Modern Psychology and the Loss of Transcendence

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Since its inception, modern Western psychology has gradually cut itself off from its metaphysical and ontological roots. This is evidenced, in part, by a shift from using words such as *soul* or *psyche* to an almost exclusive use of *mind*. This process of severing the human soul from the spiritual dimension is, in large part, due to the emergence of the modern world and its secularizing outlook (which took root in the European Renaissance, continuing through the Scientific Revolution and culminating in the Enlightenment project). The concept of *psychology* is roughly 500 years old, yet – as a subject of study and practice – it is much older than the word itself, which can readily be seen when we consider the worldview of ancient peoples. Curiously, having rejected transcendence and the intermediary realm of the soul, the discipline today fails to be a psychology in the best sense of the word, such that it can truly benefit humanity.

The secularizing trajectory of Western culture culminated in the twentieth century when psychology went from being a "science of the soul" to one that had become completely profane. Accordingly, it "shuts out all 'transcendence' and so also shuts out all effective spirituality."[1] Furthermore, "Modern psychology … dismisses … all that transcends it."[2] This decisive turn was championed by behaviorism and psychoanalysis – the foundational paradigms of the discipline; yet this degradation of its outlook and assumptions occurred long before these developments emerged within modern psychology. Rather, the catalyst was a declaration of psychology's independence from a metaphysical and religious perspective on what constitutes a human being. Due to the current spiritual malaise, it has been aptly observed that to comprehend humanity today, we need a sound knowledge of mental health: "To understand modern [and by extension postmodern] man, it may well be appropriate to study psychology."[3]

Among the spiritual traditions of the world, we find unanimous agreement that the tripartite constitution of the person – and of the cosmos of which we are but a mirror – comprises Spirit, soul, and body; or the spiritual, psychic, and corporeal states. The dominance of the unseen world proclaimed by the spiritual traditions (and their corresponding psychologies) was gradually overthrown and replaced by the more tangible demands of the sensorial world and its empirical modes of knowing, represented by the modern West's culture of materialism. What may be self-evident at one level is not so on a higher one, for lower levels cannot encompass what lies beyond them; only the higher can know the lower. While the reductionist position ostensibly shuns metaphysics, embedded in its argument is a hidden metaphysic of its own; one that implicitly attacks any suggestion of a reality that transcends the psycho-physical order. In doing so, it has transgressed its own conceptual assumptions.

Due to the marginalization of spiritual considerations in modern psychology, there is a profound confusion between the psychic and spiritual orders. The phenomenon of *psychologism* has thus become unavoidable – the tendency to sublate the objective metaphysical order and thus reduce our understanding of human consciousness to the level of a purely subjective phenomenon. Furthermore, there is the aberration known as *scientism*, which is not an observance of the scientific method *per se* but an ideology that has transgressed the limits of its own inherent limitations as confined to the empirical order. The founder of the "talking cure," Sigmund Freud

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(1856–1939), declared his allegiance to scientific fundamentalism, epitomizing this overreach in the following words: "No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere."[4]

There are two trends in modern psychology, with its post-Enlightenment prejudices, of which we ought to be vigilant. Both trends confuse the psychic and the spiritual, but in different ways. René Guénon (1886–1951) explains: "In the first, the spiritual is brought down to the level of the psychic ... in the second, the psychic is on the other hand mistaken for the spiritual."[5] A paragon of Islamic spirituality, Rūmī (1207–1273) pointed out that "The soul is one thing, and the spirit is another."[6] In verbatim agreement, St. Augustine (354–430) writes: "The soul is one thing, and the spirit … is another."[7]

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) defined the soul as "the first principle of life in those things which live."[8] Seneca (c. 4–65) says: "What else could you call [the] soul than a god dwelling as a guest in a human body."[9] Elsewhere Augustine confirms the divine origin of the human psyche and its reliance on the Spirit: "This soul which [has] its origin from the breath of God could not exist without [the] intellect [which] is the spirit."[10] Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as "the Greatest Master" (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*), observes that our true vision requires both reason and intellect in order to "distinguish the in-between from the in-between"[11] or what constitutes the intermediary realm of the psyche.

