

The Metaphysical Instincts & Spiritual Bypassing in Integral Psychology

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Abstract: Instincts are innate, unconscious means by which Nature operates in all forms of life including animals and human beings. In humans however, with progressive evolution of consciousness, instincts become increasingly conscious and regulated by egoic functions. Biological instincts associated with the *lower-unconscious* such as survival, aggressive, and reproductive instincts are well known in general psychology. The *higher-unconscious*, which is unique to human beings, may be said to have its own instinctual processes referred to here as the ‘metaphysical instincts’. In traditional spiritual practices awakening the metaphysical instincts has often been done at the expense of suppressing the biological instincts—a process referred to as spiritual bypassing. This essay discusses how the metaphysical instincts initially expressed as the religious impulse with associated beliefs and behaviors may be transformed and made fully conscious, and integrated with the biological instincts in integral yoga and psychology in order to achieve wholeness of personality.

Key Words: Carl Jung, higher-unconscious, instincts, integral psychology, integral yoga, lower-unconscious, psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli, spiritual bypassing, Sri Aurobindo.

Introduction

A key aim of integral yoga and psychology is to reach wholeness of personality. In practical terms, achieving wholeness necessitates harmonization of the various dimensions of personality through the organizing principle of the psyche—the Self, or in Sri Aurobindo’s terms, the Psychic Being (Sri Aurobindo, 1989). Among western transpersonal psychologists, Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli have developed some of the most comprehensive personality frameworks that include a similar psychocentric principle—referred to as the Self or the Higher/Transpersonal Self respectively—to represent this integrating and harmonizing fulcrum of personality.

Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychiatrist who was an early associate of Freud and Jung, is not as well known as these pioneers of depth psychology. However, his framework called Psychosynthesis, which combines empirical, depth, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies at once, is in this author’s view the most comprehensive western integrative psychological and

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psychotherapeutic system compatible with integral psychology. Assagioli's conceptual model of human personality is complemented with a rich array of practical techniques and processes for growth, development and integration of personality. In his major work titled *Psychosynthesis*, Assagioli (1971) proposed a model of human personality with many practical implications for healing and transformation of consciousness including techniques for catharsis, critical analysis, self-identification, dis-identification, development for the will, training and use of imagination, visualization and many more, all as part of the psychosynthesis work aimed at integration of personality.

Assagioli's personality framework includes three intrapsychic dimensions: the *lower-unconscious*, the *middle-unconscious*, and the *higher-unconscious*. Depicted as hierarchal strata within an upright oval diagram, these are nested within the larger collective realm in the background which is similar to Jung's notion of the *collective unconscious*, representing the transpersonal and cosmic dimensions of the psyche. The region that includes the conscious mind is at the center of the oval diagram and is referred to as the middle-unconscious region. This region is primarily subconscious with the field of ordinary waking consciousness represented by a circle at its center.

Assagioli (1971), who incorporated in his model some of the key features of Freud's and Jung's contributions, added the idea of the higher-unconscious and called its organizing principle the Higher or Transpersonal Self. While his concept of the lower-unconscious is essentially comparable to Freud's concept of the *Unconscious*, and Jung's personal unconscious (the *Shadow*), as the storehouse of dynamically repressed materials, his middle-unconscious was added to account for what is not in the immediate conscious awareness, and yet not dynamically repressed and available for recollection at will without any resistance or defense mechanisms.

Assagioli's higher-unconscious explicitly represents the human spiritual realm which could be made conscious and integrated into the conscious personality, just as the lower-unconscious would be made conscious and integrated to achieve complete integration and wholeness of human personality. The Higher Self (also called the Transpersonal Self) would be crucial as a catalyst to make this integration possible. Beginning in the 1920s, Assagioli developed pioneering insights into the nature of the relationship between psychological and spiritual development and pointed out a number of psychological issues arising before, during and after spiritual awakening (Assagioli, 1971).

Although a two-dimensional depiction of the oval diagram is rather linear with the abovementioned regions appearing as hierarchal strata with the higher-unconscious at the top, in day-to-day experience both the higher and the lower unconscious are hidden below the surface of mental awareness and are ordinarily mixed-up and confounded. This inner fusion may eventually become clarified as more and more unconscious contents are integrated into the middle-unconscious and enter the field of conscious experience.

