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The Mystical Self in Psychotherapy:
A Dialogue with Richard Schwartz, Sigmund Freud, Romain Rolland, Martin Heidegger,
Joan Stambaugh and Zen Buddhism

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This paper aims at providing (a) a philosophical determination, based on textual analysis, of the notion of the Self in certain psychotherapeutic practices, (b) a cursory ontological elucidation of that notion of the Self, and (c) in light of the ontology, a pointing towards what realization of the Self means, with an assessment of certain claims made about the Self. Our understanding of psychotherapy is broad and we are interested in the being of the Self. Although there are a handful of psychotherapeutic practices where notions of the “Self” play a role – such as *Core Energetics* (Pierrakos, 1987) and *The Hakomi Method* (Kurtz, 2007) – the *Inner Family Systems Model* developed by Richard Schwartz (1995) will provide our point of departure.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we’ll come up with a relatively simple philosophical determination of what the Self is by examining what Richard Schwartz says about it. Schwartz is a psychotherapist and doesn’t write in a philosophical idiom, so we’ll need to interpret. What is essential to the Self, we’ll argue, is the non-duality¹ of self and world; that is, their merger or identification. This theme appears in religious, spiritual, esoteric, mystical, etc. writings and practices. In this context, we’ll claim that what is at issue is the non-substantiality of what is often called self, subject or ego.

Second, as point of departure for the ontological elucidation, we’ll scrutinize this notion of the Self in dialogue with Sigmund Freud. The Viennese founder of psychoanalysis famously denied, in a way we’ll need to clarify, the reality in the “oceanic feeling.” This is the term that his friend, Romain Rolland, the French Nobel Prize-winning writer, introduced to him in a correspondence about religion, and which Freud

¹ Concerning the complexity, from an intellectual perspective, of the issue of non-duality in Eastern and Western philosophies, see (Loy, 1988).

defined in his book *Civilization and its Discontents* as a “feeling of being one with the external world as a whole” (1962, p. 12). We’ll dissect Freud’s psychoanalytic explanation of the oceanic feeling and more closely consider Rolland’s mysticism. We’ll argue that Freud lacked ontological insight and misunderstood Rolland. In revealing how this is so, we’ll more clearly intimate the nature of the Self and gain deeper insight into the meaning of the oceanic feeling. This discussion will lean on the works of Martin Heidegger and Joan Stambaugh. Stambaugh translated Heidegger’s thinking into English and, in her own writings, explicitly opened a philosophical dialogue with Zen Buddhism.

Third, and finally, we’ll attempt to point towards what realization of the Self means. In order to delineate something not easily sayable in traditional philosophical categories, we’ve chosen the terms *ontological achievement or insight* to evoke this existential knowledge which is prior to the dichotomy of theory and practice. In light of our conclusions, we’ll reconsider Freud’s perspective and briefly assess certain positive claims made about the Self. We remark that, despite our apparent ability to speak about the Self generally, realization of the Self is infinitely particular, so it remains to be seen in each case what happens. We’ll preserve openness to experience by relying on the rather laconic phrase: “We know it when we see it.”

The substance of psychotherapeutic practice arguably lies in methodology or technique. Although a study of the methodology of the *Inner Family Systems Model* might give us clues for our philosophical determination of the Self, we’ll limit our analysis to what Richard Schwartz has written about the Self directly.

Further removed from methodology is theory. Concerning that, the following summary of Schwartz (1995) should suffice: according to IFS, the person is an internal system of psychic parts or sub-personalities. The need for therapy arises from disharmony within this system. Each person has a core Self that is to be differentiated from the parts. The therapist's task is to help clients access the Self, which is seen as playing a leadership role in harmonizing the system.

Schwartz discovered through experience what he calls the Self (Schwartz, 2018). During therapy sessions in the early 1980s he found that when he trusted himself he was able to help clients with eating disorders differentiate from disharmonious parts of themselves. They would enter into a state of calmness, openness, and compassion. Led by his curiosity, he asked them what part was present. They responded that it was their true self. Over the years he learned to trust the healing power of the Self (Schwartz, 2018).

