

What is a Human Being?

The structure of the self within spiritual psychology

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This essay attempts to describe and clarify the fundamental psycho-spiritual terms and dynamics within the human being.

This is the most difficult job in a spiritual psychology. If we can be successful, then our curricula, methodology, and programs can fill in the details and offer a deepening experience of the truth of these basic principles.

This work rests on a solid Quranic foundation, as I hope will be obvious, and, at the same time, it creates a bridge toward contemporary psychological language and understanding.

The psychology of traditional spirituality provides a vocabulary with which we can know and understand ourselves and our relationship to the Divine Being, Allāh. This sacred psychology and its spiritual vocabulary offer an implicit model of humanness as well as a map of a spiritual landscape.

No one who has studied the circumstances of the Qur'an's revelation would deny that it proceeded from a deep level of inspiration, nor can one deny that it has its own inherent unity. This is part of its miracle: that the closer one looks, the more precision and order seem to reveal themselves. Its terms—which on the surface may be read as mythic or metaphoric—are increasingly appreciated for their objective quality. Gather together all the references to “heart” within the Qur'an, for instance, and you will see how they inform each other and suggest an objective and practical knowledge. The psychology of Islam, therefore, is not something formulated by the theorizing intellect; rather it is a unified body of knowledge whose source is this inspired text as it has been understood by generations of wise human beings.

The outcome of this knowledge and practice is humanizing and life-enhancing. Even if there were no God as an external, independent agency, and no “heaven” for the eternal perpetuation of one's individuality, the principles of spiritual development would still stand as remarkable tools in purely humanistic terms. For the believer, however, there is the faith that one's actions and intentions *here* will resonate forever in an eternal dimension and that our choices here have consequences far beyond our immediate earthly life.

Psychology means “knowledge of the soul (psyche).” Our best contemporary psychologies are mostly a collection of subjective and culture-driven conjectures. There are dozens of theories of personality, theories of learning, and so on, but a true science still proves to be elusive. Insofar as they claim to be scientific, these theories are rudimentary experiments that hardly begin to fathom the most important issues of meaning and purpose in life. Here we must face the central question that separates those who defend and maintain a purely secular reality from those who believe in the great tradition of revelation on this earth. The secular materialists essentially “believe” that human beings can construct an effective and satisfactory knowledge of the human psyche from the ground up, so to speak. Freud and Marx are the outstanding examples of this

mentality for the twentieth century. The failure of Marxism (which does not imply the success of Western-style finance capitalism) is hardly a matter of debate. The failure of Freudianism, though quieter, is no less noteworthy. These systems were not without their elements of powerful insight and truth, nor were their discoveries and critiques entirely irrelevant. However, their failure was that they could not offer a satisfactory model of the highest purpose of human life. What we are witnessing in the new millennium is a cultural collapse of modernism.

The Education of the Soul

Education as it is currently understood, particularly in the West, ignores the human soul, or essential Self. This essential Self is not some vague entity whose existence is a matter of speculation, but our fundamental “I,” which has been covered over by social conditioning, and by the superficiality of our rational mind. In the world today we are in great need of a form of training that would contribute to the awakening of the essential Self. Such forms of training have existed in other eras and cultures and have been available to those with the yearning to awaken from the sleep of their limited conditioning and know the potential latent in the human being.

Primary Terms of Spiritual Psychology

The structure of the human individuality within spiritual psychology can be understood through three primary elements: *nafs*, or ego-self; *qalb*, or heart; and *ruh*, or Spirit. Together these form the human being.

If the human being were visualized as a sphere, the ego would be like its surface, the heart would be its interior, and the Spirit would be its very center. The ego is the most superficial part of ourselves which, nevertheless claims control. The heart, as our interior, can be ignored and even denied. The Spirit, like a dimensionless point at the center of ourselves is the source of our life and consciousness.

In attempting to bring some clarity to these terms, we are faced with the problem that our English language uses them in vague, if not contradictory, ways. So we are compelled to create a spiritual glossary of our own.

