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Neoplatonism and Analytical Psychology
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The Quaker pioneer, John Woolman, and a Moravian pastor were one day deep in conversation. Among those listening to them was the Native American leader, Chief Papunahung. He did not understand English and yet he listened attentively to the entire discussion. Afterwards he said, “I love to feel where words come from.”ⁱ

Any psychotherapist can appreciate his feeling. We have many ways of talking about where words come from – transference, internal objects, projections, introjects, subpersonalities, archetypal images and autonomous complexes. We have identified a host of inner voices and perspectives. Among these many voices we are listening for the voice of the self. How we imagine or theorise this self is bound to influence where we pitch our listening, how we cock our inner ear. This paper is written from the point of view of a psychotherapist trying to sort out his ideas about the self in order to listen better to where words come from. I am doing this by comparing the work of three neoplatonists to that of three analytical psychologists.

The neoplatonists are Plotinus (204-270 AD), Proclus (412-485 AD) and Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th cent. AD) (henceforth referred to as Dionysius). The analytical psychologists are James Hollis, Michael Fordham and Wolfgang Giegerich. I twin Hollis with Plotinus, Fordham with Proclus and Giegerich with Dionysius. My intention here is descriptive rather than evaluative. I have chosen work by each of the analytical psychologists that has, from my point of view, value and integrity.

All neoplatonists subscribed to the worldview of emanation and return. The One, the Good beyond being, overflows and this overflowing brings into being the levels of existence, including our world. There is subsequently a movement of return to the One. Immediately next to the One is *nous* (intellect, being).

Psyche (soul) flows out from *nous*. Each philosopher has their own way of describing the detail of emanation and return, but one particular point of debate revolves around the descent of soul.

My suggestion here is that this debate within neoplatonism about the descent of soul can serve as a metaphor to illuminate different approaches to the self in analytical psychology. In a sense I am looking at these theories as contemporary versions of the myth of emanation and return. For the purposes of this talk I am equating the neoplatonic idea of soul with the concept of the self in analytical psychology.

Plotinus held that while *psyche* generates beings and permeates life, some essential aspect remains within *nous*. Proclus argued, against Plotinus, that *psyche* descends entirely into life. In its generating activity it loses touch with *nous*. Dionysius describes a relationship of mutual ecstasy between the One and soul. Each of these views of the descent of soul has consequences for the character of its return to *nous* and ultimately to the One.

Hollis/Plotinus

Plotinus distinguished between the descent of soul and the fall of soul. The descent of soul is natural, generative and purposive. The fall of soul is the result of audacity (*tolma*). It results in forgetfulness and ignorance. It is the consequence of a desire to belong to oneself and to be independent of the One.

This mirrors Hollis' description of the midlife crisis, in his book, *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife*. He distinguishes between the "acquired self" or ego and the "greater Self which seeks its own realization."ⁱⁱⁱ In the first half of life the self (small s) loses itself in life in the world and becomes identified with the roles and goods of the world. In midlife "perhaps the greatest shock of all is the erosion of the illusion of ego supremacy."ⁱⁱⁱ

Hollis' prescription for the wounded ego is to establish a relationship with the Self. This involves withdrawal of projections, a turn within and entry into solitude. This connection with the Self is possible

because the Self “speaks to us through the symptomatology of everyday life as well as through the spindrift of dreams and active imagination.”^{iv} For Hollis the providence of the Self reaches the ego. The Self is always there even though the ego is forgetful. The Self is inexhaustible. “Given the kaleidoscopic character of the Self, only a few facets will ever be lived.”^v

In Plotinian terms the individual soul turns to philosophy to seek reunion with *psyche*, *nous* and the One. The return is possible because some portion of soul has not descended from *nous*. The correspondence between the *psyche* of the individual and the portion of *psyche* remaining in *nous* provides the thread back to the centre. The return is accomplished by removal of unlikeness. Plotinus uses the metaphor of a sculptor chipping away stone to reveal the image which is hidden in the boulder.