Unable to explain what was going on in clinical terms, Schwartz began a novice's exploration into the literature of spirituality and religion. There he discovered "a mother lode of esoteric writings by sages, holy seekers, wise men and women, who emphasized meditative and contemplative techniques as a means of coming to know their Self" (Schwartz, 2018). Schwartz claims that all the esoteric traditions² within the major religions emphasize the same thing: that we are manifestations of "the absolute ground of being" (Schwartz, 2018).

Schwartz describes the Self in various ways. Clients "lose their sense of separateness and feel an exhilarating connection to or merger with the universe" (Schwartz, 1995, p. 105). He likens the Self to meditative states. Schwartz emphasizes,

² While this may be the case, the sweeping claim clashes with both academic decorum and healthy curiosity.

however, that the Self is not only a passive, nonjudgmental observer, in the tradition of Eastern religions,³ but also an active leader. Here we'd like to point out that the Self as passive observer seems to imply some degree of separation from the world. We'll return to this vaguely Heideggerian problematic. In keeping with our thesis that what is essential to Self is the nonduality of self and world, the Self must be as it were prior to activity and passivity.⁴ Along the way we'll understand this better.

Schwartz wants to resolve the problem in describing the Self as both passive observer and active leader (why this needs to be resolved is not yet clear to us). To do so, he relies on an interesting metaphor. Just as in quantum physics, light is a particle and a wave, the Self can be in its expansive wavelike state when a person is meditating and then shift to being an individual with boundaries when it is dealing with other people. On the basis of this figure of thought, Schwartz (1995) concludes that the Self is "both an individual and a state of consciousness" (p. 107).

This passage in Schwartz' book is somewhat murky. Why does Schwartz need to use this interesting light metaphor to say what he means? Is it mysterious that something should be two things at once? He claims that the Self is a state of consciousness *and* an individual. But don't individuals *have* states of consciousness? Here we'd like some philosophical clarification.

³ This is, most likely, a poor interpretation of Eastern religions. Loy (1988) explores the notion of nondual *action* in Eastern philosophy and religion, where there is "no awareness of an agent as distinct from its actions" (p. 96).

⁴ For an extended study, in the context of Immanuel Kant's philosophy, of the bifurcation of human being into the active (rational) and passive (sensory) faculties, see (Heidegger, 1997).

That the Self should be a passive observer and an active leader doesn't seem at all problematic to common sense. Yet Schwartz' intuition has run into an unarticulated problem which impels him to use metaphors, the language of deeper thinking – that is, the problem: how do we account for individuality if the Self is the world? Here we need to think identity in difference, which we won't be able to do if we remain at the surface level of logic. The problem of difference in oneness with the world becomes acute, at this level, when we think about action, for action seems to imply an agent or individual.

Schwartz is struggling to express the nonduality of self and world. The “passive observer” he identifies with the world as a whole – this is the “expansive wavelike state of consciousness.” In the case of action, however, he still speaks of an “individual” or “particle.” Nonetheless, by and large in the canon of Western philosophy both actor *and* observer are thought to be separate from the world; thus, either way, this goes against Schwartz' “merger with the universe.”

We are pushing against the limits of language. Calling the Self individual and state of consciousness is perhaps a concession to our usual way of speaking about things. But this encourages confusion. We get the idea that there is some *thing*, the Self, which has the qualities of being sometimes an individual and sometimes the world. But – and for now we say this without proper elucidation – there is no *thing* or substantial self. The Self *is* the world and the world *is* the Self. Neither are things. The notion of process would be a compromise.

To make sense of this, let's reuse the light metaphor. Light is not some substantial entity, X, which has the quality of being both particle and wave. Light *is* particle and wave. There is no *thing* behind the particles and the waves. We won't be able to

investigate further this problematic which, in a vaguely Kantian sense, leads into the heart of Western metaphysics.

