

Transpersonal Development

The Dimension Beyond Psychosynthesis

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Preface

Published thirteen years after the author's death, this book consists of Roberto Assagioli's writings from different periods, undertaken for different purposes: notes, essays, lectures and speeches. It is nevertheless an invaluable work for anyone seeking practical guidance on the demanding path towards self-knowledge and self-realization.

The title *Transpersonal Development* is certainly a very appropriate one in light of the scientific framework of Roberto Assagioli's Psychosynthesis. He regards the inner search for and realization of the Self as a definite 'practice' which, given sufficient psychic maturity, allows the latent dimension within each individual to become active: transpersonality means that which is 'beyond' everyday phenomenal experience. This is not to be understood as an exceptional gift reserved for a few people, but as a reservoir of higher qualities which, although initially hidden, are available to anyone who wants to evoke and develop them by conscious effort and by a focused use of their own energies, through appropriate techniques and training.

As far as Psychosynthesis is concerned, the one and only certainty of the 'human phenomenon' is the Self, that focal point from which we cannot escape and from which it would be dangerous to distance oneself. This in no way means we should evade the problems of personality and of the world, but simply that we should come to an understanding of what is relative and what is permanent in the human atomic structure, and what is 'structurally' identical to the great energy that pervades the Universe. From this perspective, Psychosynthesis puts forward its theories about the potential of the 'planetary human' who represents a microcosm in a continuous state of development, entrusted with the responsibility of an animating consciousness.

In this sense Roberto Assagioli was truly a scientist of the spirit who dedicated his life to discovering the reality of phenomena beyond the evidence of verified facts. His way of thinking may be rejected out of hand by those who are dogmatically attached to a materialist point

of view, or it may be confused with some non-specific psycho-existential integralism as being superficial or culturally prejudiced. But if it is examined objectively, its concept of the human being proves to be irrefutable, and the psychosynthetic approach to life is seen to be of unlimited breadth. It is an 'open system' undergoing a continuous, infinite development, allowing for an experimental approach based on incontestable hypotheses and on tested psychodynamic techniques which have practical application in all areas of human activity.

The work of doctor and psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli acquires even greater significance if it is viewed in the historical context in which he lived and carried out his research and discovery.

His first writings date from 1906, even before he graduated in medicine at the age of 22 and went to Zurich to specialize in psychiatry. As a close contemporary of Freud and Jung, he immediately intuited the interaction between the human biological structure and the emotional/mental substratum of human make-up. As a result he established the relationship between these aspects and formulated some fundamental laws of psychodynamics. This was at a time when the official medical world was far from embracing any psychosomatic approach.

An outstanding humanist, Assagioli was not content with these first achievements, but went on to widen the boundaries of psychology into the uncharted territory of spirituality. While Freud was exploring the depths of the mind and Jung was glimpsing the splendours of human destiny in the shadows of the past, he was setting out to discover the 'permanent atom' of the human being, describing its characteristics and suggesting ways of accessing it, thus opening up a whole new area to that inner search for the divine. Psychosynthesis in fact offers a new path towards self-realization in keeping with the hypotheses and methods of the new science and based on action and direct responsibility: life passes through our hands and each of us takes control of it, accepting the present as the inevitable consequence of the past, and conscious of the fact that at any given moment we are shaping our own future.

The first part of this book is descriptive in nature and introduces the idea of the 'superconscious', i.e. that latent aspect of human nature in

which the higher values reside. And it is clear that the author's intention is to liberate the spiritual content from the historical confines to which it had been relegated: religions, philosophies and various occult ideologies. Allying himself with the psychological findings of people like W. James, Bucke, Hall, Jung, Frankl, Maslow and other scholars of his time, Assagioli adopted a stance against the exclusion of the 'spiritual' from the domain of scientific research and, in the name of authentic human science, proposed a method of experimental enquiry which did not limit its objectives to purely quantitative criteria, but supplemented them with the qualitative value of experience. This method provided tools and techniques suited to a type of research which moves the focus of observation from the external world to the world within, while at the same time retaining the essential requirements of objectivity and reality as perceived by the senses.

Such a methodology involves the obvious problem of having human beings be neutral observers of themselves, detached analysts of their own inner psychological processes. But, as Assagioli maintained, what matters is 'good reasoning' and an openness to the experience of renewal without preconception or prejudice, bearing direct witness to that evolutionary process which is the fundamental law of the Universe and which constantly transforms everything that exists, whether by natural selection or by deliberate self-direction.

