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## **DECENTRALIZATION OF THE "SELF" IN PSYCHOLOGY**

**Contents of Article: The Differentiation of the Understanding of the "Self" in Philosophy, The Influence of the Physical System Theory, The Evolution of the Understanding of the "Self" in Psychology, Decentralization of the "Self" and Disintegration according to Kazimierz Dąbrowski, Conclusion, Bibliography.**

The process of the decentralization of the "self" is part of that broader current of thought which is intended to refute the Cartesian paradigm of science. Positivism, neo-positivism and scientism may be named in this context. In other words, the point is to avoid cold objectivity in coming to understand the human person.

In the history of psychology, specifically of the psychology of personality that goes back as far as William James and that appears explicitly with the work of Gordon W. Allport, a process of transition took place from one, strong "self" to a number of diversified selves that are capable of entering into a dialogue with each other. One of the best examples of this process is no doubt Hubert Herman's "The Valuation Theory" (cf. Hermans & Kempen 1993; Jastrzębski 2008), which should be considered as one of the most important approaches in narrative psychology.

The factors that contributed to the new concept of the "self" were, among others, the theories of some psychologists and, even earlier, the research undertaken by some philosophers. This paper is an attempt to illustrate this process and, eventually, to compare it with Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory. Our focus will be principally the history of psychology; however, we will give some philosophical references as well. From time to time in psychology we can also trace some inspirations taken from other sciences – physics for example. Although physics works under quite different conditions than psychology does, the systems theory found its way into psychology and psychotherapy. We will refer to this as well (cf. Bertalanffy 1984; Grzesiuk 2005).

### **The Differentiation of the Understanding of the "Self" in Philosophy**

Philosophical analyses of the human being's internal structure are not that new. Already, at the beginning of the history of philosophy, Plato pointed out the three dimensions of the human soul and Aristotle described its separate faculties. Nonetheless we have to admit that only in modern times did the "self" and its complexity become fully an object of dedicated research.

The theory of the "self" has had a place in philosophical anthropology since the time of Descartes, who brought about a radical change in philosophical methodology. Thanks to his research and his famous "cogito ergo sum", philosophy shifted from theocentricity to anthropocentricity. This, in turn, contributed to the development of a reflective method which in a better way articulates the subjective point of view – the human person as a being that feels and thinks. A further consequence of Descartes' work was the birth of psychology as an independent field of scientific research.

The next important stage of reflection on the human being as a subject was the anthropology of Immanuel Kant (cf. Kant 1957). He distinguished the "phenomenal self", which is the sum of human experiences, from the "transcendental self", the unknowable yet

experientially available subject of thought. Kant first expressly articulated the interior division of the "self". From that time onwards philosophers began to ask which of these selves is the very foundation of the human being and which is the truest.

Following on Kant's discoveries, Edmund Husserl (Husserl 1974, p. 186) distinguished several structures of the human "self": empirical, ideal and pure. The "empirical self" is, in his terminology, a part of the perceptual world of the concrete person. This 'empirical self' always appears in the phenomenal field of human experience, it is present in every form of sensual perception as the acting subject which perceives its own existence. The "pure self" is on the other hand something less changeable. It is a permanent subject that insures the self-identity in face of changing perceptions. This "pure self" cannot be part of the experiences and perceptions.

The next philosopher to pick up the problem of the "self" was Henri Bergson (cf. Bergson 1913). He distinguished the "superficial self" and the "deep self". His idea was to explain that the "superficial self" does not express the true nature of the human person which is founded in the "deep self". One understands the difference even if one has had only one experience on the deep level. The "deep self" is not directly available to us and its discovery requires intellectual effort. The "superficial self" is only a shadow of the true self which gradually emerges in the course of life. The "superficial self" is at the mercy of the demands of the social life of the human person. The "deep self" appears in the process of interior organization.

John Dewey, in his pragmatic philosophy, says that the human being always remains in diverse relationships to his environment. This environment causes suffering principally by its resistance to human actions. The suffering experienced by the human being then influences the process of its thinking. In the light of these discoveries Dewey redefines the terms "subject" and "object". An object is whatever causes frustration by its opposition ("objecting"); a subject is the one who suffers and endures the environmental situation of resistance. Thus, a subject is an embodied agent whose relationship with the environment is very complex (Hermans & Kempen 1993, p. 30).

