

## **PSYCHOLOGY, SOUL, AND GOD**

Steven Prasinos

As a practicing psychologist for nearly forty years I have listened to hundreds of patients share their inner life and seek guidance on how to feel better. Over time this vocation has cultivated in me a compelling sense that there is a spiritual foundation to this work,<sup>1</sup> a sense of working with invisible problems with invisible solutions. And further yet, through readings, mentors, and experience, I have come to perceive an unseen essence to each person, what religions refer to as a soul. In this article I hope to show how psychology can lead us, as it has led me, towards both an awareness of soul and an appreciation of how rich a construct it is.

### **The Nature of Experience**

We begin with perhaps the most fundamental description we can give of ourselves: each of us is a consciousness, a stream of experience. Experience (consciousness, awareness) is how we know we are alive. It is our witnessing living. We imagine death, on the other hand, as the end of experience. So, if we consider experience psychologically, if we strive to be aware of our awareness, what can be said about this water in which we swim?

Our first observation about experience is that we can observe it. In other words, within the experiential stream there is a self-aware voyager, an Ego, that can rise above the stream and generalize about its nature.

Next, we can see that experience is real.<sup>2</sup> How could it be otherwise? Perception and ideation, our sense of “facts,” our very view of reality, all reside within consciousness. Consciousness “houses” reality. What is real is what we believe to be so and believing is a consciousness event. And if reality is apprehended through consciousness then consciousness must be, not only real, but the most fundamental level of reality.<sup>3</sup>

We can also observe, very simply, that experience is invisible. Believing, perceiving, naming, feeling and so on are all unseen. They occur in a private, intangible interior.

Still further, we see that experience flows. It flows like a stream from bird song to hunger to missing a friend, for example. Right now you and I are sharing a flow via this sequence of concepts. And this flow is dynamic. Like fire, experience flares and subsides and shimmers. Like music, it shifts in intensity, rhythm, and tone.

The tone of experience, how it feels from moment to moment, is informed by the body. Consider how feeling shifts as we encounter these images: Santa Claus, crucifix, daffodil. Each image elicits a body response. Similarly feeling shifts as we sense touch, thirst, or sunshine. Experience and physiology, mind and body, are in a synergistic dance creating shifts in heat, chemistry, and movement. Our bodies are resonators, tuning forks, registering inner and outer events.<sup>4</sup> Experience vibrates with the body. Each of us, then, is a subjective energy field.

### **The Source of Meaning**

So we are investigating a living, unseen, subjective field that flows and vibrates. And appearing within this subjective dimension is meaning. That is, significance, what matters and motivates, emerges into this experiential field.

To elaborate, we are ceaselessly operating within meaning structures. We inhabit a rich gestalt of intangible roles, beliefs, and narratives. Roles such as student, priest, or plumber exist only in our minds. Invisible beliefs, like about race or discipline, guide our choices. Invisible narratives influence our affect and identity. Subjectivity flows with meaning that emanates from a vast collective subjectivity field (culture).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, most of the meaning we inhabit is not consciously created. We do not choose but rather find ourselves in *dramatis personae* such as jealous son, curious student, or lonely spouse. Neither do we choose ideas, intuitions, or dreams that arise from the unconscious of their own accord. Much of the meaning in which we live comes to us autonomously, unbidden.<sup>6</sup>

So the Ego (the embodied, self-aware locus of identity) exists within a larger subjective field that provides it with meaning. Thus the Ego is contextualized: I am more than “me.” We are each a subjectivity field within a larger subjectivity field, within a vast subjective soup.

It is easy to see how subjectivity is transpersonal, beyond the individual. There is a shared meaning field, for example, when two persons are laughing together, when a nation mobilizes for war, or when an entire species marvels at a moonwalk. These are collective, group-mind events, persons nested in a transpersonal subjectivity and sympathetically

vibrating together. Experience, paradoxically, is both private and embedded in the transpersonal.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Subjectivity Field as Soul**

Wise and thoughtful people throughout history have been aware of this mysterious subjectivity field that is within us, between us, and beyond us. Hinduism names it *atman*, Islam *nafs*, Judaism *nephesh*. In Latin it is *anima*, in Greek *psyche*. We shall here call it soul.

These names all point to a universal observation about human nature: each of us is an embodied subjectivity field, a soul. And each personal soul exists within a broader subjective field. Let's call it the "Oversoul."

There are of course alternative names for this Oversoul (for example, Tao, Spirit, Chi, Ether, Collective Unconscious<sup>8</sup>). In using the term Oversoul I am emphasizing how personal soul and Oversoul are both subjectivity fields differing only in scope.