The second part of the book focuses on the problems and difficulties that may arise along the spiritual path, and suggests the most appropriate approach to tackling and overcoming them. In this section the balanced perspective and personal involvement of Assagioli the man becomes apparent. He certainly travelled this path himself and knew its hardships. Indeed he had the great advantage of being able to integrate three fundamental aspects of his existential experience: the cultural aspect, in that his great learning enabled him to bring together the most significant fruits of human knowledge from the earliest traditions up to his own day; the scientific aspect, in the sense that his profession as psychiatrist and psychotherapist gave him firsthand experience in dealing with 'human problems'; and the human aspect, in that his true vocation for self-realization enabled him to overcome the difficult events of his life with serenity and courage.

This synthesis within Assagioli is obvious, manifesting in his inner enlightenment and his love for humanity, characteristics that pervade his work. What is most striking is his capacity to take the side of human beings, and even when he is denouncing their negative attributes he redeems them with his boundless faith in the future.

The third part of the book brings the earlier research into the modern world, emphasizing the values of the spirit and the primary goals of our existence. Here too the words of Assagioli act as witness: those who knew him will never forget the radiance of the person he was, expressing beauty, love, goodwill and peace.

Reading these pages makes one certain that when the sun sets on great suffering, a bright dawn of divinity will be born from the depths of the human being, and in its bright light suffering, attachment and passion will vanish as if by magic, transfigured by the uplifting process of renewal. It is the catharsis which announces the birth of a new Humanity, which Roberto Assagioli intuited and inhabited in his own consciousness. The works of Roberto Assagioli do not require a long preface: the clarity of his exposition, the fluency and coherence of his language, the continuous use of examples to explain concepts, the absence of any obscure references, and an absolute respect for semantic values make him a very special writer. Because he is always careful to explain his thought processes, he is the ideal companion for anyone wishing to follow him in his inner discoveries.

In my view, this is a book to delve into slowly and carefully. It does not contain anything existentially new, it does not promote exciting adventures of the mind, even less does it provide easy methods for entering into some illusory paradise. Rather it is a precious collection of gems of wisdom and psychospiritual reflections, which can be used as a useful tool for meditation for all who seek truth in the depth of their being.

Sergio Bartoli

Two

The Superconscious

The point has been reached in our research into the psychological make-up of human beings to examine in detail the higher aspect of the unconscious: the superconscious and the spiritual self. We need, at the outset, to affirm the *reality* of the superconscious because it is not yet generally recognized, particularly in the area of science and psychology where it is an unknown quantity. (We will look at the reasons for this later.) The reality of the superconscious does not need to be demonstrated; it is an *experience* and, when we become aware of it, it constitutes one of those 'facts of the consciousness', as Bergson so aptly put it, facts contain within themselves their own evidence and proof. It is a direct experience – like that of seeing a colour, hearing a sound or a having a feeling. It is neither possible nor necessary for anyone to 'demonstrate' the sensation of redness or greenness, joy or pain: for those who experience them they are a psychological reality.

We need, at this point, to dispel a possible misunderstanding and clarify a doubt. How can we talk of experience or awareness of things that are outside or above one's consciousness? The answer is simple, and is the same answer one might give for any other aspect or level of the unconscious. We are able to have a conscious experience of phenomena, activities and psychological processes *normally* existing outside of our own consciousness when – at certain times and under certain conditions – they break through into our field of consciousness.

There is a continuous exchange, a process of osmosis, between the conscious mind and the unconscious. There comes a point at which the superconscious becomes conscious, remains so for some period of time, and then returns to the superconscious state. I would point out here that the 'superconscious', 'unconscious' and 'conscious' are *adjectives*, that is to say they are temporary conditions of a psychological fact.

This breakthrough of the superconscious into the conscious mind can happen in two ways. The first, and most frequent, can be termed 'descendant': the bursting in of superconscious elements into the conscious mind in the form of intuitive thoughts, sudden enlighten-

ment or inspiration. Often these are spontaneous, unexpected occurrences, but sometimes they are a response to a call or an invocation on the part of the individual, whether conscious or not. The second way may be called 'ascendant': it consists of raising our centre of consciousness, the self-conscious 'I', to levels above the ordinary, until we reach the sphere of the superconscious.

