

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

*A Psychology  
of the Spirit*

JOHN FIRMAN  
*and* ANN GILA

---

# PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

---

SUNY SERIES IN  
TRANSPERSONAL AND HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

---

RICHARD D. MANN, EDITOR

---

PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

---

*A Psychology of the Spirit*

JOHN FIRMAN *and* ANN GILA

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

---

Published by  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS  
ALBANY

© 2002 John Firman and Ann Gila

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address  
State University of New York Press  
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production, Laurie Searl  
Marketing, Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Firman, John, 1945–

Psychosynthesis : a psychology of the spirit / by John Firman and Ann Gila.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in transpersonal and humanistic psychology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-5533-5 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-5534-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Transpersonal psychology. 2. Psychosynthesis. I. Gila, Ann. II. Title. III. Series.

BF204.7 .F575 2002

150.19'8—dc21

2002017736

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

---

To those who worked, played, laughed, and  
cried with us in the Psychosynthesis Institute.  
We all learned a great deal the hard way.



---

# CONTENTS

---

	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
	INTRODUCTION	1
ONE	THE LIFE AND WORK OF ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI	9
	<i>Roberto Assagioli and His Influences</i> 11	
	<i>In Conclusion</i> 16	
TWO	THE PSYCHOSYNTHESIS MODEL OF THE PERSON	19
	<i>Assagioli's Diagram of the Person</i> 20	
	<i>The Middle Unconscious</i> 21	
	<i>Primal Wounding</i> 27	
	<i>The Lower Unconscious</i> 29	
	<i>The Higher Unconscious</i> 31	
	<i>"I," Consciousness, and Will</i> 34	
	<i>Self</i> 38	
THREE	THE STAGES OF PSYCHOSYNTHESIS	45
	<i>Stage Zero: Survival of Wounding</i> 47	
	<i>Stage One: Exploration of the Personality</i> 53	
	<i>Stage Two: The Emergence of "I"</i> 56	
	<i>Stage Three: Contact with Self</i> 58	
	<i>Stage Four: Response to Self</i> 61	
	<i>In Summation</i> 64	
FOUR	MULTIPLICITY WITHIN THE PERSONALITY	67
	<i>Subpersonalities are Normal</i> 68	
	<i>The Birth of a Subpersonality</i> 70	

	<i>Subpersonalities in Survival</i> 73	
	<i>Recognition</i> 77	
	<i>Acceptance</i> 81	
	<i>Inclusion</i> 85	
	<i>Synthesis</i> 89	
FIVE	THE NATURE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY	93
	<i>A Disidentification Exercise</i> 94	
	<i>Empathic "I"</i> 95	
	<i>Spirit, Soma, and Psyche</i> 102	
	<i>Transcendence-Immanence</i> 103	
SIX	A PSYCHOSYNTHESIS DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY	111
	<i>Bigger Than We</i> 111	
	<i>Opening the Inner Door</i> 112	
	<i>Authentic Personality</i> 115	
	<i>External and Internal Unifying Centers</i> 118	
	<i>Primal Wounding</i> 121	
	<i>Survival Personality</i> 125	
	<i>Recognition</i> 130	
	<i>Acceptance</i> 134	
	<i>Inclusion</i> 139	
	<i>Synthesis</i> 142	
	<i>In Conclusion</i> 147	
SEVEN	THE HIGHER AND LOWER UNCONSCIOUS	149
	<i>Primal Wounding and Splitting</i> 150	
	<i>The Lower Unconscious and Higher Unconscious</i> 153	
	<i>Positive and Negative Idealization</i> 156	
	<i>Psychological Disturbances</i> 159	
	<i>Psychology and Spirituality</i> 167	
EIGHT	SELF-REALIZATION	171
	<i>"I" and Self</i> 171	
	<i>Personal Psychosynthesis</i> 177	
	<i>Transpersonal Psychosynthesis</i> 179	
	<i>Self-Realization</i> 183	
	<i>In Conclusion</i> 191	
	NOTES	193
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	207
	INDEX	217

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

First, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to our colleague and friend, Chris Meriam, for his generous support throughout the writing of this book. His authenticity, compassion, and knowledge of the path were immensely valuable to us. Chris not only encouraged and advised us at various points in this writing but was actively involved in providing feedback and editorial changes in the content of the book.