According to sacred psychology, the macrocosm and the microcosm reflect each other. This is conveyed in the Hermetic maxim: "In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below."[12] In this process of cosmic mirroring, the human psyche is a miniature of the cosmos (or *microcosm*). The Sufi master Shaykh ad-Darqāwī (d. 1823) writes:

> The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos.[13]

The levels of reality that exist – both within and without us – are unified in the Absolute. Traditional "sciences of the soul" allow for all realms of consciousness to be known directly: "[I]n the very place where the lower worlds are, there are to be found the higher worlds and the totality of worlds. It has been said that there exist ten thousand worlds, each one like this world … and all of these are contained in man, without his being conscious of it."[14]

The soul is a mystery; it is immersed in time while also being rooted in the timeless. The human body participates in time and space, whereas the Spirit transcends both. The psyche belongs to the intermediary realm between body and Spirit, but partakes of each dimension. Humanity's spiritual traditions all attest that the intermediary realm of the person is of Divine origin. Plato (429–347) insists that "the soul is absolutely immortal and indestructible."[15]

According to the Abrahamic monotheisms: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). The Qur'ān declares that God created Adam from clay – "I breathed into him My Spirit" (15:29) – and that the "Lord created you from a single soul" (4:1). Muslim philosopher Mullā Sadrā (1572–1640) points out that "The soul is *the junction of the two seas* ([Qur'ān] 18:59) of corporeal and spiritual things."[16] That the heart-intellect is the center of the human psyche was also taught in the Christian tradition by Meister Eckhart (1260–1328): "There is something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable ... [and] this is the intellect."[17]

There are dimensions of the soul that not only bring us closer to the corporeal order, but which are also transcendent. Because it is situated between the Spirit and the body, the intermediary realm is difficult to fathom and thus requires a certain metaphysical discernment. Eckhart explains: "At the highest point of his ... soul, man is more God than creature."[18] Plato

identifies the transpersonal faculty of the Intellect as "the highest part of the soul,"[19] which is synonymous with the spiritual dimension in all beings. The *Vedānta* (or *Brahma*) *Sūtras* articulate a similar concept: "The soul can have a double nature, that of the supreme and that of the individual soul."[20] Correspondingly, our primordial nature or innermost Self is synonymous with the heights of the soul.

The English poet and Anglican divine Thomas Traherne (c. 1636–1674) declares: "As my body without my Soul is a Carcase, so is my soul without Thy Spirit, a chaos, a dark obscure heap of empty faculties: ignorant of itself, unsensible of Thy goodness, blind to Thy glory: dead in sins and trespasses. Having eyes I see not, having [ears] I hear not."[21] Every facet of reality is hierarchically ordered with its levels and modes of knowing – without recourse to the transcendent, lower orders of reality invariably become opaque and distorted.

Again our physiology is dependent on the soul, and our bodies and souls (in turn) are grounded in the Spirit. In the same way that the body cannot function without the soul and Spirit, the same can be said for modern psychology. According to St. Makarios of Egypt (c. 300–c. 390), "[T]he soul, which is a subtle body, has enveloped and clothed itself in the members of our visible body, which is gross in substance."[22] However, the human soul requires the body to manifest itself and cannot do so without it. Furthermore, throughout humanity's spiritual traditions, the human body is viewed as a theophany and is understood to be the locus of the Spirit. For example: "The body, the house of the Spirit"[23] (Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12) and our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

We recall the memorable words of Eckhart, who said: "God create[d] the world ... [so] that God might be born in the soul."[24] But this does not mean that the human psyche is independent of the Spirit; the soul is completely reliant on the spiritual domain for all things. Likewise, our identification with the transcendent clearly implies immanence as we see in the following Patristic formula: "God became man that man might become God."[25]

The Divine immanence is recognized across all religions: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), "I am the Self … seated in the heart of all beings"[26] (Bhagavad Gītā 10:20), or "Heaven and earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me" (*hadīth qudsī*). This is based on a metaphysical understanding that there is a prior acknowledgment of the Divine transcendence that makes it possible to access God within oneself (in a manner not limited to the psychological level). Eckhart clarifies this distinction: "God alone is free and uncreated, and therefore he alone is like the soul with respect to being free, but not with respect to uncreatedness because the soul is created."[27]