Jacques Derrida, the French structuralist, stated that the subject ceases to be a creative source of meanings and becomes more of a result of a system of conventions. The stability and unchangeability of the "self" is, in his view, very weak. His theory finds its application mainly in the interpretation of literary works, in which the meaning of the text is understood as a process of a dialogue between the writer and the reader.

In linguistic structuralism the position of the "self" becomes very weak, it sometimes even disappears, and the human person turns into a linguistic construct. The mute "self" of the human being has a place in myths which have many common elements across different cultures. The principles of the mythic construction seem to be beyond the consciousness of the human "self" (cf. Levi-Strauss 1970).

In the existential analysis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1945) human experience has a historical character and is always related to the future and to the past. The human being for this French philosopher is "le corp-sujet" – an embodied subject, where the body is part of the "self" and not merely its property. The "self" moves intentionally in time and space.

The Polish psychiatrist, Antoni Kępiński, brilliantly describes the "self" in the context of time and space: „The 'self' of the human person is the central point of the world of experiences. Around this centre particular psychic facts are grouped according to the coordinates of time and space. Time is structured from the point of view of the "self": past, future and present; the same applies to the space directions: front – back, up – down, left – right. When everything around the person remains unchanged, in particular, the feeling that "I am me", the identity of the human person is preserved" (Kępiński 1979, p. 192).

Among modern philosophers particularly interesting are the anthropological ideas of Mieczysław A. Krąpiec (Krąpiec 1995). Following the example of William James (James 1890), Krąpiec distinguishes the "self" from "my" acts. More about James will be said in the psychological part of the paper. Krąpiec states that the first experience of the human person is that of one's own acts. By coming to understand the nature of these acts we come to understand the "self" as a subject. In other words, applying the Rogerian terminology (Rogers 1969), we can say that my acts reveal first of all "me" as experienced and only secondly the "self".

### **The Influence of the Physical System Theory**

In order to justify the concept of the divided "self", psychologists refer to the phenomenon described in physics as a nonlinear system. In such systems there occurs the so-called butterfly effect. The meaning of this term is that the initial conditions of a system only roughly influence the outcome which is rather the product of a very complex dynamic process.

The nonlinear system, when subjected to an energy stream, reaches a new form of functioning, that is, a new level of dynamic stability. An example of this is the functioning of the human organism. Some information is reduced while other information is reinforced in order to preserve the organism's stability. The process of an organism's self-renewal works the same way.

In the case of the "self", the main energy source is the power of imagination which makes of the "self" a nonlinear system, demonstrating that the structures of meaning are to a great degree unpredictable. A good example of this process is assigning a meaning to chance events.

### **The Evolution of the Understanding of the "Self" in Psychology**

The beginning of the theoretical decentralization of the "self" in psychology was made by W. James. He distinguished the "I" and the "me". It is the "I" that comes to know and maintains the identity, nourishes the sense of unity and distinctness. The "me" is a gradual transition from the "I" to "mine". The "I" even influences its own environment: material things and personal relationships. To the "I" belong spiritual goods as well. James, unlike Descartes, included the body-organism in the "self" system. The "self" unceasingly digests the "me"-experience.

James' concept was developed by Theodore Sarbin (Sarbin 1986) so that the "I" becomes an author of an ongoing narrative with the "me" as its actor. The "self" can reconstruct its past history and imagine its future with the narrative serving as a kind of organizing factor that holds this whole story together.

James created the term "potential self" (James 1890), E. Tory Higgins distinguished "the

actual self", "the ideal self" and "the ought self" (Higgins 1987). Hazel Markus spoke of "the possible, desired or undesired self" (Markus i Nurius 1986); similarly Karen Horney pointed out the role of the "ideal self" in personality structure (Horney 1978). It was in Carl Rogers' work (Rogers 1951) that the distinction between the "real self" and the "ideal self" appeared. For Rogers the "self" is first of all a part of the phenomenological field of the individual. Only later does the "self-concept" emerge, defined as the "self" as such, together with its relationships and characteristics. This picture is accessible to consciousness only potentially, since it is changeable and is process. However, at a given moment in time it possesses a certain wholeness.