Many thanks also to Philip Brooks, who read the manuscript in its entirety and engaged in extended theoretical discussions with us. Philip's friendship, heartfelt presence, and clinical wisdom were significant in the writing of this book.

We would like as well to warmly acknowledge John Thatcher for his many insightful comments and helpful questions about the manuscript; David Klugman for reviewing our treatment of modern psychoanalysis and for sharing his personal story; Anne Ziff for allowing us to quote her own personal experience; and John White for his help and support in the publication of both of our books with State University of New York Press.

Our gratitude also goes to David "Pope" Firman, John's brother, who rendered all of the many illustrations for the book. Pope's patient care, artistic ability, and technical knowledge were invaluable in the production of this book.

Finally, since this text derives from our work with individuals and groups over the past thirty years, we would like to extend our gratitude to all of our students and clients over these years for sharing their personal journeys with us.



---

## INTRODUCTION

---

Psychosynthesis presupposes psychoanalysis, or, rather, includes it as a first and necessary stage.

—Roberto Assagioli

I believe psychoanalytic method and theory is a necessary sub-structure for any such “higher” or growth psychology.

—Abraham Maslow

Roberto Assagioli was an Italian psychiatrist who, in 1910, rejected what he felt was the psychoanalytic overemphasis on analyzing the childhood dynamics underlying psychopathology. Accordingly, he conceived “*psychosynthesis*,” emphasizing how the human being integrated or synthesized the many aspects of the personality into increasing wholeness. An early student of psychoanalysis, Assagioli respected and valued Freud’s views but considered them “limited” (Assagioli 1965a). Here, Assagioli, in an interview with *Psychology Today*, describes his relationship to early psychoanalysis:

I never met Freud personally but I corresponded with him and he wrote to Jung expressing the hope that I would further the cause of psychoanalysis in Italy. But I soon became a heretic. With Jung, I had a more cordial relationship. We met many times during the years and had delightful talks. Of all modern psychotherapists, Jung is the closest in theory and practice to psychosynthesis. (Keen 1974, 2)

As Jung would do after him, Assagioli became a psychoanalytic “heretic,” refusing to accept Freud’s reductionism and neglect of the positive dimensions of the human personality. Psychosynthesis thus became the first approach, born of psychoanalysis, which would include: the artistic, altruistic, and heroic potentials

of the human being; a validation of aesthetic, spiritual, and peak experiences; the insight that psychological symptoms can be triggered by spiritual dynamics (often now called *spiritual emergency*); and the understanding that experiences of meaning and purpose in life derive from a healthy relationship between the personal self and a deeper or higher Self in ongoing daily living, or what is called *Self-realization*. These concerns were later to place psychosynthesis within the developing fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

By developing psychosynthesis, Assagioli sought, then, to address not only the resolution of early childhood issues—a focus on what he called the *lower unconscious*—but to give attention to the sphere of aesthetic experience, creative inspiration, and higher states of consciousness—which he called the *higher unconscious* or *superconscious*. He sought to give each of these central dimensions of human experience its proper due, avoiding any reduction of one to the other.

So although extending beyond psychoanalysis, Assagioli did not intend to leave Freud's system completely behind. In the first of his two major books, *Psychosynthesis* (1965a), Assagioli envisioned psychosynthesis as founded upon a psychoanalytic exploration of the lower unconscious:

We have first to penetrate courageously into the pit of our lower unconscious in order to discover the dark forces that ensnare and menace us—the “phantasms,” the ancestral or childish images that obsess or silently dominate us, the fears that paralyze us, the conflicts that waste our energies. It is possible to do this by the use of the methods of psychoanalysis. (21)

As this exploration of the unconscious proceeded—including the higher unconscious and *middle unconscious* as well—the individual was more free to develop a conscious relationship with a deeper or higher Self beyond the conscious personality or, in Assagioli's words, “widening the channel of communication with the higher Self” (27).

This relationship with Self could then guide a new synthesis of the personality embracing the fruits of the prior self-exploration and, more, it could become a source of direction and meaning in a person's life. This ongoing relationship with Self, emerging from prior exploration of the unconscious, is called *Self-realization* and is a fundamental principle of psychosynthesis.