There are innumerable testimonies to experiences of the superconscious, from all times and places, ancient and modern, from the East and from the West. They are of various types. First of all there are those occurring within a religious context, especially mystical experiences. But it should be noted that these are not the only type: there are superconscious experiences having other, non-religious characteristics. If superconscious experiences are a fact, they must of course be subjected to scientific inquiry, just like all other types of facts. Indeed a start has been made on this, but it is extremely limited given the great importance of the human and spiritual value of the superconscious. Whereas there are thousands of psychologists around the world studying other aspects of human nature (especially the baser aspects!), very few of them are focusing on the superconscious.

What are the reasons for this strange situation? Firstly there is basic human materialism, in particular the theoretical and practical materialism of the West. It seems that we are hypnotized by sensations – both those stemming from the outside world and those of our own bodies. We are fundamentally extrovert: we tend to act outwardly; all aspects of the inner world frighten us or at least make us feel uneasy. We therefore tend to avoid and evade anything which focuses our mind inwards and causes us to face ourselves. Another reason is a fear of being abnormal or at least of being considered so by others. If we have certain superconscious experiences we are afraid that we might 'lose our mind', particularly when we have sudden, unexpected flashes of awareness so different from the narrow, restricted normality of everyday life. We sometimes fear that these are morbid or abnormal, whereas they are in fact *supernormal*. And lastly, in the scientific field, the greatest obstacle is an obstinate refusal to accept that such experiences are a valid subject for scientific investigation. Psychology, as the youngest of the sciences, has relied on or remained tied to the methods employed in the natural sciences,

though these are not at all suited to it and serve it little better than the legendary 'bed of Procrustes'. It has the right, and indeed the duty, to use methods which, though *equally serious and scientific*, are more suited to its nature.

A group of brave pioneers, however, have dared to venture into the field of the superconscious and have attempted to study it in a scientific manner. The first of these was the great American psychologist William James who, in a series of lectures later published in a book entitled *Varieties of Religious Experience*, carried out a careful, sympathetic and respectful, but at the same time impartial and objective, examination of religious experiences. James's work is all the more commendable in that, as he acknowledged, he had no personal experience of these matters himself and so had to be scientifically rigorous in order to study them in other people.

James gave his lectures at the end of the 19th century. Shortly after that, another American, Dr Richard Bucke, following a sudden and unexpected experience of spiritual illumination which affected him profoundly, began to study accounts of what he termed, somewhat questionably, 'cosmic consciousness'. He collected and commented on many experiences, from many different ages, and put forward his interpretation of them in his book *Cosmic Consciousness*, published in 1901.

Another doctor, Winslow Hall, collected firsthand accounts of enlightenment. The value of his collection lies in the fact that it deals with ordinary people who possessed no other claim to superiority but nevertheless had remarkable superconscious experiences.

Among the modern psychologists there is Jung, who teaches that there are elements of a higher, super-personal nature within what he calls the 'collective unconscious'. The sociologist Pitirim Sorokin devoted a chapter of his book *The Ways and Power of Love* to the superconscious. The Viennese neurologist Viktor Frankl openly acknowledges the existence of superconscious experiences. The psychiatrist Urban of Innsbruck speaks of 'higher psychology'. And lastly a comprehensive study of the superconscious has been carried out by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, professor at Brandeis University, who has written his findings in a book *Towards a Psychology of Being* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., New York, 1968; 3rd

edition Wiley, 1998). He uses the term 'being' for the overall range of experiences we call superconscious, because one of their characteristics is to give a sense of 'fullness of being', a feeling of intensity in existing and living. Maslow collected a great deal of important data from personal interviews and from use of a questionnaire.

This leads us to a discussion of methods of investigating the superconscious. First of all it is necessary to collect together all the existing documents on the subject: biographies, autobiographies, correspondence, etc., from different ages, then to obtain other data from personal interviews and questionnaires.

The second stage of scientific inquiry is the examination, classification, interpretation and evaluation of the data that has been gathered.

The third method, and the most interesting, is the *experimental* one, that is the use of psychological methods, whether to bring down elements of the superconscious into the realm of the conscious, or to raise the centre of consciousness to the shining regions above.