The use of the term 'unconscious' is of pivotal interest to our discussion here: all regions in Assagioli's scheme are outside of the conscious realm depicted as a circle in the center of the middle-unconscious. The lower-unconscious region is associated with the biological functions as well as dynamically repressed emotional and mental content. The lower-unconscious is mainly

regulated through biological instincts. Instincts are innate, unconscious means by which Nature operates in all forms of life including animals and human beings. Biological instincts associated with the lower-unconscious such as survival, aggressive, and reproductive instincts, are well known and well researched in general Western psychology.

The higher-unconscious, which is unique to human beings, may be said to also have its own instinctual processes referred to here as the *metaphysical instincts*. These include transpersonal intuitions, visions, illuminations and spiritual aspirations which are initially unconscious relative to ordinary mental functions. Here we can apply the idea of instincts to the realm of the higher-unconscious because they too initially reside outside of the realm of conscious experience and exert powerful influences on the human psyche. "...[A]ll psychic processes whose energies are not under conscious control are instinctive" (Jung, 1971, p. 451).

Metaphysical instincts are as powerful as the biological instincts and become more relevant and empowered in the course of psychospiritual growth and transformation. Whereas biological instincts are responsible for our embodiment processes, the metaphysical instincts tend to propel us toward our spiritual destiny. They influence our religious impulses, beliefs and behaviors as well as our philosophical ideations.

Integral Psychology

Sri Aurobindo's key phrase: "all life is yoga", suggests that integral yoga—which is an integration of the yogas of love (*bhakti* yoga), knowledge (*jnana* yoga), and action (*karma* yoga)—is not only understood as an individual spiritual practice, it is also accomplished by Nature in a collective manner. A simple observation of animal life reveals that even though the mental life of an animal is not as elaborate and complex as that of a human being, the essence of their being is nevertheless expressed through instinctual love and knowledge in action. Animals simply know how to go about their daily life, care for their young and live their lives according to the dictates of their biological instinctual processes.

The animal instinctual core structures also operate in human beings as part of our evolutionary heritage. Whereas animals are primarily driven by the biological drives, the human beings are, in addition, pulled by the gravitation of the forces of the metaphysical instincts. In other words, in humans the evolutionary instincts of the lower-unconscious and the involutory instincts of the higher-unconscious—the metaphysical instincts—create an existential dialectical process in the psyche. This dialectical tension typically manifests in terms of diametrically opposing forces that act upon and within the psyche on all levels from physical, to emotional and mental, which must eventually be harmonized in the course of integration of personality.

Jung made a similar distinction between biological and metaphysical instincts as pairs of opposites, inextricably linked and often difficult to distinguish. He wrote:

...psychic processes seem to be balances of energy flowing between spirit and instinct, though the question of whether a process is to be described as spiritual or as instinctual remains shrouded in darkness. Such evaluation or interpretation depends entirely upon the standpoint or state of the conscious mind. (Jung, 1960, p. 207).

Before spiritual awakening—the first step in the psychospiritual transformation processes—a typical individual is primarily governed by conscious mental, emotional, and physical processes, as well as relatively unconscious instincts. The interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness is at the core of the phenomenal and psychic existence and some sort of balance among, or the reconciliation of, these is a common goal of western schools of depth psychology, notably Freud's Psychoanalysis, Jung's Analytical Psychology, and Assagioli's Psychosynthesis. A similar, yet more comprehensive, aim is also at the core of integral psychology and yoga.

In integral yoga and psychology,

...consciousness is not synonymous with mentality but indicates a self aware force of existence of which mentality is a middle term; below mentality it sinks into vital and material movements which are for us subconscious; above, it rises into the supramental which is for us the superconscious. But in all it is one and the same thing organizing itself differently. (Sri Aurobindo, 1997, p. 88)

The human being is then an embodiment of various spheres of consciousness ranging in density from the densest to potentially most luminous strata. The ultimate aim of integral yoga is to eradicate the unconscious dimension of the human psyche and thus achieve a fully integrated conscious psyche.