The “I,” Ego, Self, Soul, Anima, Psyche (Nafs,)

Why must we have four English words to translate one Arabic word? The subject of the human “I” or self seems a slippery one. It is convenient that we have one word, *nafs*, in the Islamic glossary to convey the idea of a “self.” The complexity and subtlety of the subject comes from the fact that the quality of the self, itself, can vary. Depending on factors like the degree of our social “persona,” our psychological defenses, our state of consciousness, and our willingness to let ourselves be seen and known, we may experience our “I-ness” in very different ways. It is common to say, for instance, that one person has a big ego, while another seems self-less, while yet another has a remarkable soul. In each case we are talking about the identity, the sense of self that a person exhibits.

Nafs, or ego is what we most often experience as “I.” People derive their sense of “I” from different sources. Some people, for instance, are completely “I”-identified with their nationality, their religion, their status. Others are identified with and draw their sense of self and self-worth from how other people view them. Still others identify with their own deepest values and this identification will give them a stability of identity that allows them to survive the ups and downs of life.

The kind of education we are proposing, an education that includes the “vertical” dimension of soul education, will result in a continuing transformation of one’s sense of “I.” What we take to be our “I” today, we should not be so quick to believe is our real and truest “I.”

Let us examine, for instance, this creature called “ego.” The ego is actually a complex of psychological manifestations arising from the body and related to its pleasure and survival. If the body is hungry, the ego acts to satisfy the hunger. If some threat to life or well-being is perceived, the ego mobilizes what is necessary to escape or confront it. The ego, therefore, is ruled primarily by fear and desire. Its servants include: ambition, self-importance, selfishness, rationalization, fantasy, delusion, self-righteousness, and aggression.

If a person experiences cruel treatment as a child, the ego that is formed will be primarily concerned with defending itself, or perhaps inflicting cruelty on others. If a person is criticized, belittled, and shamed, the ego may lack confidence, self esteem, and self worth. If a person receives a healthy amount of love and attention, without being spoiled, while learning to be a considerate human being, such a person may come into the world with a relatively healthy, balanced, and integrated ego.

All too often, however, the ego has no limit to its desires, whether these are appetites of the body or of the personality. The ego has an intimate relationship not only with the body, but with the socialized personality as well. The personality is like a veneer on the ego. It disguises the ego’s agendas and strategies and makes them more socially acceptable. Sometimes the more “education” a person has, the thicker is the “veneer” of personality.

The *nafs* (soul) should be the receptive pole of the individual, assimilating what the active pole, Spirit, can give. When the self has become receptive to the heart, it may be called the inspired self (*nafs al-mulhama*). At this stage we might no longer describe the *nafs* as “ego” but as “soul.”

When the *nafs* (ego) becomes the active pole, driving the individual with its demands, then we have a human being out of balance. The most disruptive and evil manifestation of the self is known as the commanding self (*nafs al-ammâra*).

As we shall see, the ego needs the purified heart (*qalb*) and the Spirit (*ruh*) to guide and inspire it in order that it might truly mature as a living soul. On the other hand, the spiritual part of ourselves, the soul, also needs the basic energy of the lower self (*nafs*) to aspire toward completion, or perfection.

The optimal state of human well-being is when the self can follow the guidance of the heart, rather than the demands of the selfish ego. Put another way, the soul must be in submission to the heart which is guided directly by Spirit.

How shall we achieve this state of surrender? All authentic sacred traditions propose ways, guidelines, and methods that essentially serve this one purpose: helping the ego come into harmony with Spirit through the mediation of the heart.

The Heart (Qalb)

The heart is at the same time the core of our being, and also our deepest and most comprehensive knowing. The heart has the ability to sense the significance and value of things and events. Only the awakened heart can know the true dimensions of the spiritual universe we live in.

It is the midpoint of the individual person, halfway between the ego self and Spirit. When it is healthy and awakened it receives all that Spirit has to give and transmits it to the soul, the individual self. The heart includes many subtle faculties of perception.

On the other hand, if the heart becomes too dominated by the materialistic concerns of the ego, it becomes contracted and numb and no longer functions as a heart at all.