Our claim is that Schwartz' figures of thought are pointing toward the nonduality of self and world. The Self can be written about in many ways, but only the ontological achievement is *the ontological achievement*. That is why Richard Schwartz, who presumably has no philosophical training (as we're calling it these days), can seemingly have an insight that is seldom evidenced in the canon of Western philosophy.

In his book *The Future of an Illusion* Freud had pejoratively analyzed the "common man's" religion. After its publication in 1927, he sent a copy to his friend, Romain Rolland, the French writer and mystic. Responding in a letter,⁵ Rolland praised Freud for exposing an adolescent form of belief among the masses, but also wrote that Freud had missed the true source of religious sentiment, what Rolland called *une sentiment océanique* (Parsons, 1998).

In 1930 Freud provided in his book *Civilization and its Discontents* a psychoanalytic explanation for the oceanic feeling. Freud argued that the feeling was a psychological relic of infantile narcissism; that is, regression to when the infant hadn't differentiated its self from the world.

As a point of departure for our cursory ontological elucidation of the Self, we'll shed light on the inadequacy of Freud's thinking for understanding Rolland's oceanic feeling. Sounding the depth of Freud's thoughts will lead us into dialogue with Martin Heidegger. We'll round off the ontological elucidation with a more detailed consideration

⁵ For the details of this correspondence that lasted until Freud's death, see (Fisher, 1976).

of Rolland's mysticism – which was more *thoughtful* than Freud's book reveals. Here we'll draw on Joan Stambaugh's comparative study of the philosophy of Buddhism, which will lead us into our concluding remarks about the Self.

Freud's train of thought is quite short. Examining it reveals a track that leads us into the history of Western philosophy.

Without considering in the least the philosophical foundations of so-called scientific empiricism, Freud complains that it's not easy to deal scientifically with feelings. For his part, he cannot discover in himself the oceanic feeling. He continues: There is usually nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our ego as distinct from the external world. However, sometimes the boundaries with the world seem to dissolve, such as in certain pathological states and “at the height of being in love” (Freud, 1962, p. 13). These considerations admit of the fluidity of what Freud calls, vaguely enough, “ego-feeling.” This makes room for a psychoanalytic explanation of the oceanic feeling. Freud presumes that the adult's ego-feeling must have gone through a process of development: The infant at the breast has not yet distinguished “its” ego from the external world as the source of sensations. When the breast is withdrawn, the infant cries. For the first time, an object in the external world is set against the infant's ego, beginning a process of ego-differentiation. Freud speculates that the primitive ego-feeling of a bond with the universe can coexist with the mature ego-feeling of separation.

Now, an oddity that should give us pause is: If we're dealing with an *ego-feeling*, it's not clear why the *feeling* of a separate ego has ontological privilege over Rolland's *feeling* that the ego is one with the world. What, indeed, do feelings have to do with ontology – that is, with the nature of “reality”? We'll get clearer about this as we more

closely consider Rolland's mysticism. For now, we'll remark that the oceanic feeling is not a *feeling* in the narrow sense of something *irrational*. It is, rather, something non-rational – *intuition* – to which Freud is blind. Freud's relation to being is, as it were, exclusively bifurcated into the rational (reason) and irrational (senses), where the rational has privilege – and who knows why? – in determining what is real. All of this is bound up with Freud's *subjectivism* – that is, with his positing a substantial self, or reified subject. We'll understand this better as we proceed in our cursory ontological elucidation of the Self. Now, let's sound Freud's thinking more deeply.