According to Sri Aurobindo (1992):

In the right view both of life and of Yoga all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga. For we mean by this term a methodised effort towards self perfection by the expression of the secret potentialities latent in the being and highest condition of victory in that effort a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence we see partially expressed in man and in the Cosmos. But all life, when we look behind its appearances, is a vast Yoga of Nature who attempts in the conscious and the subconscious to realise her perfection in an ever-increasing expression of her yet unrealised potentialities and to unite herself with her own divine reality. In man, her thinker, she for the first time upon this Earth devises self-conscious means and willed arrangements of activity by which this great purpose may be more swiftly and puissantly attained. (p.2)

According to integral psychology pioneer Indra Sen (n.d.):

...to Sri Aurobindo the teleological or forward moving character is the central fact of our consciousness. It is the evolutionary urge of life generally, which unfolds in the ascending scale of the animal species a progressive growth in consciousness. Therefore, the unconscious is the large evolutionary base from which consciousness emerges. However, if the past is any indication, then it can be definitely affirmed that the goal of this long evolutionary march must be the attainment of a consciousness fully come to its own. That is to say when the unconscious has been reduced to the vanishing point and the human individual becomes fully aware of himself and capable of acting out of such awareness. (p.6)

The Problem of Spiritual Bypassing

When a human being is primarily governed by his or her instinctual drives, various biological and metaphysical tendencies are at odds with one another and tend to compete to get the attention of the egoic will to utilize it toward their own purposes. The various levels of the unconscious (lower, middle, higher in Assagioli, or inconscient, subconscient, and superconscient in Sri Aurobindo) are in actuality not neatly divided and compartmentalized. They are in fact a ‘mixed bag’ of tendencies beyond the reach of the conscious, egoic will. In depth psychology it is understood that sexual and aggressive urges can easily get mixed up in the form of dominance or otherwise aggressive sexual behavior in animals and humans. This mixing up of the unconscious tendencies is not, however, limited to the biological instincts. The aggressive urges, for example, can get mixed up with religious fervor and, as history has witnessed over and over again, killing and other forms of aggression have been committed in the name of God or religion. In the same manner religious and sexual urges can manifest as either strongly segregated, or combined in certain sexual or religious rituals and spiritual practices.

Instinct is not an isolated thing, nor can it be isolated in practice. It always brings in its train archetypal contents of a spiritual nature, which are at once its foundation and its limitation. In other words, an instinct is always and inevitably coupled with something like a philosophy of life, however archaic, unclear, and hazy this may be. Instinct stimulates thought, and if a man does not think of his own free will, then you get compulsive thinking, for the two poles of the psyche, the physiological and the mental, are indissolubly connected. (Jung, 1954, p. 81)

In traditional spiritual practices, western or eastern, awakening the metaphysical instincts has often been done at the expense of suppressing the biological instincts—a process referred to as spiritual bypassing in transpersonal psychology. The body and its associated needs and desires are often regarded as impure and as an obstacle to spiritual attainment. This could be rooted in a belief that life on Earth and in the body is a form of banishment from heavenly realms. In other instances, this could be a result of an overly masculinized attitude which holds a fear of the body and the senses and privileges transcendent consciousness over embodied existence.

In such views the body is often deemed subject to pain, disease, decay and eventual death and thus ultimately unreliable and undesirable. This attitude is often extended out to the feminine principle and the Earth as manifestation of this principle. This tendency, explained in a number of different ways (Welwood, 1984 ; Cortright, 1997; Masters, 2010), has been called spiritual bypassing, which implies bypassing of embodied physical and related vital and emotional challenges through suppression of them in order to attain higher or transcendent spiritual consciousness—i.e. suppression of biological instincts by metaphysical instincts.

In a paper titled: ‘The Unconscious in Sri Aurobindo,’ Indra Sen (n.d.) who coined the term ‘integral psychology’, stated that in the Indian approach “yoga has been a necessary concomitant discipline for each system of philosophy for the realization of its truths and, therefore, the growth of personality is an indispensable issue for each system” (p. 2). Sen points out that most forms of yoga strive to incorporate the higher unconscious into the conscious personality but only touch the surface of the unconscious for the purpose of purification of the topmost level of the

unconscious from which contents surge up. Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga, however, requires a complete investigation and integration of both the higher-unconscious (Superconscious) and the lower-unconscious (Subconscious) realms.