For Assagioli, then, analytic work was an essential part of the personal exploration upon which the process of psychosynthesis was based. Assagioli seemed clear that both psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis were needed to work with the whole person.

#### THE PSYCHOANALYSIS-PSYCHOSYNTHESIS SPLIT

Over the years, however, psychosynthesis (at least within the English-language literature) drifted away from the developments taking place in psycho-

analysis and from a focus on the lower unconscious. In the words of Will Friedman, cofounder of the Psychosynthesis Institute of New York, psychosynthesis “lost touch with its psychoanalytic roots” (Friedman 1984, 31). And psychologist Frank Haronian, former vice president of the Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, warned that psychosynthesis needed “to pay more attention to the lower unconscious,” because it was overlooking “human weaknesses and limitation” (Haronian 1983, 31, 27).<sup>1</sup>

It seems that an important reason for this separation from psychoanalysis was that Assagioli and later psychosynthesis thinkers had basic philosophical differences with Freud. Assagioli’s stance was in strong conflict with, for example, Freud’s reductionistic drive theory, his contempt for spirituality and religion, and his insistence upon a disengaged attitude on the part of the analyst.

Assagioli could not include such principles in his system, because they were fundamentally at odds with his view of human nature. He saw personal selfhood, choice, and responsibility existing at a more essential level than the drives, validated the spiritual and religious dimensions of life on their own terms, and maintained that authenticity and empathic connection were central to psychotherapy. At a most basic level, Assagioli understood the human being not as an isolated individual to be observed but as a subject in continuous, active interaction with a larger relational field:

Indeed, an isolated individual is a nonexistent abstraction. In reality each individual is interwoven into an intricate network of vital, psychological and spiritual relations, involving mutual exchange and interactions with many other individuals. (Assagioli 1965b, 5)

Given these basic differences, among many others, psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis were destined to follow two very separate courses of development.

#### THE SYSTEMS EVOLVE

As psychosynthesis developed, it tended to focus on personal growth, self-actualization, and the higher unconscious, while having less to say about early human development or the roots of psychological disturbances. It went on to become one of the early systems within the larger movements of existential/humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology. These latter approaches too were moving beyond the Freudian focus on the lower unconscious and psychopathology in order to study what Abraham Maslow (1971) called “the farther reaches of human nature.”

Assagioli, along with the likes of C. G. Jung, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers, was considered an important figure in the “new pathways in psychology” and “the post-Freudian revolution” (Wilson 1972) and a major early thinker in transpersonal psychology (Boorstein 1980; Scotton, Chinen, and Battista 1996).

Indeed, psychosynthesis notions such as *Transpersonal Self* or *Higher Self*, *higher unconscious* or *superconscious*, *subpersonalities*, *identification*, *disidentification*, and the *observing self* or “*T*” have infused the thinking of many in contemporary psychological movements. Furthermore, many of these movements also utilize traditional psychosynthesis techniques such as guided imagery, creative use of visualization, dialoguing with parts of the personality, disidentification, exploring levels of identification, and relating to an inner symbol of wisdom.

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, followed its own developmental line beyond Freud, and as it happened, toward some of Assagioli’s earlier relational conceptions. As psychosynthesis before it, psychoanalysis too became part of the global paradigm shift toward viewing reality not as composed of isolated objects interacting in space but as a vast system in which all things—including the observer—are included and interrelated. From Einstein’s earthshaking insights, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and Bertalanffy’s general systems theory, to family systems theory, the women’s movement, and nature-centered spiritualities,

---

This trend towards synthesis is already apparent and is spreading more and more; psychosynthesis is only bringing its own contribution to it.

—Roberto Assagioli

---

ties, to the environmental agenda, the “global village,” and religious ecumenism, existence itself was being revealed as fundamentally relational.

As psychoanalysis moved in this relational direction, it increasingly perceived the person not as the isolated object of Newtonian mechanics but as an interactive part of a relational system or field. The notion of the isolated individual struggling with inner drives began to yield to a concept of the person as an integral part of a larger whole. This relational stance is represented in today’s psychoanalysis by, for example, object relations theory, self psychology, and intersubjective psychology. Each of these, in its own way, attempts to focus on the interactive field, and each is a part of a major paradigm shift toward what has been called the *relational model* in psychoanalysis (Mitchell 1988).