To the unsuspecting reader, the plausibility of Freud's explanation – which hangs ontologically over an abyss – is preserved by the fogginess of his usage of the term “ego.” The poor ego of psychodynamic theory, embattled on both sides by the id and super-ego, is not the “ego” called into question by the oceanic feeling. To gain insight into this problematic, we need to orient our thinking toward the “ego” as the condition for the possibility of knowledge. This “ego” appears in Western philosophy as the reified subject. It is usually conceived as the metaphysical basis upon which someone like Freud could, in the first place, come up with psychoanalytic theory – the subject is, in other words, usually mistaken for the absolute foundation for thought. The matter is more complex than we're able to intimate; nonetheless, this “subject” appears in one way or another, for example, in the thought of René Descartes and Edmund Husserl, and its main quality, which is well-articulated in Immanuel Kant's philosophy, is its substantiality – that is, its thingness, its remaining one and the same.⁶ Kant claimed that the basis

⁶ It is fascinating to note that, later in the book, after Freud draws an analogy between the vestigial in species evolution and the development of the mind – i.e. the primitive oceanic feeling exists alongside the more mature ego-feeling – he turns to

provided by the transcendental apperception (“ego”), was the condition for the possibility of cognizing any object at all (Richardson, 1974, p. 120).

Thus Freud, fully unaware, *presupposes* the substantial subject – that is, the ego separated from the world. For, in what does Freud’s posited ego-feeling *inhere*? How could the infant’s ego *develop*, if “it” never had an ego? *Where* is the “ego-feeling”? If on the other hand the infant always “had” an ego, presumably no “ego-feeling” of any kind would change that. Freud’s psychoanalytic explanation of the oceanic feeling, which is just murky enough to seem coherent, simply maintains the Western metaphysical status quo. Freud missed the point. His explanation is not an adequate response to Rolland, but reveals that Rolland’s mysticism was unsettling enough that it caused the monumental thinker, Freud, to write a book.

In order to better understand what the Self calls into question – namely, the substantiality of the subject, on the one hand, and the separation of the subject from the world, on the other – we’ll introduce a small portion of Martin Heidegger’s thinking in a rough-and-ready fashion. The relation of these matters to what, in our analysis of Freud’s thinking, we called, vaguely enough, *rationality* and *subjectivism* should become clearer. This, in turn, should give us insight into Romain Rolland’s oceanic feeling.

Being and Time was published in 1927, the year of Rolland’s letter. In showing step by step how Dasein (human being) is being-in-the-world, Heidegger revealed that the worldless self is an “illusion.” There is no self that gazes out at the world from

“the more general problem of preservation in the mind” (Freud, 1962, p. 16). By this he means memory – which is, indirectly, a temporal problematic having to do with the substantiality of the subject. Freud landed in the correct domain of inquiry.

somewhere outside it. We note that *Being and Time* does not present a theory; rather, studying it is a process that we can “go through.”

Heidegger’s insight was that Dasein is not thing-like but temporal. The so-called “temporalization of consciousness” is the key to unraveling the substantiality of the subject, but we can’t discuss it here.⁷ Dasein is *ecstatic* temporality, which means that past, present, and future are somehow unified. Also very important in this inextricable constellation of insights, is the *ontological difference*. This expresses the insight that Being is not any particular being or thing. What’s more, Being is not to be confused with everything that is, nor with some overarching substance. Being is never a thing.

In 1955-56 Heidegger held a lecture course, *The Principle of Reason*. An oversimplification of a few ideas will help reveal how what we’re calling rationality (reason) and subjectivism hang together. The lectures are an investigation of the fundamental axiom that says: nothing is without reason. (In other words, everything must have a reason or cause.) Heidegger claims that the principle holds our thinking in thrall before we ask where it comes from, or from whence it speaks. He points out that it wasn’t until the 17th century that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz explicitly formulated it. Thus the principle of reason took Western European thought about 2,000 years. Heidegger opines that we’re not yet awake enough to wonder at this oddity (Heidegger, 1991).

Heidegger investigates how Leibniz’ formulated the principle and what he wrote about it. One formulation was the “*principium reddendae rationis*” and Leibniz called it a mighty principle. The Latin means: “principle of giving back the reason.” The reason

⁷ For a discussion of this issue, see Chapter 4 (Stambaugh, 1986).

must be rendered, namely, to the *subject*. This is what Heidegger calls representational thinking, and it is fundamental to Western European thought.

