

An Existential–Spiritual View of the Nature of Man 🗨️

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All activities of man evolve, consciously or unconsciously, in the context of a belief system (paradigm) about the nature of man and his world. Such activities include scientific research, medicine, psychology, economics, etc., and the more profane daily enterprises of people. Living and working in the context of such a paradigm is on the one hand a necessity for one's orientation and acting in the world and of interpersonal communication. On the other hand it limits the understanding of reality and of what is possible (in a Dutch strip story the leading character, a bear, once remarked: "What I don't understand, doesn't exist"). Truly objective action therefore requires making explicit, as far as possible, the assumptions underlying one's thinking and behaviour (the principle of objective subjectivity of modern philosophy of science). This will facilitate an awareness of the possibilities as well as the limitations of one's understanding and way of working. For this reason it is important to summarize in the following the understanding of man's nature in the existential/spiritual paradigm.


1. *Man is a bio-psycho-spiritual unity* in constant mutual relationship (exchange) with the world he lives in. This is not a static but a dynamic, ideally ever evolving, unity and relationship. Within this unity, the biological, the psychological and the spiritual are closely integrated modalities of functioning, each having their own needs and particular modes of experience, intention and expression. The world man lives in includes the dimensions of interpersonal dyadic relationship, family and the history of its generations, neighbourhood, society, culture, nations, nature, the planet and finally the universe defined as the greater whole of all that is in existence. The reciprocal relationship, mentioned earlier, has as its deepest meaning that man is in dialogue with his world. The world (in)forms man and man (in)forms his world. In this sense man (although he is by no means omnipotent) is a co-creator of his world: the way he actively responds to the reality he perceives, has the potential of changing this reality (this is an important insight first gained by quantum physics). It carries serious responsibilities with it, because the direction of change may be negative in the sense of involution or regression (e.g., violence and destruction) as well as positive in the sense of evolution, creativity and enrichment of life.

2. *Each human individual is unique, biologically and psychologically.* This uniqueness concerns his individual make-up, his potential for development and change and his response to environmental conditions. One of the many possible illustrations of biological uniqueness has been given by the geneticist Dobzhansky (1960). He calculated that in principle in man 10^{1000} different gene combinations are possible, a number infinitely greater than the total number of atoms in the universe, and that only an infinitely small fraction of these combinations can be ever realized. Therefore, he concludes, each human individual is the carrier of a unique genotype. Too little account of this fact is usually taken in current clinical medical research, where for example the effects of drugs is studied by comparing the average response of large groups of people. Individual uniqueness does not deny the fact that (roughly) similar patterns of biological and psychological constitution, development and response may be distinguished among different groups of individuals. However, in existential/spiritual counselling the emphasis is on uniqueness. This has important implications for the design of psychological interventions and research designs. Standardization of the format and the time sequence of interventions is in discord with this principle and may potentially reduce their effectiveness or even produce undesirable results. Interventions have to be tailored to the individual, his biography, his present psycho-spiritual stage of development and his life situation at the moment. Similar requirements must be posed to the instruments used for the evaluation of intervention outcome.

3. Subjective experience is the ground of being of man, rather than the intellect and thought. This is contrary to Descartes' famous sentence: "I think, therefore I am". It is in experiencing that man finds and creates himself and his world. Subjectivity paradoxically is an objective fact. In this context it is interesting to look at the root of the word *fact*. The latin *factum* is the past participle of *facere*: to do, to make, and therefore means: *that what has been made*. Thus it refers back to the concept of man as being a co-creator in the previous paragraph. Man through his subjectivity is an (active) actor on the stage, literally making his reality, as the quantum physicist Bohm has stated. In practice, this "fact" has to be taken account of in psychology, medicine and scientific research. An illustration of this is a study of Stephen Locke in the field of psychoneuroimmunology. He studied the effect of life events on natural killer (NK) cell activity in a group of students. Only when account was taken of the individual student's experience of a particular life event, significant differences in NK-cell activity between students could be established. To paraphrase the results of this study: these students were "making" their immunological reality. The experiential tradition in psychotherapy derives its name from the realization of the primacy of experiencing.

