

Psychology and the Perennial Philosophy

Editorial

As for modern Western psychology, it deals only with quite a restricted portion of the human individuality, where the mental faculty is in direct relationship with the corporeal modality, and, given the methods it employs, it is incapable of going any further. In any case the very objective which it sets before itself and which is exclusively the study of mental phenomena [of the ego], limits it strictly to the realm of the individuality, so that the state which we are now discussing [*Ātmā* or the Self] necessarily eludes its investigations.¹

René Guénon

The health envisaged by the [modern] empirical psychotherapy is a freedom from particular pathological conditions; that envisaged by the other [traditional or perennial psychology] is a freedom from all conditions and predicaments. . . . Furthermore, the pursuit of the greater freedom necessarily involves that attainment of the lesser; psycho-physical health being a manifestation and consequence of spiritual wellbeing.²

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy

There is no science of the soul [psyche] without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal.³

Frithjof Schuon

[The spiritual] psychology [of the perennial philosophy] does not separate the soul either from the metaphysical or from the cosmic order. The connection with the metaphysical order provides spiritual psychology with qualitative criteria such as are wholly lacking in profane [modern] psychology, which studies only the dynamic character of phenomena of the psyche and their proximate causes.⁴

Titus Burckhardt

Without question, modern psychology has shaped and impacted the twentieth century in an unprecedented manner, though curiously this influence still appears to be unnoticed by the majority of present-day individuals. Yet the point cannot be overly emphasized that modern

¹ René Guénon, “The State of Deep Sleep or the Condition of *Prājña*,” in *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, trans. Richard C. Nicholson (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), p. 104.

² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or rather Pneumatology,” in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 2: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 335.

³ Frithjof Schuon, “The Contradiction of Relativism,” in *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. Peter N. Townsend (London: Perennial Books, 1984), p. 14.

⁴ Titus Burckhardt, “The Branches of the Doctrine,” in *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D.M. Matheson (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), pp. 26-27.

psychology, as a derivative and stronghold of scientific materialism, can be credited as one of the leading and contributing factors that has destabilized the spiritual and correspondingly the psychological apparatus of traditional man.⁵ This point is alluded to by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): “No, our science [of psychology] is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what [materialistic] science cannot give us we can get elsewhere.”⁶ This endemic scientism is observable throughout modern psychology. While most apparent in behaviorism and psychoanalysis, it is nonetheless also present in humanistic and transpersonal psychology, as these are both continuations and expansions of the two earlier “forces.” This influence is aptly summarized by Gill Edwards:

[Modern] science has claimed a monopoly on truth, seeing the scientific method as the only valid path towards knowledge. . . . [A]s recent products of their culture, modern psychology and psychotherapy were built upon the shifting sands of Cartesian-Newtonian assumptions—with devastating consequences . . . [and] many therapists are still clinging to the scientific tradition . . . and refusing to open their eyes. . . . [T]he old paradigm gave birth to a positivist, materialist psychology which values objectivity, rationality and empiricism. . . . The mechanistic, reductionist, determinist assumptions of the Cartesian-Newtonian world view are endemic in psychology and psychotherapy.⁷

The very notion of a scientific foundation underlying modern psychology has been brought into question by William James (1842-1910), a key pioneer within humanistic and transpersonal psychology, in saying that “This is no science, it is only the hope of a science.”⁸ The complex events that have altered the human outlook not only of the cosmos but of man’s true identity during the Renaissance and the so-called Age of Enlightenment are often described as blows to man’s narcissism, particularly the Copernican revolution, the Darwinian revolution, and the Psychoanalytic revolution:

[T]he human individual has been successively reduced and dethroned by the discoveries of [modern] Western science—removed from his honored place in the center of the heavenly bodies by Copernicus and others, removed from his special position as king and curator of the animal kingdom by Darwin, removed even from command of his own acts by Freud and the behaviorists, thus rendered puny, insignificant, and impotent, vulnerable to further reduction with each further discovery.⁹

⁵ “[P]sychoanalysis is one of those mass movements which are both a cause and consequence of spiritual decay” (Werner Kraft, quoted in Thomas Szasz, “Karl Kraus Today,” in *Karl Kraus and the Soul-Doctors: A Pioneer Critic and his Criticism of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis*, p. 93).

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 71.

⁷ Gill Edwards, “Does Psychotherapy Need a Soul?” in *Psychotherapy and Its Discontents*, eds. Windy Dryden and Colin Feltham (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1998), pp. 194-199.

⁸ William James, “Psychology and Philosophy,” in *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), p. 335.

⁹ George B. Leonard, “A Morning on Mt. Tam,” in *The Transformation: A Guide to the Inevitable Changes in Hu-*

These pernicious fissures or “blows,” which began in the West and have since encroached upon the rest of the world via globalization, have devastated the traditional societies of both East and West, to the point where they may perhaps never recover. As René Guénon (1886-1951) has remarked: “[W]hile nineteenth century materialism closed the mind of man to what is above him, twentieth century [modern] psychology opened it to what is below him.”¹⁰

The destabilization of the traditional societies has led to the simultaneous desacralization of the shamanic or primordial peoples that were once everywhere, for the origin and center of traditional man is anchored in the sacred, as was the case until the post-medieval West.¹¹ Traditional man, who is inherently *Homo religiosus* or *Homo spiritualis*, was always and continues until this day to be contextualized within the spiritual domain.