Now, in relation to our discussion of Freud and the Self, we are interested in how rationality comes to determine what is “real.” In order to see how this works, we’ll cite Heidegger directly:

The principium reddendae rationis now says: something "is," which means, can be identified as being a being, only if it is stated in a sentence that satisfies the fundamental principle of reason [...] What is mighty about the principle of reason displays its power in that the principium reddendae rationis [...] also counts, precisely in being the fundamental principle of cognition, as the Principle for everything that is. (Heidegger, 1991, p. 23)

Freud, whose thought was determined by Western metaphysics, can’t see how an oceanic “feeling” – that is, not a reason in the form of a statement rendered to a subject, but an intuition – can say anything about what *is*.

In 1888 Romain Rolland wrote an essay, *Credo quia verum* (“I believe because it is true”), detailing his religious and philosophical views (Parsons, 1998). As an adolescent Rolland had had several mystical experiences, but only some years later did he begin to concern himself with abstract ideas (Parsons, 1998). “Intuition” as formulated in Spinoza’s *Ethics* gave Rolland a point of departure for formulating his philosophy (Parsons, 1998).

Parsons (1988) suggests that the crux of Rolland’s mysticism is contained in his phrase: “I feel, therefore It is.” Rolland attempted to explain what he meant:

[...] In each sensation Being affirms itself, without limits ... When I say: "I feel, therefore there is something," I don't place emphasis on the word "something" but rather on the fact of existence, which is simple and without restriction. . . . It is. It is any sensation. No sensation is truly It; [...]

It is absolutely necessary [...] that Being be – not this or that – but anything (all things)[...].

In this sensation, past and future meld into one, as into an eternal present. (as cited in Parsons, 1988)

Rolland's thinking is not conceptually nuanced, but it seems that he was aware of ecstatic temporality and, although he refers to Being as all things, it's possible that he was grappling with the ontological difference.

We are at risk of getting lost among too many imprecise words. Many years after writing the essay cited, Rolland formulated the insight as follows: "At bottom each mind and what is convenient to call nature share the same reality..." (as cited in Parsons, 1998). In other words, Rolland saw, in a particular way, the non-duality of self and world.

Furthermore:

Rolland held that scientists should stop dissociating reason from intuition.

Scientists should acknowledge the legitimacy of "generative intuitions" in all mental activity, including theory building and interpretation. They should be aware that another reality existed "outside of reason and the senses." (Fisher, 1976, p. 30)

The oceanic feeling is not a "sensation," but another mode of "knowing" – what we have indicated with the blanket term "non-rational." Intuition in this sense does not

open the floodgates for consideration of all sensational outcries about the nature of reality. To the contrary, it requires depth and rigor of thought to distinguish non-rational modes of knowing. Indeed, Rolland claimed that the oceanic feeling did not interrupt his critical faculties (Parsons, 1998).

To complete our discussion of Rolland's mysticism, we'll intimate once more what the non-substantiality of the subject has to do with the non-duality of self and world, that is, with the Self. Typical for Western philosophy is to think human being as a thing/substance with various faculties (e.g., reason and senses).⁸ However, as Stambaugh (1986) points out:

In all these approaches [to the self] the problem of the relation of the various faculties [...] to the so-called "self" remains obscure. Is the self something which "has" these faculties? [...] Is the self the "subjective" counterpart to the "substantiality" of the object? For both terms, subject and substance have the same basic etymological meaning: to stand or throw under, to underlie and persist through change. (p. 72-73)

It turns out that taking this question seriously has vast ontological consequences. We are asked to think a new "unity" of the self (Stambaugh, 1986, p. 73), which is not at all *subjective*.

By now it should be clearer why Richard Schwartz got hung up on the question whether the Self is an active leader or passive observer: The standard model of the worldless self with rational (active) and irrational (passive) faculties doesn't match his

⁸ It's clear to us that the so-called "black box" in cognitive science and contemporary Anglophone philosophy of mind is another variation on the reified subject, with its active and passive faculties: in this case its "inputs and outputs."

insight of being one with the universe. We recall that Schwartz says the Self is active and passive, but we're claiming that Schwartz witnessed a more original essence of human being.