The tripartite structure of Spirit/Intellect, soul, and body is known in Latin as *Spiritus*/*Intellectus*, *anima*, and *corpus*; in Greek as *Pneuma*/*Nous*, *psyche*, and *soma*; and in Arabic as *Rūh*/*'Aql*, *nafs*, and *jism.* The Arabic term *'aql* is used to denote both reason and intellect, although the distinction and interrelation between them (the first being horizontal and the second vertical) is always recognized. *Rūh* and *'Aql* are found to be synonymous with spirit and Intellect. The *nafs* (soul, self, or ego) is often conflated with *Rūh* or Spirit, as is evidenced by these terms being used interchangeably; however, they represent two very different ontological functions of the self. The "heart" and the "intellect," in a traditional context, are also synonymous with Spirit; for this reason, they are sometimes referred to as the "heart-intellect."

The Old Testament upholds the belief that human beings are a composite of Spirit, soul, and body. We see this, for example, in Genesis: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (2:7). Each person, according to the Jewish tradition, consists of *neshamah*, *ruah*, and *nefesh*. During its terrestrial sojourn, our higher soul (*neshamah*) longs for its return to the Spirit, while our reasoning soul (*ruah*) acts as an intermediary between the upper and lower realms, concerning itself with what is good and evil; while the animal soul (*nefesh*), our lower dimension, is linked to instincts and bodily cravings.

In the Christian tradition, references are made to the threefold constitution of the human being in St. Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians: "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your *spirit and soul and body* be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Christian psychology recognizes that the human being is created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27) and that the Divine calls us to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) by identifying this indwelling Spirit within ourselves with what is everlasting and "not of this world" (John 18:36). According to St. Paul, "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Corinthians 6:17) – a reference to our chief end in this life; namely, the soul's return to its divine origin.

In the Islamic tradition, the Spirit (*Rūh*), while transcendent, is also immanent within the soul (*nafs*) of the human being (*al-insān*) and, when the faculty of the Intellect (*'aql*) is restored in the heart (*qalb*), our primordial nature (*fitrah*) can be consummated at the highest level. The intermediary realm is known within Islam as the 'isthmus' (*barzakh*) between the Spirit (*Rūh*) and body (*jism*). Within Sufism, this tradition's mystical dimension, there are four degrees of the human psyche: ascending from the animal soul (*an-nafs al-haywāniyah*); the passional soul (*an-nafs al-ammārah* or "soul that incites" to evil); the discerning or intelligent soul (*an-nafs al-lawwāmah* or "soul that blames"); and the intellective soul (*an-nafs al-mutma'innah* or "the soul at peace," the human psyche reintegrated in Spirit or *Rūh*). The "science of the soul" that belongs to the Islamic tradition is rooted in the prophetic saying, "He who knows himself knows his Lord."

In the Hindu tradition, the Spirit (*Purusha*) or Self (*Ātmā*) manifests as the individual soul (*jīvātmā*), which is enveloped by five sheaths (*koshas*). The Spirit transcends each of these yet includes them at the same time. They are listed here in descending order, from the highest to the most 'dense.' The first envelope (*ānandamaya-kosha*) is the Spirit, the next three (*vijñāna-maya-kosha*, *manomaya-kosha*, and *prānamaya-kosha*) pertain to the intermediary realm, and the final one (*annamaya-kosha*) corresponds to the corporeal.

Notwithstanding its nontheistic character, the Buddhist tradition also speaks of an intermediary realm. The *trikāya* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism envisages the nature of reality by means of three 'bodies' or *kāyas*: *Dharmakāya* ("universal body"); *Sambhogakāya* ("body of bliss"); and *Nirmānakāya* ("body of transformation"). It is the *sambhogakāya* that corresponds to the intermediary realm of the human psyche. There is a cosmological corollary between the *trikāya* and the 'three worlds' (Sanskrit: *triloka*) pertaining to the celestial, atmospheric, and earthly realms.

