-dual or ultimate consciousness ("One Taste"). In non-dual consciousness, the world of form (sensations, perceptions, mental objects, etc.) is experienced in all its fullness and glory. However there is a fundamental difference between this ultimate non-dual consciousness and our ordinary dualistic (subject-object) awareness. In non-dual consciousness, the whole world of form is *directly experienced* as the

immediate, unconditional, liberated play or expression of Mind, Spirit, Self, or God. This means that there is no sense of a *separate* Witness or observer, nor any *separate* world. There is no inside or outside. The Witness just *IS* everything, and everything just *IS* as it is. In Tibetan Buddhism, this state is called *Rigpa* - an intelligent, self-luminous, radiant, pure, ever-present awareness that is the goal of Dzogchen and Mahamudra meditation. It is also the Original Self of Zen.

Recognise beyond any doubt that this sky-like nature of your mind is the absolute master. Where else would all the enlightened beings be but in the Rigpa, in the nature of your mind? Secure in that realization, in a state of spacious and carefree ease, you rest in the warmth, glory, and blessing of your absolute nature. You have arrived at the original ground: the primordial purity of natural simplicity. As you rest in this state of Rigpa, you recognize the truth of Padmasambhava's words: 'Mind itself is Padmasambhava; there is no practice or meditation apart from that'.

Sogyal Rinpoche (1992), p. 148-149.

*Like the empty sky it has no boundaries,
Yet it is right in this place, ever profound and clear.
When you seek to know it, you cannot see it.
You cannot take hold of it,
But you cannot lose it.
In not being able to get it, you get it.
When you are silent, it speaks;
When you speak, it is silent.
The great gate is wide open to bestow alms,
And no crowd is blocking the way.*

Cheng-tao Ke (cited in Watts, 1957, p. 145)

Experience and Concept

This list is not intended to be an exhaustive catalogue of "spiritual", transpersonal or mystical experiences. It is, however, sufficient for the

arguments that I wish to develop in relation to the concept of the transpersonal *self*. The most obvious point, perhaps, concerns the extraordinary diversity and complexity of these areas of experience. If we were hoping to find *the* soul, or *the* transpersonal self, then we shall need to think again. Little wonder, therefore, that our ancestors found it necessary to make fundamental distinctions between different aspects or levels of the "soul". Recognising the differences between these experiences helps to explain why, for example, the Egyptians distinguished between the *Khaibit*, *Ka*, *Ba*, *Khu*, *Sahu*, why St. Paul refers to *psyche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit), or why Plotinus makes a distinction between soul, *nous* and the One. Here, then, we find the experiential bases of many of the psychological and metaphysical concepts that humankind has invented in order to try to make sense of its own self-experience. Here are the animating spirit, double, shade, astral-dream body, etheric body, subtle-energetic body, immortal soul, personality, psyche, consciousness, unconscious, ego, existential self or "real self", divine spark, divine soul, guardian angel, higher self, witness, Original Self and no-self. Here also, are the experiential foundations of the world's major religions. But this is where the problem strikes home - even though each of these concepts and religious perspectives is based on *experience*, on the face of it they appear to imply multiple, incompatible or contradictory realities. How can we begin to make sense of all these different views of the soul or self? How, for example, can we reconcile *shades* with *guardian angels* or the *original self*? How can we reconcile the seeming nature mysticism of cosmic consciousness with the deity mysticism of St Teresa, or the mind-mysticism of Dzogchen? (Cf. Happold, 1970; Underhill, 1911/1995; Zaehner, 1961).

At this juncture, I should make the point that *experiences* cannot establish the truth (or falsity) of any metaphysical doctrine. In other words, seeing a ghost does not necessarily imply that the ghost exists as an actual entity in itself (as distinct from our perception of it). Similarly an experience of union with God is not a proof of His existence. Phenomenology and ontology (metaphysics) are quite separate activities although, in my opinion, if metaphysics is to mean anything at all, it must be based on sound

phenomenology. My agenda in these papers is not primarily with the ontological, metaphysical or theological questions (e.g., the immortality of the soul, the reality of reincarnation, or the divinity of the soul), but rather with a conceptual analysis of the phenomenological data and with their implications for psychological theory and practice. A complication that we shall find, however, is that metaphysical doctrines or assumptions have themselves influenced these psychological theories, such that it will be impossible entirely to ignore these questions.

If, as transpersonal psychologists, we wish to do more than provide a phenomenological description and categorisation of these experiences, we are inevitably forced into the attempt to understand and explain them in some way, using some system of constructs that we can reasonably assume, demonstrate, or justify. In this way, we should seek to adopt or create an explanatory framework that is comprehensive, believable, and that can provide practical guidance and support for those seeking to explore the transpersonal. In its *purpose*, this is no different from the agenda of myth or religion. However, in my view, transpersonal psychology differs fundamentally in its *approach* and *methods*, which are essentially scientific and philosophical. This does not mean that we cannot learn from mythological, religious or metaphysical systems, but that transpersonal psychology should avoid turning itself into a religion, cult or system of belief. In order to do this, it is necessary always to ground our discipline in direct experience (including observation and experiment) and in the rigorous and rational justification of ideas (rather than mere assertion). Because of the nature of our subject-matter it may be impossible entirely to avoid metaphysical assumptions or hypotheses, but these should, I suggest, be kept to a minimum and made explicit (cf. Daniels, 2001).

Of course a transpersonal psychology cannot be entirely materialist in its outlook. But we are *psychologists*, and there is much that we can do, I think, *while still remaining true to the data of experience*, at the level of psychological explanation. This, perhaps, is the main reason why many transpersonal psychologists prefer to talk about the transpersonal *self*, or

transpersonal *identity*, rather than the *soul*. Unlike the term "soul" which carries all sorts of religious-metaphysical connotations, "self" and "identity" are essentially psychological-experiential constructs that make no particular metaphysical assumptions.

Conclusions

The concept of the soul is complex and multifaceted because it is based on a variety of human capacities and experiences. Ideas about the soul have also evolved over the centuries, reflecting developments in human beings' experience of themselves. Since we must expect evolution of human consciousness to continue, the soul is essentially an open-ended construct that is likely to show further refinements and modifications in the future.

At its simplest, the evolution of ideas about the soul seems to involve three major stages. In the first stage, the soul is conceived as a *quasi-physical* reality of some kind, such as a vapour, body or fire. Later ideas about the soul incorporated what we would now describe as *psychological* qualities such as desire, thought, will, self-consciousness and personality. Only relatively recently, it seems, did concepts of the soul begin to include the idea of our human connection with a *divine* reality. Given these very different levels of explanation, confusion can arise, I suggest, when these levels are confounded - for example in the belief that our divine soul (or transpersonal self) has an individual personality, or that human personality has a continuing (immortal) physical substrate. This is, however, a much larger and more complex discussion that I cannot enter into here.

Being an aspect of human *experience*, the soul is something that can be investigated by psychologists, who may prefer to use psychological terms such as "transpersonal self" or "transpersonal identity" in preference to the religious terminology. Whatever terminology we decide to use, it is vital that our psychological concepts honour and do justice to the richness and variety of human experience.

In the second paper of this two-part series, I shall outline, compare and critically examine seven major psychological theories of the transpersonal self, relating these theories to the experiential foundations and metaphysical conceptions that I have discussed in this paper.

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