When we speak about involving ourselves “heart and soul,” we are speaking about this aspect of the self. Living from the heart or having a pure heart refers to a deep condition of spiritualized desire, spiritual passion. Losing one's soul refers to a condition of having the soul dominated by material, sensual, and egoistic concerns. Such a “heart and soul” is veiled, dim, unconscious.

Spirit (Ruh)

Ruh, Spirit (*pneuma*, active intellect, nous), can be understood as the non-individual aspect of the human being which is continuous with Being itself. It is described in the Qur'an as an impulse or command from our Sustainer (Qulir-Rūḥu min `Amri Rabbī 17:85).

Spirit is the essence of life itself. It is like a non-dimensional point that is linked to the realm of Divine Unity and has access to the realm of Attributes, the Divine Names. Spirit is the source that nourishes the heart. Inspiration is the word that suggests the influence of Spirit on the human being.

Spirit dignifies the human being above animals, and even above angels. It's evidence is in Adam's ability to know the names of things and thus to participate in the creative power of God. “We have honored the children of Adam. . .” [XVII, 72]

The Servants of Spirit

Spirit's servants include conscious presence, conscious will, and conscious love.

Conscious presence is that comprehensive state of awareness in which we can be relatively aware of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. It exists on a level above these other functions—a level from which we can witness what goes on in our minds, feelings, and behaviors. It is a state that needs cultivation and development. Many aspects of modern life conspire to weaken it.

Conscious will is simply the ability to make a conscious choice, to have an intention. It implies a certain level of awareness and then it is up to our will-power to follow through with the intention or decision. Once again, we have relatively few opportunities to exercise this kind of will in modern life. Materialism, consumerism, and hedonism conspire to keep us acting unconsciously from mostly unexamined desires.

Conscious love is that better part of ourselves that can recognize and do what is right, regardless of self-interest, desire, or fear. Conscious love perceives and feels the unity of all life. The more conscious love we experience, the richer, deeper, and happier we are.

All three of these are essential aspects of Spirit which can enter the heart and transform the ego. Spirit has other important servants as well, including reason, reflection, wisdom, and conscience.

The Human Being

The individuality, the totality of the person, is the result of the relationship of these three, which can be conceived as a vertical dimension. At the same time there is a progression from the false self to the essential self which can be mapped on the horizontal x axis. The individuality passes through stages of development on this axis, which will be covered in a later section. The

stage of self-development depends on whether one is dominated by the commanding false self, at one extreme, or the spiritualized heart.

The Structure of the Self

The human being can also be understood in terms of two fundamental axes. One axis we can call the conscious-unconscious axis. Another is the false self-essential self axis.

The four terms diagrammed below represent, in a necessarily simplified way, some fundamental dimensions of the human being.

Conscious Mind

Ego, "I"

Personality

Intellect/Reason

Reflection

Awareness

False Self

Essential Self

Subconscious Mind

Emotion

Heart

Intuition

Creativity

Wisdom

We begin with a sense of self, an "I," something we all experience. Every time we say "I" that "I" is making some claim for itself: "I am happy today." "I am Fatima." "I am an American." What this experience is like varies enormously from person to person, from a contracted, separate self to an expanded, spiritualized Self. Commonly, however, this "I" is a very small part of ourselves. It is only as much of ourselves as we are conscious of, or believe ourselves to be.

Beyond this "I" or conscious mind is a vast realm which can be called the subconscious. It might also be called the "supraconscious" if we want to emphasize that some of our higher impulses may originate from this realm, but for the sake of simplicity we shall use the familiar term "subconscious." Commonly, in conventional psychology, the subconscious mind is viewed as a kind of warehouse of buried memories, conditioning, complexes, drives, and obsessions. From a more spiritual perspective this subconscious is also the heart, the source of wisdom and subtle perceptions. It is infinite, at least compared to the conscious mind, and is spontaneously in communication with other minds, with mind-at-large, and with Spirit.

Any true education should help us to understand and make use of the relationship between the conscious mind and the subconscious mind. Our conscious sense of who we are is the fruit of the totality of subconscious memories, attitudes, and beliefs at the subconscious level of mind. Whereas, the ideas we consciously hold in awareness, the impressions we take into ourselves, and

what we allow to occupy our attention will be transferred to the subconscious mind and become a part of who we are.