In Buddhism, each of us is said to comprise five psycho-physical aggregates or "heaps" known as *khandhas* in Pāli (Sanskrit: *skandhas*): (1) form (Pāli/Sanskrit: *rūpa*); (2) sensation or feeling (Pāli/Sanskrit: *vedanā*); (3) perception (Pāli: *saññā*; Sanskrit: *samjñā*); (4) mental formations (Pāli: *saṅkhāras*; Sanskrit: *samskāras*); and (5) consciousness (Pāli: *viññāna*; Sanskrit: *vijñāna*). However, the existence of these aggregates does not preclude the presence of an abiding, universal Self in all beings considered as the immanent aspect of ultimate reality (Pāli: *Attā*; Sanskrit: *Ātman*) beyond birth, old age, sickness, and death. The Buddha does not take issue with the Hindu understanding of the Self as *neti*, *neti* ("not this, not that") which, by means of negation, conveys an apophatic understanding that transcends all determinate conceptions, leaving only the consciousness of that which is – the Self alone; all that is not this, can be considered "non-Self" (*anattā*).

An integral psychology informed by metaphysics and a sacred science recognizes two aspects of human identity: one relative or horizontal, and the other Absolute or vertical (while never blurring or confusing the two). This is made clear in Buddhist interpretations of mind. The following passage from *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* is instructive:

> Mind, though pure in its self nature from the beginning, is accompanied by ignorance. Being defiled by ignorance, a defiled [state of] Mind comes into being. But, though defiled, the Mind itself is eternal and immutable. Only the Enlightened Ones are able to understand what this means.

> What is called the essential nature of Mind is always beyond thoughts. It is, therefore, defined as "immutable." When the one World of Reality is yet to be realized, the Mind [is mutable and] is not in perfect unity [with Suchness]. Suddenly, [a deluded] thought arises; [this state] is called ignorance.[28]

An integrated mind sees both the mirror and the images that are reflected in it. Our original state of consciousness – unconditioned by the images of the phenomenal world – is able to envision an abiding unity behind all forms. Huang Po (d. 850) discusses this transpersonal dimension in the following passage:

> All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought of in terms of new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces and comparisons.... Only awake to the One Mind….[29]

Some have attempted to trace the rudiments of a sacred psychology to what Freud referred to as the "oceanic feeling"[30] in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Yet this venture is misplaced because the Freudian "talking cure" is, at its core, anti-spiritual and opposed to metaphysics. The "oceanic feeling" for Freud likely refers to the primary narcissistic state of union between an infant and its mother, and certainly not a unitive state with the Absolute. Although appearing to be more friendly towards the spiritual traditions and their "science of the soul," neither does the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961) refer to the transpersonal order; rather, its perspective is altogether confined to the intermediary realm of the human psyche.

Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) illustrates why psychic phenomena are so seductive and difficult to discern: "The confusion is between the psychic and spiritual planes of reality, where the unfamiliar, the strange, and the bizarre are mistaken for the transcendent, simply by the fact that they lie outside the ordinary modes of consciousness."[31] This recognition appears to be missing from the standard professional literature, and in any of the discussions related to understanding the intermediary realm. Guénon elaborates on these dangers:

> It is impossible to be too mistrustful of every appeal to the 'subconscious' … in a sort of 'cosmic consciousness' that shuts out all 'transcendence' and so also shuts out all effective spirituality … but what is to be said of someone who flings himself into the ocean and has no aspiration but to drown himself in it? This is very precisely the significance of a so-called 'fusion' with a 'cosmic consciousness' that is really nothing but the confused and indistinct assemblage of all the psychic influences … these influences have absolutely nothing in common with spiritual influences…. Those who make this fatal mistake either forget about or are unaware of the distinction between the 'upper waters' and the 'lower waters'; instead of raising themselves toward the 'ocean above', they plunge into the abyss of the 'ocean below'; instead of concentrating all their powers so as to direct them toward the formless world, which alone can be called 'spiritual', they disperse them in the endlessly changeable and fugitive diversity of the forms of subtle manifestation … with no suspicion that they are mistaking for a fullness of 'life' something that is in truth the realm of death and of a dissolution without hope of return.[32]

All religions teach that there is an inseparable link between human beings and the Divine. Indeed, they see their task as having us awaken to our primordial nature (*fitrah*), the "image of God" (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or Self (*Ātmā*) – our true identity *in divinis.* This traditional doctrine of identity is closely related to the image one has of Reality itself. It is the metaphysical order that restores harmony to a consciousness that has been bifurcated into mind and matter (or subject and object), which also allows for the discernment of the intermediary realm.