#### TOWARD INCLUDING A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

It would appear, then, that the time is ripe for psychosynthesis to move toward a deeper engagement with psychoanalytic insight and, further, to include current research into early childhood development as well. This is one of the tasks that we attempt to accomplish in this book.

However, it is important to understand that this increased inclusion of a psychoanalytic perspective does not mean a blending of all the formal concepts of psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis into a unified theory, nor does it necessarily forge any sort of elaborate theoretical common ground between practitioners of these systems. Rather, there is here simply an attempt to

expand and deepen Assagioli's original conception so that it can more fully embrace the important dimensions of human experience traditionally left to depth and developmental psychologies—again, the inclusion of these dimensions seems to have been Assagioli's original intention.

In this approach, Assagioli's understanding of Self-realization can become the central organizing principle synthesizing three important areas in a psychology of the whole person: developmental theory, personality theory, and clinical theory. These three areas are revealed as intimately connected, illuminating and supporting Self-realization in all practical applications of psychosynthesis.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Here is elaborated a theory of human development that is not only founded upon core psychosynthesis thought but is at the same time coherent with modern psychoanalysis, intersubjective psychology, attachment theory, and current infant research. Following Assagioli's understanding of a relationship to Self, this relationship is seen as the essential bond or connection by which the human spirit flourishes throughout the life span. The supportive holding provided by this relationship allows us to negotiate developmental stages, harmonize our personalities, and find meaning and direction in our lives. A relationship with Self is present at any and all stages of development, manifesting within significant inner and outer environments, and so Self-realization itself is not considered a particular stage of human development.

#### PERSONALITY THEORY

From this developmental perspective arises a theory of personality in which an intact relationship with Self is seen to allow a creative engagement with the many diverse facets of the human personality—body, feelings, mind, intuition, imagination, drives, subpersonalities, and so on. This natural multiplicity may form an inner coherence or community within the inclusive empathic field of the person who is in turn held within the empathic field of Self. The higher and lower unconscious are not here seen as naturally occurring personality structures or levels of development; rather, these sectors of the unconscious are considered the result of wounding to the relationship with Self, and are found to underlie many psychological disturbances both mild and severe, personal and transpersonal. The view here is that both the higher and lower unconscious are sectors in need of ongoing exploration and integration.

#### CLINICAL THEORY

If an intact empathic relationship with Self allows for the emergence of the human spirit, a coherent expression of personality, and a sense of meaning in our lives, then it follows that a disruption in this empathic connection will cause disturbances in these areas. Furthermore, if an empathic disruption

causes wounding, it can only be that an empathic connection can heal this wounding. Thus a profound empathic intersubjective resonance between the psychosynthesis practitioner and client becomes the healing center of all work in psychosynthesis. The functioning of an empathic field is perhaps the most important way that Self operates in psychosynthesis practice and, again, without this empathy there can be no true healing and transformation. While the breadth of psychosynthesis allows the use of many techniques and methods from widely different approaches, these are completely secondary to this empathic resonance.

Reviewing these three areas, it is clear that psychosynthesis can be of special help to those who work with the heights and depths of human experience, with psychological difficulties and spiritual practices, and with integrating the transcendent in daily life. On the one hand, we need not avoid psychological work, believing that this is a sidetracking of our spiritual path or an ensnarement in illusion; on the other hand, we need not consider religious experience a psychological symptom nor spiritual practice a defense mechanism.

Psychosynthesis instead addresses the common experience in which psychological difficulties, interpersonal challenges, personal self-actualization, and higher states of consciousness all exist side by side in the same personality—the situation, after all, of most of us. But even more important than this, psychosynthesis seeks to recognize and support the particular life journey of the person—the individual's own unique path of Self-realization.