When we know and are convinced of this, we will be in a better position to assume responsibility for our conscious mind. We will better understand how intention, positive thought, and prayer can affect our whole being positively, while negativity, anger, and fear can create a toxic state of mind.

The other polarity which needs clarification involves the false self (ego) and the essential self (soul). The basic premise of this model is that the conscious mind is often identified with the false self, which is the product of fear and selfishness. We can free ourselves of this false self and through conscious *presence, will and love* come to live from our essential self. Both these terms, false self and essential Self, are relative and not absolute. From the perspective of the essential Self we feel our unity with everything through love and through the finer faculties of mind.

Where we identify on the false self and essential self continuum influences our experience of “I,” as well as the condition of our subconscious mind. Clearly, someone whose life is ruled by vanity and greed and all the delusions they brings will have a different sense of self than someone who can remember his own mortality, his interdependence with the whole of life, and his dependence on God. The former will be enslaved to the tyranny of his own ego; the latter will experience an abundant and creative life, living from the essential Self.

This could all be so simple, but for how long have we and generations before us made it so complicated? And yet we are created to know ourselves; we are created for this self-awareness; we are fully equipped for it. What could be more important than to know ourselves?

The Education of the Soul

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The education of the soul, or the “vertical” dimension of education, is different from the education of the personality or the intellect. Conventional education is all about acquiring external knowledge and becoming something in the outer world. The education of the soul involves not only knowledge, but the realization of a “being” which is our deeper nature, and which includes conscious presence, conscious will, and conscious love.

What is most characteristically human may not be guaranteed to us by our species or by our culture, but is given only in potential. A person must work in order to become human.

What quality makes us most distinctly human? What is most human in us is something more than the role we play in society, and more than the conditioning (whether for good or bad) of our culture. What is most human in us is our heart, which is our point of contact with infinite Spirit.

The human being is the end product of a process in which this Creative Spirit has shaped and evolved a witness who could embrace the covenant it offered. If the human being is the most evolved Care-taker (Khalife) of the Creative Spirit—with the potential for conscious presence, will, love, and creativity—then our humanity is the degree to which this physical/spiritual vehicle, and particularly our nervous system, can reflect or manifest Spirit. That which is most sacred in us,

that which is deeper than our individual personality, is our connection to this Spirit, Cosmic Life, Creative Power, or whatever name we may use.

On the path of the soul we work in three realms at once: transforming the ego, purifying the heart, and activating spirit. Yet, in a certain sense, it is most effective to begin with the heart, which is the midpoint between the other two, and the place where they meet.

The heart work begins with the development of presence and remembrance of God (zhikr). Remembrance draws the light of Spirit into the heart, from where it is distributed to the psyche as a whole. With light and presence in the heart, even the tyrannical demands of the commanding self can be witnessed and transformed. With presence and the subsequent opening of the heart, the egocentric aspects of the self (nafs) can be transformed into more evolved human qualities.

In many traditional religious texts we find such a strong emphasis on the commanding self (*nafs al-ammâra*), the compulsive ego, that we may wonder whether this is because the people being addressed by those texts were significantly more under the command of the ego, or are we in the same situation today? How much should this “war” with the ego be emphasized? Must its every impulse be opposed, as some suggest? This is certainly not the example of Muhammad and the Qur’an, which suggest that the self has its rights, so long as these are within lawful, moral limits. The lawful pleasures of the earthly life are not considered a detriment to our spiritual life as long as we are not enslaved to them. What we see, however, in the lives of those who have been transformed by the grace of God is a growing independence from the world of the senses; and yet this is not the result of a deliberate asceticism. Muhammad once said, “This world is for me like a tree under which a traveler takes shade for a short while.”

One fact that we must take into account, however, is that both the spirit and the self, as two opposing elements within human nature, each want for themselves alone complete control over the heart of the human being.

The conflict between Spirit and the evil-commanding self is caused by their very nature, which induces each of them to try to dominate the whole of the human being and to be the ruler of it. Even when one of them is able to conquer the whole realm, the other still strives to regain what it has lost and to repair what has been destroyed.