4. Intentionality is at the heart of human consciousness, says Rollo May. It underlies man's capacity to attend (attention), intend (intention), choose and will. Rollo May defines intentionality as "the structure that gives meaning to experience". Intentionality focusses our experience and thus, through our intentions, the way we *perceive* the world and *direct* our actions in the world. From this insight stems the notion in psychosynthesis theory that *will precedes consciousness*. The other side of the coin, as Rollo May states, is that intentionality involves response from the world, the object (such as other people) and thus is a bridge which partially overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object. Most importantly: "It is in intentionality and will that the human being experiences his identity". Thus there is the sequence of "I conceive → I can → I will → I am". And finally, essential for psychotherapy: "he (man) experiences the identity *in the action*" (and not before it). Restating this in a slightly different way, the sequence becomes: my experience, which is equal to my truth, → my process (of intentionality and rendering meaning) → my existence and self-realisation.

This view may liberate man from the Cartesian principle of determinism: within limits man has degrees of freedom. His reality is much more in line with that described by quantum physics with its principles of probabilism and uncertainty: through intentionality man co-determines which *scenario* of all possible scenarios becomes the most probable and thus manifests in the world, whether this concerns an individual's life scenario or that of humanity as a whole.

Interestingly, as I have mentioned elsewhere , neurophysiological research has demonstrated the effects on the human brain of the closely related functions of attention and intention. By computerized electroencephalography it was shown by a number of investigators that both attention and intention are accompanied by electric potentials diffusely spread over the cortex of both halves of the brain. These diffuse electric potentials can be clearly distinguished in time from the local firing of neurons in the somatosensory or motor cortex, respectively, of one half of the brain. During attention the local electrical activity at the somatosensory cortex precedes the diffuse wave, whereas during intention local electrical activity at the motor cortex follows the diffuse electrical wave. When no attention or intention are exercised by the experimental subject, only local and no diffuse potentials can be measured. It is exciting that the principle of: will precedes consciousness, has its neurophysiological correlates. But, even more important, it puts severely at question the notion that man is entirely determined by his brain activity and that his experience of consciousness and will are either illusory or just "epiphenomena" of brain function. The opposite may be true: attention and intention regulate brain activity. Here again it seems that the principle of determinism must give way to that of probabilism.

5. Man has the capacity of being a witness to his experience and his responses. He can be the witness but often is not, because he may be identified to such an extent and so much of his time with parts of himself, such as feelings, thoughts, roles and activities, or with objects in the environment, that he has no access to the witness or observer. Being one's witness therefore requires *disidentification* from all objects, whether inner or outer. The witness is not the same as self-reflexion, often described as the capacity which distinguishes man from animals. Self-reflexion is a mental activity, while the witness is pure, non-judgemental, awareness. Being the witness is accompanied by a deep felt sense of freedom, stillness, peace, clarity, detachment, inner strength and invulnerability. Being the witness is neutral, non-reactive, awareness of what is unfolding from moment to moment in the here and now in one's inner world (thoughts, feelings, body sensations, impulses, behavioral patterns) and in the outer world, experienced through all one's senses. Being the witness does not equal passivity. Ideally one can be in this position during one's daily work, communication with others, etc. It is, as it is called in certain eastern traditions, action in non-action. It is one of the purposes of meditative practices to exercise this capacity. Finally, being one's witness, the state of witness awareness, facilitates the connection to the spiritual dimension of man. It may be seen as the royal road to spirituality, the contentless, formless and timeless context of life, both personal and universal.

Apart from this, the exercise of witness or observer awareness through disidentification has great practical importance, especially for people with life-threatening and chronic illnesses. If successful, one is no longer overwhelmed by pain, fear, despair and existential "angst" and loneliness. This does not mean that one doesn't have these painful feelings anymore, but that one is no longer entirely controlled by them. Consequently, it may restore or create a new perspective on one's life and life situation and render meaning to whatever time is left to existence.

6. Man has an innate tendency towards self-actualization. Once a person has to a certain measure attained his basic needs: the physiological needs, and the needs for safety, belongingness and love, and self-esteem, he experiences the urge towards self-actualization or self-realization. In Maslow's words: "to become actualized in what he is potentially ... to become everything that one is capable of becoming". Or as Rogers has formulated it: "To be that self which one truly is". This need is related to having a sense of direction and purpose in life, of having a "mission", however modest, a longing to "beat-out one's own special song in life" as Lawrence Leshan has said. To be able to speak-out one's own truth, even if that truth differs from or even seems to be contrary to that of others. It involves an *ongoing* process of realizing and creatively expressing one's potentials, expanding possibilities, choices and degrees of freedom, even in the face of the (unavoidable) risk of increasing vulnerability. It involves the urge to make meaning in and of life, what Frankl has characterized as the *will to meaning*, even under the pressure of utterly desolate circumstances such as existed in the German concentration camps. So strong is this urge, that it apparently may sometimes transcend the basic needs mentioned earlier. Whenever this fundamental *existential* need is frustrated, man falls victim to existential despair, shame, guilt, fear and loneliness, which in its turn inevitably leads to self-destruction (such as drug abuse) and violence, either directed towards oneself, or others and the world.