At the root of the crisis in modern psychology is the "Cartesian bifurcation," the dualism between mind and body (along with matter) that has plagued the mindset of the West since the seventeenth century. As a result of this myopic outlook, human beings are severed from reality and everything becomes objectified, further entrenching the psyche in a subject-object dichotomy. The Cartesian divide between *res extensa* ('extended entities') and *res cogitans* ('thinking entities') makes no allowance for overcoming this bifurcation, thus reducing all human experience to the private, subjective realm and destroying any notion of objective reality. This perpetuates the illusion of a fragmented worldview and an isolated self, which sunders our relationship to the sacred. This mind-body dualism lives on in modern science, especially in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, where this notion is deeply embedded in its epistemological framework. It is especially to be found in the *medical model* of clinical diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, which separates the psychological (*psyche*) from the biological (*soma*). It is the metaphysical order that restores harmony to a consciousness that has been distorted by dualism.

Across the diverse traditional cultures of humanity, this pernicious bifurcation does not exist, as they all recognize that we comprise Spirit, soul, and body. Within each of the world's religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the traditions of the First Peoples – there exists a corresponding psychology that is fully integrated and grounded in the sacred. At the heart of each authentic psychology, there lies a "science of the soul" that can bring about a psycho-spiritual transformation that is essential to healing our damaged psyches: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). The term *therapy* comes from the Greek word *therapeía* ('healing') yet, for the purposes of this discussion, it is not only we who are in need of restoration but also the discipline of psychology as a whole, along with its mental health systems.

Although psychology today has begun, to some degree, to incorporate spiritual practices into its secular framework and is becoming more open to these approaches, it still has a long history of pathologizing religion. Furthermore, modern Western psychology continues, in large part, to view itself as the only valid way of knowing the mind, thus implicitly rejecting the validity of other approaches to this discipline. This is an acutely problematic situation that has not been fully understood, which means it cannot be properly remedied until the root causes of this crisis are clearly identified.

While one can certainly find some common ground between the spiritual psychologies and their modern aberrations, no integration between the two is possible without asking the following question: Is modern psychology able to accommodate the sacred in its worldview? As it stands, the foundations of modern psychology are vitiated by the exclusion of a spiritual dimension in its epistemology and praxis. If this trajectory continues unabated, modern psychology will never become a fully integrated "science of the soul."

Contemporary psychology had its genesis with the advent of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. All the movements and schools that came after them were simply prolongations of these two pioneering forces which have not, as many assume, disappeared into the annals of history. The question that arises is whether modern psychology and the field of mental health can be extricated from this deformed superstructure. We need to be vigilant about giving preference to the tenets of modern psychology over those of humanity's spiritual traditions if we are committed to reviving an authentic "science of the soul" as an endeavor distinct from modern psychology.

As human beings have both a body and a mind, it is important that we first attend to our corporeal nature and explore, with patients, their bodily health prior to determining a mental health diagnosis. Once a physical cause has been ruled out, a person's mental health can be further assessed. At the same time, maintaining awareness of the fundamental mind-body unity and its relationship to the tripartite structure of Spirit, soul, and body at all times is central to any spiritually-informed therapeutic approach. Each effective sacred psychology is sustained by the

transpersonal order which facilitates an integration that does not rely on the ego. In contrast, mainstream psychology (and psychiatry) do not – by and large – take into consideration the spiritual dimension. Their attempts to reduce the human being to merely a psycho-physical entity, devoid of what transcends these limitations, will only yield a fragmented understanding. This approach may, in some cases, produce a temporary cure or remove some unwanted symptoms, but it does not constitute true healing.

It is only by embracing a more spiritually integrated psychology that the discipline can be saved from itself. All spiritual traditions teach their own version of the famous inscription found at Delphi – "Know thyself" (*Gnóthi seautón*) – yet such realization is only possible if we are able to restore the practice of healing souls to its transcendent origins.

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Notes

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[13] Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, quoted in *Letters of a Sufi Master: The Shaykh ad-Darqāwī*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998), p. 21.

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[31] Whitall N. Perry, "Drug-Induced Mysticism: The Mescalin Hypothesis," in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), p. 10.
[32] René Guénon, "The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual," in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 239–240. See also Rama P. Coomaraswamy, "The Problems that Result from Locating Spirituality in the Psyche," *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 9 (Summer 2002), pp. 101–124.

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