By the Subconscious Sri Aurobindo means the submerged part of the being in which there is no waking consciousness and coherent thought processes, will or feeling or organized reaction. Subconscious materials rise up into our waking consciousness as repetition of old thoughts and vital and mental habits and *samskaras* (impressions) formed by our past. There are three types of differentiation in the subconscious: the mental, the vital, and the physical subconscious, each one of which is distinguishable by the virtue of their contents and action on the waking personality.

These subconscious processes are generally disorganized and chaotic. In other words, there is no execution of a unified will in the subconscious as the various impulses therein act chaotically and without any organization and thus various conflicts and struggles arise within the subconscious mind in addition to conflicts with the elements of our conscious personality related to the external environment. Using methods such as hypnosis, free association, and dream analysis, Freud's therapeutic aim was to help the patient make conscious certain amount of the unconscious materials in order to create a balance between the conscious and unconscious mind. While many forms of psychological work attempt to help human beings become healthier by creating a harmonious balance between the unconscious and the conscious dimensions of personality, integral yoga and psychology aim at complete transformation of personality by making conscious the entire content of the unconscious. This would necessitate making the instinctual processes of both the higher and the lower unconscious fully conscious.

Sri Aurobindo was interested in much more than making the unconscious, passively conscious. Rather he was interested in the transformation of personality from the ordinary egoistic state to a fully conscious and integrated state. Sri Aurobindo was careful, however, not to recommend plunging into the subconscious without first mobilizing the higher-unconscious. Without this preparation there is a risk of losing oneself in the obscurity and the chaos of the Subconscious world. Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga is unique in that it starts with the opening of the higher centers of consciousness first. This is to avoid the trappings of the lower unconscious realms and intensification of attachments, as well as a myriad of other problems associated with premature opening of the *kundalini* energy—as in the case of spiritual emergencies—without first establishing the Psychic will or even possibly Supramental will to guide the process of transformation of the unconscious.

Integration of Personality

For Sri Aurobindo merely making the unconscious mind conscious is not sufficient for transformation and we need the assistance of the conscious will to help organize and transform the content of the Subconscious mind. Another point of difference is that unlike depth and ego psychologies, for Sri Aurobindo the therapeutic aim is not to strengthen the ego. This is because ultimately the ego is self-centered, even though it is better adjusted to reality. Therefore, access to a higher integrating center is needed which in integral yoga is the Psychic Being, or the evolving soul in the human being.

Jung was also aware of the need for such a higher integrating principle which he termed the archetype of the Self—i.e. the soul or psychocentric consciousness. Depth psychologists first discovered the unconscious through their encounter with the pathological manifestations of the unconscious. Both Jung and Assagioli realized the importance of the role of the Self or Transpersonal Self as the catalyst for integration of personality, a task not possible through ordinary therapeutic techniques which often emphasize the importance of ego-strengthening which is necessary for those who suffer various forms and intensities of neuroses and psychotic dissociation, or even unmanageable phobias, depression or anxiety etc. Certainly for the initial healing phase strengthening the ego up to the point of basic health and stability is unavoidable and desirable. But when it comes to the complete transformation of personality as required in integral yoga and psychology, a mere balancing of the conscious and unconscious elements of personality through a healthy and strong ego will be insufficient.

Traditional depth psychology often focuses on expanding the sphere of human consciousness by incorporating materials from the lower unconscious regions to the conscious regions, while traditional yoga attempts to engage with the higher realms of the unconscious and is not necessarily interested in transforming the lower unconscious psyche as much as it is interested in developing the higher unconscious. This could result in disinterest in ordinary consciousness and evolution of embodied consciousness. In integral yoga the goal is no less than the complete illumination, transformation and integration of the psyche and evolution of embodied consciousness.

To summarize, the goal of yoga is to accelerate the rate of conscious evolution. Integral yoga aims at total transformation of the unconscious as well as ordinary consciousness. Culmination of conscious evolution, therefore, requires a total transformation of human personality and consciousness. The high level of integration of personality required in this process supersedes the establishment of basic wholeness of personality which is possible by balancing the egocentric and psychocentric spheres of consciousness. This level of integration known as Psychic Transformation in integral yoga and psychology, which is similar to Jung's process of Individuation or integration of ego and Self, is a necessary foundation. The complete transformations of the unconscious—including the inconscient physical base of consciousness and the subconscious—however, would necessitate the activation of Supramental consciousness.

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