Seen from a slightly different perspective, self-actualization or self-realization can be seen as a process of continuous evolution of the person towards a greater and more harmonious and coherent whole. This involves an integration of all aspects of the personality: body, feelings, mind, subpersonalities, persona and shadow around the ego as the central principle which directs the person's life and is the seat of personal consciousness. This evolution also involves the actualization of the person's special qualities, previously unconscious and unrealized. This process can be described as *existential transformation*.


7. *Man is capable of self-transcendence.* Many people have experienced brief moments where one feels one with all life, nature, all creatures, the universe. In transpersonal psychology such moments are described as peak-experiences. All boundaries between the person and the world seem to have melted away. This experience is accompanied by feelings such as utter happiness, unconditional love, fulfilment, awe, serenity, bliss, grace and undescrivable beauty. All personal concerns and fears have disappeared. The peak experience is one instance of transcendental states of consciousness being variously described as unitive consciousness, universal awareness, cosmic consciousness, ground of being, or spiritual consciousness (Lajoie and Shapiro, J. *Transpers. Psychology*: 24, 79, 1992). As Wilber has repeatedly emphasized (Wilber, *Revision*, 3, 51, 1980), these states have to be clearly distinguished from narcissistic consciousness (or the oceanic state). The latter is a *prepersonal* (pre-rational) state of consciousness, occurring before the child is able to differentiate himself from his environment or during certain types of psychopathological regression. Transcendent states of consciousness are *transpersonal* (trans-rational): the person still has awareness of himself as an individual. However, the transpersonal state of consciousness *includes* the personal so that a boundary is no longer experienced. One senses himself as being connected to and part of a greater whole. As a result there is a realization that on this level of being one in fact cannot be harmed.

A typical example of a transcendent state of consciousness has been described during a near death experience (NDE) by people who, due to various causes, have had an episode of clinical or impending death. I have reviewed this phenomenon elsewhere (). The NDE may have a profound effect of psychological healing. After the NDE people state to have a sense of being reborn, having an increased appreciation of life and, importantly, to have less fear of death. They experience themselves as having become a stronger person, having more self-confidence and self-esteem and being more compassionate and tolerant in their relationships with others. They account having acquired a new sense of direction and purpose in life and a *sense of universality and connectedness to other beings, nature and the world*. The transformation these people have gone through (though it may not last) can be described as a form of *spiritual transformation*. This particular type of transformation has to be distinguished from the process of existential transformation described in the previous paragraph.

8. *Man is an embodied soul.* A fundamental assumption in existential/spiritual counselling is that there is a principle which is the essence of the nature of man. This principle has been described in different traditions of psychology and mysticism among others as soul, higher self, Self, Big Mind, Over Mind, contentless being, suchness, creative void. In psychosynthesis the Self is seen as the context and the guiding principle for the psyche and personality, states Yeomans. The Self is contentless pure being. It is also the context for a life-time. It can be likened to the concept of the morphogenetic field in developmental biology: the morphogenetic field directs and contains the information needed for the sequential development of the fertilized egg into a fully grown organism (embryogenesis). So the Self can be seen as a field, containing the information and the direction for the step by step process of Self-realization. Therefore the basic task of a psychotherapist is to align himself with his client's Self and helping him to remove the impediments in the personality and the psyche for the Self to express itself. For this is needed the therapist's trust that ultimately the client's Self "knows what has to happen", moment to moment. Though the person is most of the time unaware of his Self, in being the witness or observer he may from time to time, and during continuing practice increasingly so, establish and experience a connection to the Self.

As said in the introduction, the Self is also the bridge to the spiritual dimension, it serves as the connection between individuality and universality. A very clear and therefore most important

illustration of this connection is occurring during and after the near death experience. Another aspect of the NDE may be considered to be possibly a direct empirical evidence of the existence of the Self. During what some authors have classified as the transcendental stage of the NDE, people have described a phenomenon of "seeing a light", "entering the light", or the meeting with a "being of light". As I have argued elsewhere , this light or being of light is not some ghost but actually may be a projection of the person's Self. As one woman who had experienced an NDE told me: "Sometimes (the light) was outside me and then again it was me". People have described certain qualities of the light which are similar to those experienced in certain transcendental states of consciousness, such as occurring during meditative practices and peak experiences: wisdom, unconditional acceptance of the person, compassion, joy, serenity and goodwill.