Here's what we mean. In Western philosophy, the essence of human being is usually determined by rationality. Reason belongs to "free will" and sets human being apart because it seems that reason "processes" sensations allowing one to "make sense of the world," get hold of it. This rational thought supposedly happens "inside" the subject.⁹ But the real problem is how the isolated subject-self-thing underlying the faculties ever gets back to the world at all. Leaving that problem aside, one claims that the "rational animal" can "lift itself out" of its environment in order to rule the world with reason. It can, however, never do that. It is one with the "environment." The nonduality of self and world reveals this anthropocentrism as an illusory ontological fundament, removing man from the center and putting him back into a more original relationship with Being, to which he *belongs*.

We've called realization of the Self an *ontological achievement*. This is because, no matter how much we talk about it, we never realize the Self that we are until we have insight. We can't describe this in the jargon of most Western philosophy, which is shot through with rational subjectivism.

Stambaugh (1999) claims that Zen Buddhist thinking merges self and world with a total lack of reification or objectification of either (p. ix). In order to explain what we

⁹ For more about the "cabinet of consciousness" in relation to Heidegger and Buddhism, see (Stambaugh, 1999, p. 22)

mean by *ontological achievement*, we'll cite Stambaugh's (1986) understanding of the "way" in Buddhism:

In regard to the term "method," it means literally "way" (*methodos*), and the Buddhist understands it in the profoundly existential sense of a path [...] leading not to just a *knowledge* of reality, but ultimately to *becoming* that reality itself [...] This is the "mystical strain" so predominant in Eastern thought in general [...] But the "mysticism" in Buddhism [...] is unable and unwilling to speak of any kind of "union" of the soul with God [...] yet it can speak in some sense of "becoming the reality." (p. 96)

In conclusion, we'll evaluate remarks about the Self and human being in light of our ontological elucidation.

Richard Schwartz (2018) says that it often doesn't take years of meditative practice to access the Self, because it exists in all of us, just below the surface. We maintain a kind-hearted skepticism towards this claim. Schwartz is, however, speaking from *experience*. But perhaps clients are just reacting positively to Schwartz' openness and kindness. Admittedly, it's not easy to say what this has to do with the Self of our ontological elucidation. It may be, however, that unwavering presence in the shared situation (Self is world) is the most effective psychotherapy – not the psychoanalyst's violence in treating the analysand as an object (which, as we've seen, is a fitting approach in the context of Western metaphysics.)

Schwartz (2018) claims: "[T]he most important variable in how quickly clients can access their Self is the degree to which I am fully present and Self-led." The

importance of the guru in Hinduism is well known, as is the fact that Zen teachings are given immediately from master to student. Neither are such face to face relationships foreign to Western philosophy.

Does realizing the Self make one a good person? We won't mention Heidegger's life, providing more fodder for meaningless speculation. We point out that being a good person has to do with what one *should be*, whereas realization of the Self has to do with becoming one with *what is*. This is not any kind of ethics in the usual sense of the word.

Whereas Schwartz says that everyone has a compassionate true Self, there seems to be no end to the bleak things that Freud says about human beings. For Freud (1962), the origin of religious feelings is the need for consolation permanently sustained by fear of the superior power of Fate (p. 19). But ontological insight into the non-duality of self and world renders Freud's speculations meaningless. The Self "is" Fate. The need to escape reality is based on the illusion that the self is an isolated thing separate from the world. There is nothing but embrace.

Regarding what Freud says about human existence, we are not going to argue against that, given what is plain to read in the history books. However, these facts do not add up to an ontological determination of human being. Freud, the explorer of the irrational is, as we've seen, much too rational. The Self points towards a more original relationship to Being. Psychoanalytic theory is part of the Self, not its determination.

Finally, it seems to us that the insight that the Self is the "universe" leads to a particular kind of fearlessness. This fearlessness is open-heartedness, an open heart that is infinitely unique but which encompasses everything.

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