Let us consider the data that has been collected so far in our investigation of the superconscious. What are the characteristics of those higher levels or of the state of consciousness that they produce when they are brought into the realm of the conscious mind? I have listed and described thirteen of these. The first is a sense of *depth*. Various accounts speak of reaching the source or origin of one's being, leaving behind the ordinary level of consciousness and entering the very depths of what one is. Another is the sense of *internalization* – moving from the external to the internal, from the periphery to the centre of our being. The third characteristic is that of *elevation*, or *ascent*: rising up to a higher level. The symbolism of climbing a mountain or reaching a peak is often mentioned in the accounts of such experiences and links with the frequently occurring idea of the *path* or *road* that must be travelled. The fifth characteristic is that of *expansion* or the sometimes bewildering *enlargement* of the consciousness: the restrictive boundaries of the separate 'I' are transcended and overridden for a short time, and one has the sense that one is part of a far greater consciousness. The sixth characteristic is *development* and *activation*, a sense of being freed from whatever hinders us and closes us off, so that we are able to 'blossom' or emerge. The seventh characteristic is an *empowering*: we sense a more powerful energy at work in us; we

feel stronger, more dynamic; we experience the fullness, the intensity of existence and being already referred to. Another frequently reported experience is that of *awakening*. In many accounts there are expressions such as 'I awoke to a higher reality', 'My senses were released from darkness', 'I moved from the "dreamlike state" of ordinary life to a state of enhanced alertness.'

It must be noted that the actual name of Buddha was Gautama, and that 'Buddha' means 'The Awakened One' or the 'The one who is perfectly awake'. Very often there is a sense of illumination, a new, unearthly light transfiguring the external world and revealing a new beauty. It illuminates the inner world, 'sheds light' on problems and doubts, and dispels them; it is the intuitive light of a higher level of awareness. This is often accompanied by a sense of *joy* or *happiness* which may lead to a state of *bliss*. Along with these, or quite independently, there may be a sense of *renewal* or *regeneration*, the birth within us of a new state of being. Then there is a sense of *resurrection*, of rising up to a state which had been lost or forgotten. Finally there is a sense of *liberation*, an *inner freedom*.

This array of characteristics corresponds to a large extent to those that feature in the firsthand accounts collected and studied by Maslow, who identified fourteen characteristics which he called 'Being values'. These are: a sense of fullness, integration, wholeness; a sense of perfection, completeness, vitality and intensity of life; a sense of richness and, at the same time, a sense of simplicity; a sense of beauty, consciousness of goodness, absence of effort, spontaneity, joy, cheerfulness, humour; a sense of truth or *authenticity* of the experience, that is to say the experience reveals something *real* – more real than we can know with the ordinary consciousness. Finally, there is a sense of independence, an inner freedom which takes away the need to rely on anything else: self-sufficiency in the higher, spiritual sense.

Maslow is right in saying that all these outward manifestations are interpenetrating and linked together: They are all facets of Being, rather than parts of it.'

This produces in us a desire to have such beautiful and enticing experiences. How can they be brought about or encouraged? Before we go any further I need to present a darker picture: that these very experiences can manifest themselves in a disruptive and dangerous way.

This may happen either as the result of an incorrect understanding and evaluation of the experiences, or because of their intensity. A wrong evaluation, as already mentioned, means regarding them as strange or abnormal, a sign of mental instability. But quite apart from this false interpretation, the intrusion of superconscious elements into ordinary consciousness, particularly if they are unexpected and very intense, can disturb the existing equilibrium (however real that might be) of the ordinary personality, producing various reactions, over-stimulation or a sense of disorientation. Even when one is developing and ascending to higher levels, various incidents and problems may occur. I cannot deal with these here, but I have dealt with them at length in an essay on 'Spiritual Development and Neuro-Psychological Disturbances.'¹

However, the advantages and value of these experiences are far greater than any initial adverse effects they may have. They are able to effectively resolve, or contribute to the solution of, all human problems, individual or social. This they do by incorporating them into a greater reality, reducing them to their true proportions, and evaluating them in a different, more appropriate manner. This means that the problems either cease to preoccupy us and melt away, or they are illuminated by a higher light in such a way that a solution becomes obvious.

I will give some examples. One of the greatest causes of suffering and misguided action is fear. This can be individual anxiety or the collective fear which can carry a nation into war. The experience of the superconscious reality does away with fear, for any sense of fear is incompatible with a realization of the fullness and permanence of life. Another cause of error and wrong conduct is the urge to fight, which stems from the idea of separation, from aggression, and from feelings of hostility and hatred. In the calm atmosphere of the superconscious, however, such feelings cannot exist. Anyone whose consciousness has been enlarged, who feels a sense of participation, a sense of unity with all beings, can no longer fight. It seems absurd: it would be like fighting oneself! In this way, the most serious of problems, the ones causing the greatest distress, are resolved or elimi-

¹ This essay appears as Chapter 10 of this volume.