In order to express itself in the world, the Self literally needs to become embodied: to have at its disposal the sensory and the motor apparatus of the body. This is not only a theoretical consideration, it has very practical consequences for existential/spiritual counseling. As we will discuss in another chapter, we have over the years met many people with cancer who experienced serious difficulties of "being in their bodies". One symptom of this is a (sometimes total) lack of body awareness. We suspect that this is the result of a hurt they suffered in early childhood: the hurt of not having been welcomed (an example is the case of an unwanted child). The concept of man as an embodied soul has also practical consequences at the end of life: the guidance of the dying person. In medicine and psychology very little is known about the facilitation of the dying process (such in contrast to the process of birth): the letting go of the Self of its body and embodied life. Helping the person complete unfinished business in the family and other relationships, in our experience is one way of facilitating letting go. This includes the explicitly verbalized permission of close relatives for the person to go in peace. Meditation techniques, such as disidentification and Self-identification may be another (Wilber in his book "Grace and Grit"). The "art of midwifery" at the end of life possibly may, at least to some degree, render the ethical problems around euthanasia less relevant .

In this context I want to address the question of the possibility of some form of after-life of the Self or soul. I can respond to this question only in a personal way. My answer is: I don't know. I personally have no experience of existence beyond my life now. So, I neither want to deny nor affirm the possibility of the permanence of Self or soul. Many people have taken the near death experience as evidence of after-life. I strongly disagree with this assumption: the NDE is not an experience after death because it occurs in people who, though in a life-threatening condition, were still alive (even the condition of clinical death doesn't equate that of death). In addition I have the concern that a belief in some form of after-life (such as reincarnation) may facilitate avoiding fully living one's life now. The central thesis of existential/spiritual counselling is to help people becoming alive and actualizing their potentials *this life*. This doesn't imply that counselors should not take seriously people who report memories of previous lives. I personally do. Whether "real" to me or not is irrelevant because such experiences may be extremely valuable for helping the person who reports these, to heal wounds of the past, learn to more fully express themselves, to improve the quality of their relationships with other people and change their lives in a way that is more fulfilling and meaningful to them.

9. *All human knowledge is, and will remain, partial.* This view is contrary to the ideals of modern positivistic thinking in the natural sciences: ultimately the scientific endeavour will lead us to complete knowledge and understanding. The notable exception again is quantum physics which has shown us that at any time we can have only a notion of one of several possible manifestations of physical reality, each of these excluding or contradicting the others. In the previous paragraph I already pointed out the not knowing in relation to the possibility of after-life. Accepting the not-knowing and the willingness to stand in and bear one's not-knowing can be, as has been my own

experience, very painful, confusing and at times frightening. It can be likened to "the dark night" of one of the mystical works of Saint John of the Cross. It is the not-knowing that has marked the lives and spurred the creativity of the great artists and scientists through the times. Avoiding the not-knowing, precisely because it may be so painful, may lead to all sorts of illusory existence and can even have dangerous consequences, such as intolerance, sectarianism, "guru-ism", power trips and abuse. In the context of existential/spiritual counseling the willingness to stand in and, paradoxically, trust one's not-knowing is the basic stance required of the therapist or counselor. Only then will he be able to stay fully with his own and his clients' experience, to trust his own and his clients' *truth*, from moment to moment. The inability to do so, may lead to false judgements and, worse, to the pretension that one knows what is good for the other, thus disempowering him and denying his own unique truth. However, there is a reward: again and again I am perplexed and awed by the fact that *when* I am able to "sustain" (which I am often not), wonders can happen, usually in totally unexpected ways, in which my clients and I myself become alive.

I have decribed in these pages a view of the nature of man which is essentially an evolutionary model. Man is subject to an ongoing natural evolution on the physical, emotional, mental, existential, relational and spiritual levels. The emphasis in this model is different from that of the usual medical and psychotherapeutical model, which is more illness and pathology oriented. Existential/spiritual counselling has its emphasis not on disease (that what is wrong with this person) but on healing in its original sense of becoming whole (that what is good in this person). The healing process is a natural process: if unimpeded "it goes by itself". The task of the healer is not so much to "make it happen" as to assist by removing the impediments. The work can be compared to that of a gardener, removing the weeds and creating air and space for growth, rather than trying to "pull out the grass".