Regardless of the names we employ, however, by naming soul and Oversoul we become aware of a mysterious dimension out of which all experience arises, a Great Subjective Sea. Each of us floats upon this Sea as a self-aware, choosing Ego. And how the Ego relates to the Oversoul may be our central existential question.

### **The Soul in Disharmony**

The Ego's relationship to the Oversoul is central because having a soul in harmony is the essence of well-being. Consider examples of a soul in dis-harmony. I have thoughts I do not want, nightmares I do not want, relationships I do not want, anger I do not want, loneliness I do not want.

These are all examples of a troubled soul where the Ego is at odds with the broader consciousness field (Oversoul) in which it resides. The Ego has the capacity to reject emotions, roles, and even, as in self-hate, itself. And when we do not want what we are the worst in us emerges: depression, anxiety, hate, murder. The personal subjective field (soul) is frustrated and in disharmony with its broader subjective field (Oversoul). This disharmony is visceral. The "music" of such a body/soul is discordant, arrhythmic, or lifeless. The stakes could not be higher.

## **The Universal Quest**

Our quest for harmony in our souls is relentless. It drives human undertaking. Common strategies for harmonizing the soul include consumerism, infatuation, over eating, status seeking, and drug use. These methods tend to be addictive because, though they may provide temporary comfort, they fail to address the fundamental disharmony of an Ego in opposition to its broader subjective field.

A more effective soul medicine is art. Literature, music, film and so on can re-calibrate ones subjective field. Via art the soul may experience new stories and new ways of feeling. The subjectivity field vibrates in novel, sometimes healing, ways. This is why we have such gratitude for our artists.

The most explicit guidance for care of the soul, however, comes from religion. Religions acknowledge the reality and importance of subjectivity, both personal and transpersonal. Indeed, we can see religion as a framework defining the relationship between Ego and Oversoul. Or, in other words, religions offer narratives guiding the individual towards congruence between personal and transpersonal subjective fields.<sup>9</sup>

Psychology, the lens we are employing here, is a modern, secular approach towards caring for the soul (though this term is rarely used). Psychology (the study of *psyche*) has been profoundly helpful in giving modernity a language for discussing interior life. It shies away, though, from the soul concept. Mainstream psychology has not fully endorsed what we are discussing here, the reality and fundamentality of personal and transpersonal subjectivity. Note how extraordinarily powerful the concept of soul is. It is arguably the fundamental concept for understanding ourselves. Our lives are our quests for harmonious souls.

## **Harmony and Love**

How does the Ego harmonize its soul? How do relationships, including between Ego and Oversoul, evolve? From playgrounds to politics, we know the answer: harmonizing requires communication, learning, and changing for a greater good. It requires integrating the rejected, bringing the lost “home.” Essentially, harmonizing requires love.

For example, I evolve when I open to my buried anger and learn how I have been injured. I evolve when I listen to my wife and how I hurt her. I evolve when I consider the point of view of a terrorist. To love is to listen and learn.

Symptoms (disharmonies) are meaningful in that they reveal what is in need of love. They point the way towards personal evolution. Other messages from the Oversoul, such as dreams, intuitions and emotions, also reveal what seeks integration. Even events, such as loss, disease or cruelty, are phenomena emerging out of the Oversoul, into the field of experience, insisting on our attention and understanding.<sup>10</sup>

Harmonizing is far from easy. Acknowledging ignorance and problematic attitudes wounds our pride. To create new meaning structures that integrate my wife, a terrorist, or disease is to suffer the death of, not only a point of view, but an identity. An uncomfortable confusion often precedes learning. To venture, with a solitary candle, into the cave of uncertainty requires faith, courage, and a willingness to face a kind of death. But if we see this process through we can be “resurrected” into a wiser, more harmonious self.

We are all seeking harmony. A loving receptivity to the other, to the “not-self,” harmonizes the subjectivity field. We harmonize as we integrate, not only persons who oppose us, but inner threats such as symptoms, nightmares, and death. This is the deeper meaning of “Love thy enemies.” And as we illumine the shadows<sup>11</sup> we become more congruent with self, others, and the Oversoul.

This quest to more fully love is a hero’s journey, both arduous and gratifying. It is a quest that gives life purpose (*telos*) for through it we evolve. And this evolution engenders a sense of belonging to a limitless, invisible psychic ecosystem. We are enlarged.