The ego does not necessarily exert its influence through a grossly carnal or emotionally negative form; it may exhibit itself as a need for attention or praise, or a subtle insistence on having its own way. It can even take the form of doing religious practices from a self-serving motive, or it can permeate our whole being as the inability to step outside of our own egocentric viewpoint.

The classical advice is that we can give to the ego its due and no more. If we start to compromise on small points, we are in danger of being overcome by the egocentric self and losing touch with the guidance of the heart and spirit. What begins as a small garden snake, can become a dragon. Within modern secular culture, the egocentric self faces very little opposition except, perhaps, the opposition of other egos. The ego is always in conflict—especially with other egos and with other parts of itself—but the struggle of ego with ego does not usually lead to any positive transformation.

We in our society pride ourselves on the freedom and rights of the individual, while relatively little emphasis is placed on responsibility to the community and human family, and practically no emphasis on our relationship and responsibilities to the Divine Reality. The attainment of our humanness depends not on our following every impulse of the self but on our making a connection between ego and Spirit.

What can save the human realm from danger is its obedience to a beneficent influence that comes from Spirit. That influence from the realm of Spirit is the source of character, values, and divine principles (sacred law). It is only when a person is open and ready to accept the divine principles that the spirit in him or her recognizes that its influence has the same nature, the same characteristics, as itself. Only then may it distance itself from the evil-commanding, self-serving ego. When this happens, the soul, the essential self imagines that it has found an ally against the ego, the false self, and rises against it—and the war between them starts.

The two forces fighting to dominate the human being become aware of their differences only in their relation to the divine principles. Yet viewed from the outside, it is evident that one of these forces is aimed at bringing the human being to destruction, and the other, to true happiness.

It is not until we begin to oppose the ego that we see how much influence it has and how powerful this influence is. If the ego is denied expression in one way, it can easily change its strategy and satisfy itself in another way. For example, we may curb its lust but find that its anger increases. Since this battle between the spirit and the self is virtually a battle between equals, the struggle sometimes seems hopeless.

The ego is afire with its own selfishness, fear and self-protection; it feels threatened by the light of spiritual energy. Because it suffers pain from the light, it feels its whole world is threatened by this light. It tries to protect itself from this pain by covering itself with many veils of desires, fantasy, and unconsciousness.

The spiritual side of our being, the essential self, which generates divine light, tries to do the same, to protect the human being from the pain of the fire. The two adversaries vie to convince the human being of their convictions and impress upon it their beliefs, hoping that it will join them and assume either the attributes of fire or the attributes of light. Thus the human realm would belong wholly to either one or the other, and be subject to it.

Although we have been endowed with profound resources of character, we see that, left to our egos, we are nonetheless weak, powerless and in need. Perhaps the Creator wanted us to realize that we would only find strength in the help and support of a higher Source. He created a strong opposition for us to provoke this realization. If this dilemma were to totally disappear, everything would disappear. Both are needed; the personal and the spiritual give each other meaning. Together they help the human being to understand with true humility its utter dependence on God. That is the secret of the two opposing possibilities for human selfhood: the ego and the soul.

In other words this struggle between the two sides of ourselves will only be concluded when a higher power comes into play. For this it is necessary to make a call for divine assistance, to realize in humility our dependence on God, and, without abandoning the struggle with our egocentric compulsions, to pray that these compulsions be dissolved.

This is the inner dilemma we human beings experience. If the human being, instead of just looking at itself, could step back and see the whole situation, then it would indeed see who is truly the cause of all this, who is really making each of them do what it does. Then it would have found the truth. Then truth and justice would be established. All sides of the human being would surrender to the Divine.

If the Sustainer had so willed, He could have made mankind one people, but they will not cease to dispute except those on whom the Sustainer has bestowed His mercy (Surah Hēd, 118-119).

“Those on whom the *Sustainer* has bestowed His mercy” are those who have surrendered their selves and been qualified with His own beautiful names and attributes. Such a person has seen the egocentric qualities transformed with the help of the uplifting agency of the divine principles and ways of life. Such a person will have realized in herself or himself those qualities that are truly human.