Both Hollis and Plotinus recommend simplicity in the face of a greater wholeness, a simplicity arrived at through a judicious balance of activity and passivity. Hollis’ Self could be described as the Royal Self, enthroned in the collective unconscious watching over the ego, its servant in the world. The ego-Self axis is analogous to the thread that connects the individual soul with Soul. The possibility of return is there because the link was always fundamentally intact.

Fordham/Proclus

According to Proclus, “Every particular soul, when it descends into the realm of generation, descends completely: it is not the case that there is a part of it that remains above and a part that descends.”^{vi} The individual soul therefore finds itself without a link to the higher world. This creates a difficulty for the soul’s return to *nous*. How is the soul to ascend if the thread of correspondence has disappeared? Some form of mediation is necessary between the individual soul and *psyche* in *nous*. The solution was found in theurgy (*theourgia*), the work of the gods.

Theurgy consists of rituals and prayers. The powers that reside in the symbols which are evoked reach the gods. The gods through their providential grace draw the individual soul back toward *nous*. According to

Proclus' predecessor, Iamblichus, "Divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge. Nothing then... in us as... human contributes in any way toward the accomplishment of divine transactions."^{vii}

This can be compared to Fordham's theory of deintegration and integration of the self. He was dissatisfied with the view that the self was characterised by stability. In *Explorations into the self*, Fordham writes, "Thus I introduced a new view of the subject; the self is no longer conceived of as a static structure, instead the steady state represents one phase in a dynamic sequence; integration is followed by deintegration, which in turn leads to a new integrate. The sequence is conceived to repeat throughout life and lies at the root of maturational development. In formulating this process theory, I also had in mind the tendency of integrated stable states to be sterile in that they could not now allow adequately for the incorporation of new components."^{viii}

Fordham's model of integrate – deintegrate – new integrate is reminiscent of Proclus' triads. Proclus used triads to describe the process of change. He divided the event of change into ever more finely distinguished triadic structures. Every triad was an instance of emanation and return. [remaining, proceeding, returning]

Fordham describes autism as an inability to engage in deintegration and integration. Less extreme types of pathology are also evidence of impairment of the flow of deintegration and integration. While Fordham does not explain in detail the process of integration of the deintegrate, I think that for the purposes of psychotherapy we can say that the return is through the transference and countertransference. In other words the transference is an attempt at integration, which in the words of Iamblichus is "beyond knowledge", i.e. unconscious. Here the therapist is the mediator, the theurgic object. Through containment and interpretation of the transference and countertransference, the therapist provides a bridge between the deintegrate and a new integrate. The link "back" to the self is accomplished through the mediation of the therapist's psyche.

Fordham's self is in constant flux. He described his theory as a "process theory." Like Proclus he uses a triadic structure to describe the process of change. In contrast to Hollis' Royal Self, we could characterise Fordham's self as the Protean self.

Giegerich/Dionysius

Giegerich describes Jung as "the thinker of the soul"^{xix} and in his book, *The Soul's Logical Life*, he argues that analytical psychology needs to discover the thought of soul. He says, "the soul is logical life"^{xx} and "under today's psychological conditions, the soul's life can only be 'caught sight' of through the highest and most stringent abstract thought."^{xxi} This abstraction is a form of negation and it is by a series of negations that we can think soul. Giegerich draws his concept of negation from Hegel, who found the idea of negation of negation in Proclus. Today I am comparing Giegerich to Dionysius, who also drew on Proclus and whose work is saturated with concepts and images of negation.

Giegerich complains that we have lost the sense of what he calls the "internal infinity"^{xxii} of the person, moment or event, and of the silence and depth at the heart of discourse. We are obsessed with extension and surface, with the horizontal dimension. There is little possibility of a true appreciation of psychology in such a flattened landscape.