In one manner or another all life is seen to participate in the sacred, all cultural forms express the sacred, so that inevitably within this context the lives of those peoples who live close to their sacred traditions may be called religious, and they are thus beings who are religiously human.¹²

“The problems faced by modern man,” says Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), “all point to the same cause, namely to man’s living below his own possibilities and to the forgetfulness of who he is [*in divinis*].”¹³ The idea of addressing the needs of the human psyche by what lies outside or rather below the spiritual domain—in isolation from the sacred principles that can provide authentic efficacy—is based on a radical misunderstanding of the unitive principles that facilitate a true and complete psychology of man. “Psychology, we must remember, is the study of the soul [psyche], therefore the discipline closest to the religious life. An authentic psychology discards none of the insights gained from spiritual disciplines.”¹⁴

Paradoxically, the perennial psychologies of man, which have been applied since the dawn of civilization, were in essence rejected in an ideological *coup d’état* by a secular and materialistic worldview that was designed and endorsed by the same tendencies that manufactured the plethora of ills that are so prevalent in this turbulent epoch: “Psychoanalysis is the disease of which it pretends to be the cure.”¹⁵ It has been emphasized that “in a traditional society there

mankind (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972), p. 12.

¹⁰ René Guénon, quoted in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Doctrine,” in *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 61.

¹¹ See Frithjof Schuon, “The Ancient Worlds in Perspective,” in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1984), p. 7.

¹² Joseph Epes Brown, “On Being Human,” in *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition with Letters While Living with Black Elk*, eds. Marina Brown Weatherly, Elenita Brown, and Michael Oren Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 93.

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “One Is the Spirit and Many Its Human Reflections—Thoughts on the Human Condition Today,” in *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 48.

¹⁴ Theodore Roszak, “The Visionary Commonwealth,” in *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), p. 414.

¹⁵ Thomas Szasz, “Kraus and Freud: Unmasking the Unmasker,” in *Karl Kraus and the Soul-Doctors: A Pioneer Critic and his Criticism of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 24.

is little or nothing that can properly be called secular,”¹⁶ which is to say, “The fact is that every *bona fide* pre-modern science is rooted in an integral sapiential tradition [of the *philosophia perennis*].”¹⁷ One cannot take lightly the following Promethean epigram that Freud borrowed from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which speaks to the nefarious quality of a science broken away from its sacred source: “If I cannot bend the higher powers [the gods or the spiritual domain], I shall stir up Hell”¹⁸—signifying that if modern psychology cannot gain access to what is above or transcendent it will unleash the subterranean forces of what is below or infernal in order to access power and legitimacy. For this reason it has been affirmed that “psychotherapy stirred up a hornets’ nest of the first magnitude.”¹⁹

Under the hypnotic guise of modernism and postmodernism, and filled with all the technological advancements of so-called “progress,” the contemporary outlook is incapable of addressing the core symptoms or issues since it *a priori* excludes and even undermines the significance of the spiritual domain. It has been astutely illustrated that no matter how many attempts be made, they are doomed to fail as “the psychic cannot be treated by the psychic.”²⁰ What has taken the place of the spiritual psychologies of man, based on the tripartite structure of the human microcosm—Spirit/Intellect, soul, and body—is a truncated, profane psychology that only addresses the psychic and the physical while abrogating the spirit, which is at once above man and also his center, both transcendent and immanent.

That modern psychology has become a substitute for the spiritual traditions is all-too-clear given the militantly secular milieu of today’s world.²¹ But what led to the undermining of the traditional civilizations of the world that were rooted in the metaphysical principles of the perennial philosophy? According to the perennial philosophy, the widespread disequilibrium and systematic dehumanization we see today are associated with the loss of authentic spiritual traditions. It can thus be confidently stated, in complete contrast to the modern and postmodern outlook, that “A civilization is integrated and healthy to the extent that it is founded on the ‘invisible’ or ‘underlying’ religion, the *religio perennis*.”²²

This issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, focused on “Psychology and the Perennial Philosophy,” offers for the first time the distinctive and imperative perspective on the human psyche and the fullness of human condition in light of the timeless truths at the heart of the

¹⁶ Rama P. Coomaraswamy (ed.), *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), p. 159.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Smith, “*Sophia Perennis* and Modern Science,” in *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology: Contemporary Science in Light of Tradition* (Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 2003), p. 21.

¹⁸ “*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*”: this motto was prefixed in Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A.A. Brill (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1913).

¹⁹ C.G. Jung, “Psychotherapy and a Philosophy of Life,” in *Essays on Contemporary Events: The Psychology of Nazism*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 43.

²⁰ Titus Burckhardt, “Traditional Cosmology and Modern Science: Modern Psychology,” in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, trans. and ed. William Stoddart (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 50.

²¹ “The loss of religion as Center in the world has left a hole which [modern] psychology is trying to fill” (Whitall N. Perry, “The Zodiac of the Soul: Observation on the Differences between Traditional and Empirical Psychology,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* [Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996], p. 200).

²² Frithjof Schuon, “*Religio Perennis*,” in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 143.

world's sapiential traditions. Its intent is to reclaim the sacred psychology that was known at all times and places before the emergence of the modern world. The theme is organized under three essential rubrics: "I. Critique," encompasses the core challenges and limitations that modern psychology in all of its schools and "forces" faces; "II. *Theoria*" provides further contemplations on the principal understanding of what is meant by psychology, or the "science of the soul," when contextualized within the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy; "III. *Praxis*" presents the direct application of the plenary principles, not only for psychological health and well-being, but in its often forgotten primary function: the facilitation of self-realization *in divinis*, in order to know what it means to be truly human. This after all is the *raison d'être* for psychology in the first place.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos