

What is Synthesis?

Roberto Assagioli

Until now we have persisted in disputing two widely spread errors held not only by the public, but also by some scientists and philosophers. Firstly, that the human psyche is an organic and coherent unity. Secondly, that psyche and consciousness are identical and co-existent. We have seen how an observation made without preconceived ideas or theoretical “blindness” reveals, even in the conscious part of our mind, a multiplicity of heterogeneous elements full of contrasting tendencies from which the great complexities, anxieties, mutability and contradictions of the human being derive. Then we saw that, beyond the illumined part of consciousness, numerous psychic activities take place, all quite different in nature, level and value, which range from elementary instinctive tendencies, to the highest manifestations of artistic creation and spiritual enlightenment.

But after establishing these points, we can, or rather we must, consider the other aspect of reality and give it all the importance and value that it merits. Psychic elements and tendencies do not co-exist side by side, in total independence from each other, in everlasting conflict, mitigated only by temporary compromises, by alliances or a fusing of instincts and desires. This concept, to which the more conventional psychoanalysts hold more or less explicitly, is a pessimistic and desperate theory, which fortunately does not correspond to reality. It is a derivation from the empiricists’ theory, supported in modern times by Condillac and by other associationists and in general by the positivists and materialists of the past century. But the representatives of this concept did not take into consideration, or did so only partially and totally insufficiently, the fact that there is, in the human psyche, another fundamental tendency, that of union, synthesis, which is more profound and vital than the simple, mechanical association of sensations and ideas. It is a tendency that is an expression of a universal principle, whose manifestations can be found at an elementary level before the formation of individual human psychic life and which surpasses it on a higher and vaster level, forming the great inter-human and super-human syntheses.

Synthesis is a word derived from the Greek: Syn-thesis, which corresponds to: composition. The basic principle of synthesis is already seen in its simplest form, in inorganic material and is evident from the difference to be found between chemical mixtures and chemical combinations. In mixtures two different chemical substances are in contact with each other, but no matter how much they are mixed and blended together they do not form anything new. A mixture is a simple sum of the properties of the single elements. A typical example: air, a mixture of oxygen, carbon dioxide and water vapour (except for a few other trace elements). Every one of these elements is free and easily isolated. Therefore when we breathe, we can retain the oxygen and expel the carbon dioxide. On the other hand, the water vapour is formed in the air by evaporation and leaves it by condensation independently from the oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Something very different occurs when a chemical combination is formed, as when oxygen and hydrogen combine to form water, which is a substance completely different from its components. These, at a normal temperature are gas, while water is a liquid. Besides which, water is a stable substance, fixed and special laboratory procedures are necessary in order to disintegrate it, needing great expenditure of energy. It is interesting

to note that the act of combining chemical substances often requires a great expenditure of energy which man uses for dynamic purposes and also for destructive ends. An example of the first type: combustion engines, whose power of propulsion derives from the combination of petrol and oxygen. An example of the second type is dynamite. We will discuss later on the interesting analogies, the dynamic and explosive combinations of psychic elements.

There is another interesting fact that also has a suggestive analogy in the field of the psyche. Often it is not enough to put the two chemical substances in contact: it is necessary to light a fire, or even a spark (there are elements in us that have existed for years, inert side by side, but a spark is enough to cause them to combine).

But the recent progress made in physics allows us to go a step farther. The atom itself, that at first was considered a simple and indivisible element, is really a dynamic synthesis of electric charges: from the central nucleus and from the elements that rotate dizzily around it. The atom is a delicate equilibrium of attraction and repulsion, of centripetal and centrifugal forces. The projection or shifting of an electron is enough to change the properties of an atom, to produce all kinds of radiation, electro-magnetic vibrations, luminous phenomena and sounds that emit enormous qualities of energy. It is these continuous, extremely rapid plays of force that produce all the phenomena of the cosmos, that makes every vital manifestation possible. To give an idea of this I will quote a single fact referred to us by one of the greatest astronomers, Eddington. He says, "The solar cromosphere contains a cloud of atoms of calcium that seem to ride on the solar rays. Each of the atoms contains 20 electrons, 18 of which are solidly attached to the central nucleus, around which they turn vertiginously. Two, on the other hand are semi-detached. According to the conditions of the solar cromosphere one of these becomes detached, while the second when it becomes stimulated by a luminous ray, is projected onto a more distant orbit, from which it falls, spontaneously onto the original orbit. This fact must be repeated 200,000 times a second in order to maintain the atom in equilibrium on the cromosphere. This twenty-thousandth of a second is divided into two periods: the longer one, during which the atom waits patiently for a luminous wave to collide with it and project the electron further away. The other, during which the electron remains in the more distant orbit. This lasts on an average, on hundred millionth of a second, during which it travels along its orbit a million times".

Now we come to the organic world. Biological life immediately appears as a synthesis. We see that the single organs of an animal or human organism are coordinated in their action by a superior unity. There is a vital, unifying principle, showing many manifestations that appear intelligent, which makes possible the life of the organism. A life that, above all seems to be a dynamic equilibrium of antagonistic systems.

Recent biological and physiological studies have thrown much light on this admirable phenomena. There is a fundamental dualism between the parasympathetic and the sympathetic systems, and in this antagonism groups of glands and internal secretions participate, the first in one field, the other in another. One of these groups tends towards catabolism, that is, to life in relation to the organism, to its external activity, with spending of energy. The other group tends to anabolism, to the reconstruction, to the accumulation and conservation of energy.

The excesses of the catabolic phase causes exhaustion, while excesses fo the anabolic phase produces an excessive accumulation of unused energy. These two phases

alternate rhythmically. The most obvious and normal analogy is that of sleeping and waking. During waking hours the catabolic functions reveal, external activity, the life of relationships. During sleep the anabolic activity prevails, for the reparation and conservation of the organism. Whenever one of these phases prevails excessively over the other, there is illness. Basedow's disease, the hyperactivity of the thyroid gland, a catabolic organ, causes loss of weight and other disturbances of a catabolic nature. Another morbid manifestation even more accentuated, due to a defect in the regulating ability, are tumours. These are formed by rebellious cells that do not obey the normal rhythm of growth. Continually in the organism, every day thousands of cells die and about as many are born. Altogether quantitatively and qualitatively there is an equilibrium. When this is broken, when some groups of cells begin to proliferate rapidly, a foreign organism is formed, a parasite of the principal organism, that is a tumour. This, violating the law of self-regulation, provokes the destruction of the organism and with this its own destruction.

The importance of this self-regulation is seen at the moment of death. Then the action of the unifying principle ceases. Every cell acts individually and this results in the dissolution of the organism. This interests us particularly as an analogy for the study of life of the psyche. Here the tendency to synthesis is no less strong and fundamental, in fact it reaches a superior degree of complexity and finesse. Sensation, that was held by the "sensists" to be a simple and elementary fact, like the atom by the chemists, is actually on par with the atom and more than this, a complex phenomena. Philosophers and psychologists have preceded the physicists in this discovery.

Limiting our discussion to modern thought, already Leibnitz, responding to Locke who maintained that intelligence does not contain anything that cannot be perceived by the senses, declared: "Yes, if not intelligence itself." In fact no sensation exists unless it is felt, perceived by a subject, unless it becomes part of a system, to integrate in a psychic synthesis, to unite itself to something pre-existent. Leibnitz shows how, in reality, sensation is a grouping together of numerous little elements not clearly perceptible, that is, subconscious. In a sense one could say that Leibnitz was, in modern times, the precursor of the discovery of the subconscious.

After Leibnitz, the synthetic character of psychic activities was made well evident by Kant, who demonstrated it in perception, judgement, concept and later by Wundt, Hoffding and Janet.

James has given a clear and ingenious analogy of this. He says, "Take 12 people and say to each one of them, one of these words. Then arrange these men in a line, or all massed together. Make each one of them think about his word with the greatest possible attention. This will never produce, to anyone, the consciousness of the entire phrase." Therefore the simple mechanical juxtaposition of sensations, particular elements, never produces a significance, produced only by the combination of various elements.

The synthesis of opposites has particular importance in psychic life. This great principle, which is the key to understanding and resolving so many theoretical and practical problems, was intuitively sense by Plato, but expressed more clearly by Cardinal Da Cusa. He affirms that unity exists before duality, the synthesis of the opposites before their schism. That thought was energetically supported by Cusano's great disciple, Giordano Bruno. He proclaimed the synthesis of the opposites as the principle tenet of a forgotten philosophy that must be revived. He speaks of the unifying of the opposites: of

acute and obtuse angles, of heat and cold, of love and hate, of poisons and their antidotes, of concave and converse. He who wishes to know the great secrets of nature must examine and contemplate the smallest and greatest of the contrasts and opposites. Profound magic lies in knowing how to discover the contrary, after having found the point of union.”

This principle is expanded upon even more by Hegel, who made it the key of his philosophic system, called “dialectic”. The opposites are “opposed” between themselves, but not opposed in regard to unity, since real and concrete unity is only the unity and syntheses of opposites. Immobility is not movement, nor is unchangeableness change. The truth is that unity is not faced by opposition, but by itself, and that without the opposition reality would not be reality because there would be no change and life. The two abstract elements, or opposites taken by themselves, in their state of separation are called by Hegel, “moments” with the image drawn from the moment of the levy. And “moments” is sometimes called the third term, that of synthesis. The relationship of the first two with the third is expressed by the words “resolve” and “surpass”. The two antithetic, opposing terms are resolved and surpassed in the synthesis. It is important that the two opposing moments are denied, when taken in a detached stage, but preserved in the synthesis. The principle triad that Hegel presents and from which other triads would derive, is that of being, of nothing and of becoming.

But I cannot enter into philosophic discussion. It is enough to mention the principle, then we will apply it to living, concrete, human psychology. In psychic life, as in organic life, we find a rhythmic alternating of two opposing principles, that of extraversion and of introversion. Extraversion, that is the turning outward of the vital interest, corresponds to what in organic life is catabolism, the life of relationships, of expenditure, of the dispersion of energy. Introversion, on the other hand, that is turning of vital interest inward, corresponds to anabolism, to the inner life. A harmonious succession of these movements should constitute the rhythm of life. And to reach this rhythm an “art of living” is necessary.

The same could be said about all the other contrasts or polarities of which the human psyche is so rich – we are tempted to say “too rich”. They should not be abolished, but could persist with a certain degree of autonomy.

As organic life is not the abolition of contrast between catabolism and anabolism, between the life of relationships, of consuming, and the life of reconstruction, so psychic life does not mean the abolition of one of the terms in favour of the other. It is necessary to have both, necessary that a tension exists between them, but a creative tension. It is necessary to force them to integrate into a more expansive, fuller life, into a superior reality that contains them and at the same time transcends them. This is the real synthesis. To realize it, there needs to be the continual presence and powerful action of a higher regulating principle. This principle, in its highest aspect, is the spiritual element, superior to the psychological, that remains more or less latent in the human spirit, but when it is freed and becomes effective, brings order, harmony, beauty, joy. It gradually transforms weak and insecure man, divided in himself, agitated by violent contrasts and griefs, into a bright and purified being, complete and consistent; into a centre of fire and light, from which radiate high and benefic spiritual energies.