He says "psychology is the contradiction of a speaking about unspeakables, a speaking that *reveals* the unspeakable, yet reveals it in such a way that by that very revealing it preserves its secret."^{xxiii} There is I think a strong resonance between this definition of psychology and Dionysius' description of the instant of change or revelation. "What comes into view, contrary to hope, from previous obscurity, is described as 'sudden' (*exaiphnes*) ... the transcendent has put aside its own hiddenness and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being. But he is hidden even after his revelation, or if I may speak in a more divine fashion, is hidden even amid the revelation. For this mystery... remains hidden and can be drawn out by no word or mind. What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable."^{xxiv} Both Giegerich and Dionysius are pointing to an ineffable element within communication.

Giegerich argues for a “dialectic of imagining and de-imagining.”^{xv} Key to de-imagining is sublation, which contains three elements, (1) negating and cancelling, (2) rescuing and retaining, and (3) raising to a new level. Psychology sublates religion, science and medicine. Giegerich’s method of sublation is similar to Dionysius’ method of anagogical or ‘uplifting’ (*anagou, anagoge*) interpretation.

Dionysius’ philosophy is one of affirmation and negation or *kataphasis* and *apophasis*. In the affirmative or kataphatic mode Dionysius describes the names and attributes of the One and in the negative or apophatic mode he denies or unsays these propositions. While some people read Dionysius as an account of personal mystical experience, it is clear that the historical significance of the work is philosophical.

Dionysius dialectic pushes his reader beyond imagination. “It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.”^{xvi}

Giegerich is similarly pushing his reader when he writes that psychology is, “ living insight, it exists only in the mind, as the process of thought or understanding.”^{xvii} He describes this as *theoria*, contemplation. Psychology *is* contemplation. It is contemplation that embraces beginning and end. “A *real* psychology of the Self has to *start out* from the *accomplished* Self... You have to be there if you want to get there. You have to have arrived before you set out on the way that is to take you to where you want to arrive... reversion of the natural sequence of beginning and end or cause and consequence.”^{xviii}

This paradoxical language parallels Dionysius’ cosmic vision of the ecstatic union of the One with being, a union driven by *eros*. The soul seeks to return to the One by its union with the One which is already accomplished. In terms of the theme of this paper, after Hollis’ Royal Self and Fordham’s Protean self, we now have Giegerich’s ecstatic Self.

To sum up:

I have suggested that there are at least three types of self within analytical psychology. Each of these ways of conceiving the self has echoes with theories about soul in neoplatonism and exemplifies an aspect of the myth of emanation and return. The Royal Self of Hollis, which abides in the collective unconscious and communicates itself to the ego, I compared to Plotinus' *psyche* which does not descend wholly from *nous*. The Protean self of Fordham, which is constantly changing within the flux of integration and deintegration, and requires mediation to achieve reintegration, I compared to Proclus' *psyche*, which requires theurgy to ascend to *nous*. The Ecstatic Self of Geigerich, which operates through negations to articulate the logic of soul, I compared to Dionysius' soul rising by negations to the One.

Let me return to our psychotherapist listening to where words come from. She might find that Hollis' Self provides a centre around which the client can construct a narrative of his life; that Fordham's self gives the therapist a tool with which to unpick the nitty-gritty of the transference and countertransference within the session; and finally, that Geigerich's analysis of the nature of psychology empowers the therapist to embrace her work as a contemplative vocation.

ⁱ Reynolds, Reginald (1948), *The Wisdom of John Woolman*, London: George Allen & Unwin, p. 28

ⁱⁱ Hollis, James (1993), *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife*, Toronto: Inner City Books, p. 17

ⁱⁱⁱ Hollis, p. 41

^{iv} Hollis, p. 110

^v Hollis, p. 104

^{vi} Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 211

^{vii} Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*, Book II 11

^{viii} Fordham, Michael (1985), *Explorations into self*, London: Academic Press, p. 102

^{ix} Geigerich, Wolfgang (2001), *The Soul's Logical Life*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, p. 43

^x Geigerich, p. 49

^{xi} Geigerich, p. 32

^{xii} Geigerich, p. 58

^{xiii} Geigerich, p. 35

^{xiv} Dionysius, Ep. 3, 10069B

^{xv} Geigerich, p. 274

^{xvi} Dionysius, MT 1048B

^{xvii} Geigerich, p. 100

^{xviii} Geigerich, p. 21