In Carl G. Jung's opinion the "self" is a result of the interaction of three factors (clarity, emotional shade and range) which contribute to the uniqueness of the "self" (Jung 1993). The "self" is also the centre of consciousness and, therefore, of identity. This identity is, however, changeable and the self is, therefore, potentially a subject of transformation.

Dan McAdams attempted to unify the psychoanalytical and narrative terminology. The "self" was defined as a conjunction of many "imagos" which are, for the most part, the ideal self-picture in the life of adults, corresponding to characters of a story in narrative terminology (McAdams 1985). Subsequent to the work of McAdams, John Rowan divided the personality into subpersonalities, which he described as semi-permanent and semi-autonomous regions of the personality that can behave as actors on the stage. The self is a link among those subpersonalities (cf. Rowan 1990).

Gary Gregg introduced the term "identity-in-diversity" to enhance the description of a broader "self" in which more remote "self-positions" are included so that the "self" becomes more decentralized (cf. Gregg 1991). There are many "self-positions", not only one central position – for the "self" is polyphonic. Each position of the "self" has its own narration, its own supervision centre. The respective positions are, however, not of equal importance. In most cases the individual will prefer one of these positions. One can trace this in expressions like: "It wasn't me" or "This is my true self".

The phenomenon of the "identity-in-diversity" makes clear that certain characteristics may be placed in the outer area of the "self" as well as in the inner area of it. Classical logic cannot cope with the dynamic process of the expanding and shrinking "self" which engages in numerous dialogues among its own positions.

At the opposite pole of classical logic we can find something which is called paralogical thinking and is usually mentioned in psychiatrics (Jarosz 1992). Paralogical thinking has nothing to do with the rules of classical logic. In this context we can mention hyperlogical thinking as well. This is again by no means classical logic but rather a kind of emotional logic which upon closer examination appears to be somehow coherent (Kępiński 1978).

Consciousness is always ready to explain every single experience and event. The understanding gained in this way is not necessarily based on logic (Bruner 1986). Narrative thinking quite often functions outside of classical logic. It is thus possible to reinterpret already interpreted events.

Hubert Hermans goes even further in his theory and states that there is a possibility of polyphonic narration carried out from different "self-positions". In every possible world there exists a distinct author of the story. Hermans calls him the "self-position". The "self" too can

expand and shrink.

Hermans often refers to the concepts developed by James. For the latter, the "self" is constituted as the sum of all that one can call one's own (James 1890, p. 291). James' concept is more static and emphasizes the relationship of possession. Nonetheless, the self for James is a "stream of consciousness", which presumes a process. On this point both psychologists are in agreement.

Hermans adds that the relationship of the "self" to its parts resembles the relationship between the composer and his work. The composer happens to be inspired by other composers and performers. These are the different voices in the narrative. One of the voices, in his opinion, can remain dominant for a long time on the "self"-stage.

The "self" is able to move among the respective positions. Hermans describes this phenomenon by means of a dialogical concept of the "self" that enables us to widen the boundaries of the "self" so that the "self-positions" formerly excluded from it have been again integrated as a part of the widened polyphonic "self" which moves actively among the different, opposite and sometimes even conflicting positions. The outcome of this process is the more or less broader "self" (Hermans, Hermans-Jansen 2000, p. 172).

Hermans' concept of the "self" resembles in some way the anti-substantial understanding of the human person presented by David Hume. However, Hermans states that in spite of the fact that there are many "selves", one of them, spelled with a capital "S", is to be distinguished. That strongest "Self" is a unifying power of the personality and a proper "locus" where the meanings are created.

The best historic examples of this strong "Self" were, for Hermans, Buddha, Christ and Mahomet. In this way he almost repeats Jung's statement that the best developments of the Self-archetype are to be seen exactly in Buddha and Christ. This is a classical argument present in "Perennial Philosophy" (Huxley 1989).

### **Decentralization of the "Self" and Disintegration according to Kazimierz Dąbrowski**

For Hermans who, as we have already mentioned, may be considered as a good example of the decentralization process of the "self" in psychology, human development means the broadening of the "self" and its possible positions (Hermans, Hermans-Jansen 2000). Human development is considered a cyclical reorganization of personal meanings, that is, of the "self-position" in response to a particular situation. In this context both positive and negative experiences have a role to play and open up new dimensions of self-development. For Hermans this process lasts a lifetime.

Dąbrowski used the term "disintegration" to describe the personality crisis (Dąbrowski 1978), whereas Hermans applies the term "disorganization" to describe the same phenomenon. In the opinion of the latter, the factor leading to a crisis may be biological (e.g. adolescence) as well as social or personal. Every challenging situation demands its integration into the personality. Since this is not always possible, the disorganization of the "self" system may occur. This is a kind of developmental crisis. The disorganization of the personality under normal conditions should lead to a better and more mature organization that is more adjustable than the previous one and makes possible a better integration of the "self" system.

Human development, in Hermans' opinion, becomes a personal and creative process in which the human person learns to realize in a harmonic way two major development tasks: building up a strong, autonomous "self" and entering into unity (good relationships) with other people. At each developmental stage these two tasks emerge anew and demand more effective capacity to adjust within the personality (Hermans, Hermans-Jansen 2000, p. 288).

For Dąbrowski the crises that occur in human life, which he views as disintegration, including some psychical disorders with the signs of creativity, are positive elements of human development. The 'terminus ad quem' of human development is a free, autonomous, authentic and responsible personality, which is, for the most part, what humanistic and existential psychologists considered to be a mature personality.

Disintegration of the "self" occurs many times and leads to subsequent developmental stages. Through ongoing disintegration crises, the character of this disintegration changes and with time loses its negative character to become more neutral and finally positive. The negative disintegration embraces the instinctual, ambivalent, ambivalent and, to some degree, the transformational levels on which so called positive maladjustment appears. On the fourth level, a sound relationship with other "you's" is created. On the fifth level there is essential transcendence and eventually the transcendental consciousness (cf. Kobierzycki 2001, pp. 211-213).

As we see, Dąbrowski, in opposition to Hermans, points out a concrete end of personality development which involves full integration, a sense of uniqueness and not merely a flexibility of personality as is the case with the Dutch psychologist.

As to the understanding of psychopathology, Hermans describes it in terms of dissociation, that is, limited self-integration. In a sound personality the "self" is polyphonic – it enters into a dialogue with its different positions. In the case of dissociation this dialogue is very limited or even impossible which leads to the fragmentation of the "self", multiple personalities. The latter is an equivalent of psychosis. Disorders (dissociations) with a minor intensity cause a certain stubbornness of the "self" at a particular position, that is, a lack of flexibility. Therapy has as its aim to regain the flexible, fluid functioning of the personality. In this theory, dysfunctions which are the fruit of dissociation do not have any special developmental value, and the therapist tries simply to remove them.

Dąbrowski's approach to the issue of psychopathologies is slightly different. For him, psychosis can be an important step towards personal maturity. This applies especially to the creativeness of the human person. Consequently, psychotic disintegration consists not only of human suffering that has to be removed at all costs, but can rather become an opportunity for the emergence of new qualities which, following the psychotic crisis, will be integrated into the developed personality.

## **Conclusion**

The process of the decentralization of the "self" that had begun in philosophy and was then developed in psychology has led us to some interesting insights into the human person as a complex system of inner dialogs, structures, substructures or actors on the stage. Psychology, with its access to different research tools than those of philosophical anthropology, was able to delineate more distinctly the human personality in all its complexity. Theories of personality, as we have tried to illustrate, often have their philosophical inspiration. Others have pure empirical background and are rather theoretical

generalizations. Both are verified in clinical praxis or by means of special experiments. The concept of the polyphonic, complex "self" has shown itself quite useful in coming to understand complicated human behaviours and choosing adequate therapies.

The main aim of psychotherapy based on the polyphonic "self"-concept is to lead the person to a manner of functioning that allows a flexible and adequate response to the situation and unhindered movement among the "self-positions". Disintegration, in this approach, means a total lack of connection among the particular "selves" (the actors on the inner life stage) and being fixated on only one of them.

The integrating power should be the strongest "self" in the human personality. We have to admit that in such a concept there is less connection to reality and thus the relationship to the objectivity and eventually to the truth is here at stake. Does only my "truth" count?

Integration of this kind may turn out to be dangerous not only for the individual but for society as a whole. Taking this into account, it would be worthwhile to add a postulate of value reference to the process of personality integration around the new stronger "self" and point out a clear end-point to human health and development as does K. Dąbrowski.

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