### **The Oversoul as God**

If the content of experience flows like a stream, that stream is the Oversoul. It is a stream of infinite breadth and depth, a stream in which we all swim. The Oversoul is within us and between us. It is the milieu of experience and its source. And, because our very self-image arises out of this source, the Oversoul is us. It is omnipresent, mysterious, and beyond thought. It is One.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the Oversoul rewards us when we love. We are rewarded with inspiration and improved relationships. We are rewarded with healthier, calmer bodies. We vibrate more musically. Harmony is visceral.

And if, via our quest for harmony, we are being guided to love all that experience provides, does it not follow that we also love the Provider? Shall we not love the Oversoul? And once we love the Oversoul as a Provider we have personified it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the Oversoul, once personified in our image, becomes a participant in our humanity. It is humanized and brought down to Earth. The Oversoul, the ground of being,<sup>13</sup> is now itself a Being. A guiding, caring, providing Being, the Prime Parent, often imagined as “Abba” or Father.<sup>14</sup> Thus we have come, through a psychological sequence, to God.

Once the Oversoul is imagined (and therefore experienced),<sup>15</sup> as a benevolent God we can have a personal relationship with it. We now have a God whom we can follow, thank, and love. We have an Ally guiding us toward harmony, a Being worthy of worship, a presence with a tangible vibration.<sup>16</sup>

This vision of God is both profoundly comforting and congruent with how our souls work. Further, because God rewards love (with harmony) and corrects hate (with disharmony), God can be trusted as a God of justice. There is a moral order subscribing to a Great Law: “To be in union with me love all that is.” Respect Everything.

For some this personifying warms the relationship with an otherwise cold, impersonal mystery. Others see humanizing the Oversoul as constraining the inexpressible. Whatever ones paradigm, however, it is essential to have a framework that fosters Ego/Oversoul harmony.

As this harmony develops so develops a sense of belonging to an infinite, invisible field of Soul. We become mystics, communing with the numinous. We experience the unseen, vibrating reality of existence. We become conscious of the water in which we swim.

## **Summary**

A thoughtful examination of the nature of experience suggests that we are each an invisible, vibrating subjectivity field, or soul, coupled to a body. Each soul resides in a larger, transpersonal subjectivity field, the “Oversoul,” that provides meaning. Souls relentlessly

seek harmony with this broader subjective field. This harmony seeking drives lives and history. When we are in disharmony, we suffer. But when we broaden the scope of our love, we harmonize and evolve. This feels good viscerally. And as we personally evolve we participate in our culture's evolution. The Oversoul can be seen as the ultimate subjectivity field in which all souls reside. God, the Oversoul personified and translated into the human dimension, is a just and caring Ally who rewards love, guides us toward harmony, and is worthy of worship.

I hope I have shown how psychology provides insights that can lead us, in a logical sequence, to acknowledging the existence of soul, love, and God. Psychology can, in secular terms, re-present and validate ancient wisdom. Through it we can arrive at a secular spirituality, found simply through careful observation of who we are and how we work. This secular spirituality, owing much to the psychotherapy movement, appears to be blossoming globally. It shows promise as a path through which various religions and cultures can appreciate how we all share the same quest and the same source.

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## Notes

1. Steven Prasinos, "Spiritual Aspects of Psychotherapy", *Journal of Religion and Health*, 31, (March, 1992), pp. 41-52.
2. Daniel J. Siegel, *Mind: A Journey into the Heart of Being Human* (WW Norton, 2017), p. 68.
3. Ernest Keen, *Psychology and the New Consciousness* (Brooks/Cole, 1972), p. 6.
4. Stephano Sabetti, *The Wholeness Principle* (Life Energy Media, 1986), p. 135.
5. Keen, p. 103
6. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (Harper Colophon, 1975), p. x.
7. Siegel, p. 13.

8. Robert H. Hopcke, *A Guided Tour of The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (Shambala, 1989), p. 14.

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9. Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (Perennial Library, 1958), p. 352.

10. Hillman, p. 123.

11. Hopcke, p. 81.

12. Hillman, p. 15

13. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952), ch. 6.

14. John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (The Westminster Press, 1973), p. 186.

15. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, (Alfred A. Knoph, 1994), p. 342.

16. *ibid*, p. 313.

See Also:

Miller, L, *The Awakened Brain*, 2021, (Random House)

She discusses how spiritual people have healthier brains, better resilience against depression and addiction, and how having a relationship to a higher power is the key aspect of that spirituality. She also discusses how psychotherapists can invite attention to the inner, transpersonal wisdom we all have.

Emerson, R.W., *Emerson's Essays: The Complete First and Second Series, Essay #9: The Over-Soul*, (Independently Published), 2021

Here is the first use of the term "Oversoul"