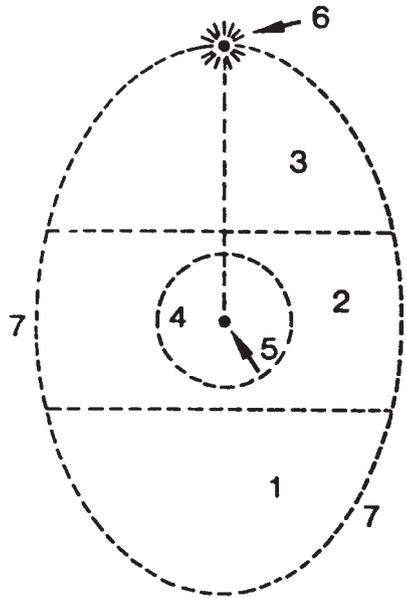
nated by the development, enlarging and ascent of the consciousness to the level of a Higher Reality.

Before completing our examination, albeit brief, of the superconscious, we need to highlight the distinction between the superconscious and the spiritual Self as shown in our diagram of the psychological make-up of a human being. This distinction is often omitted because the contents of the superconscious, particularly at its higher levels, are very close to the Self and therefore share its characteristics. But there is a fundamental difference: in the superconscious there are elements and different types of active, dynamic, changing contents which are involved in the overall flow of psychological life. The Self, on the other hand, is *stable, unmoving, unchanging*, and for this reason it is *different*.

It is important to keep this distinction in mind, not least because this sense of permanence and stability, however diluted and concealed it may be, is transmitted from the spiritual Self to its counterpart, the conscious personal 'I'. It is this that gives us our sense of permanence and personal identity throughout all the changes, alternating states of mind and changing contents of our awareness. However much we identify ourselves with different 'roles', with the various subpersonalities and emotions successively occupying the realm of the conscious mind, we know that we are always ourselves. Even if at times we might say, 'I no longer recognize myself' when some significant change occurs in life, what this actually means is: 'The thing I identified with before has disappeared and I now identify with something else.' But even to say 'I no longer recognize myself' implies, paradoxically, an obscure, hidden sense of underlying continuity. Otherwise, there could not even be a sense of not recognizing oneself, in that this is based on a comparison, a conflict, between the previous state of consciousness and the present one. Thus the essential characteristic of self-awareness is continuity and permanence, but the self-awareness of the conscious 'I' is only a poor reflection of the enduring, immortal essence of the spiritual 'I', the Self.

The Self in the diagram is placed at the highest point on the periphery of the personality, partly inside it – as it is in a continuous relationship with the superconscious – and partly outside of the personality. This indicates its dual nature: individual and universal at

1. The Lower Unconscious
2. The Middle Unconscious
3. The Higher Unconscious or Superconscious
4. The Area of Consciousness
5. The Conscious 'I'
6. The Higher 'I' or Self
7. The Collective Unconscious



the same time. This seems like a paradox, incomprehensible to the mind, to personal consciousness, yet it is a state of consciousness which can be, and is being experienced, *lived*, at certain moments of heightened awareness when a person is lifted out of the limitations of ordinary existence. In such a state one experiences a sense of enlargement, limitless expansion and a sense of being pervaded by an intense joy and bliss. It is in essence a sublime experience which cannot be expressed in words.

At this point one comes into contact with Mystery, with the supreme Reality. Of this I am unable to speak; it is beyond the confines of science and psychology. However, Psychosynthesis can help us to approach it, to get as far as the threshold. And that is no small achievement.

Bibliographic note

Lecture given at the Institute of Psychosynthesis, Florence, on 7th April, 1973, with the title '*Psychosynthesis and Superconscious*'.

For an in-depth study of the psychosynthetic concept, see Roberto Assagioli, *Per l'armonia della vita* (For Harmony in Life), Edizioni Mediterranee, Rome, 1966 (English Translation: *Psychosynthesis – A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd; new edition 1999).

For further explanations of the concept of scientific method, see Roberto Assagioli, *Principi e metodi della psicosintesi terapeutica* (Principles and Methods of Therapeutic Psychosynthesis), Astrolabio, Rome, 1973, pp 164–5.