#### THE PURPOSES OF THIS BOOK

We have written *Psychosynthesis: A Psychology of the Spirit* with several purposes in mind:

- The case examples and practical theory in this book are designed to support those seeking to understand and facilitate their own personal journey of Self-realization. While this does not take the place of walking this path with fellow travelers and/or experienced guides, here there is helpful information about much of the terrain that may be encountered during such a journey.
- As a foundational text, this work is useful for beginning and advanced psychosynthesis courses, professional training programs, or any course of study seeking a transpersonal integration of developmental, personality, and clinical theory. We here address the seven essential topics of psychosynthesis training outlined by Assagioli: disidentification, the personal self or “I,” the will, the ideal model, synthesis, the superconscious or higher unconscious, and Self (1974).<sup>2</sup>
- It also is appropriate for general psychology courses, as it reveals some of the relationships between psychosynthesis and contemporary devel-

omental research, object relations theory, self psychology, intersubjective psychology, trauma theory, the recovery movement, Jungian psychology, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and common psychological diagnoses.

- Finally, educators, social workers, career counselors, personal coaches, therapists, spiritual directors, physicians, pastoral counselors, nurses, and parents will find herein a broad framework within which they can apply their particular expertise. Since psychosynthesis is not a technique but a broad integrative view of the human being, it can provide a useful context for a wide variety of applications.

#### THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

While this book elaborates on much of the traditional material found in the psychosynthesis literature since the 1970s, it also integrates some current advances in psychosynthesis thought.

Many of these newer developments are further detailed in our book *The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction, and Growth* (1997). This current volume may be considered a companion to that work, which in turn is supported by John Firman's earlier effort, *"I" and Self: Re-Visioning Psychosynthesis* (1991). Brief descriptions of the chapters follow.

Taken together, the Introduction and Chapter 1 outline a history of psychosynthesis. We describe Assagioli's involvement with early psychoanalysis and his apostasy from it, the evolution of psychoanalysis and psychosynthesis, and the later place of psychosynthesis within humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe and extend two of the most fundamental aspects of psychosynthesis theory—the model of the person and the stages of psychosynthesis—initially outlined in the first chapter of Assagioli's seminal book, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (1965a). New developments in both conceptions are elaborated.

Chapter 4 employs an extended case example to elaborate an important insight of psychosynthesis: that the normal personality can be seen to comprise different parts, or subpersonalities. We outline a view of subpersonality formation and the phases of harmonization.

Chapter 5 plumbs the depths of Assagioli's notion of personal identity, showing that the essence of this identity is formed within a relational matrix. Topics include empathy, disidentification, dissociation, consciousness and will, and transcendence-immanence.

Chapter 6 presents a uniquely psychosynthetic developmental theory founded in Assagioli's seminal ideas. Here psychosynthesis is shown to resonate strongly with aspects of object relations theory, self psychology, attachment theory, and modern infant research.

Chapter 7 deals with the levels of the unconscious and how they are formed by empathic misattunement from the environment. Using an adaptation of Assagioli's original model, an understanding of different psychological disorders is suggested.

Chapter 8 closes the book with a discussion of Self-realization, the subject toward which all other chapters have pointed in different ways. Self-realization is seen as an ongoing relationship with a deeper Self over the human

---

I consider it [psychosynthesis] as a child—or at the most as an adolescent—with many aspects still incomplete; yet with a great and promising potential for growth.

—Roberto Assagioli

---

life span, a relationship that gives meaning and direction to human life. Here, Self-realization is understood not as a destination but as a journey.

In sum, we can say that psychosynthesis is a system that attempts to understand both analysis and synthesis, both wounding and healing, both personal and transpersonal growth, and both abyss and peak experi-

encing. Again, and above all, this is a perspective that allows an empathic connection to the unique human person, no matter what the stage of healing and growth, and draws upon techniques, methods, and practices only from within this empathic understanding.

---

ONE

THE LIFE AND WORK  
OF ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI

---

He was very early. Who was there to hear such a large and balanced statement? Not many . . .

—from a eulogy for Roberto Assagioli, *Synthesis 2*

In 1909, C. G. Jung wrote to Sigmund Freud about a young Italian psychiatrist in training, Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), who seemed to be a promising candidate to develop psychoanalysis in Italy. Jung wrote of Assagioli as

a very pleasant and perhaps valuable acquaintance, our first Italian, a Dr. Assagioli from the psychiatric clinic in Florence. Prof. Tanzi assigned him our work for a dissertation. The young man is very intelligent, seems to be extremely knowledgeable and is an enthusiastic follower, who is entering the new territory with the proper *brio*. He wants to visit you next spring. (McGuire 1974, 241)

If one reads *The Freud/Jung Letters* (McGuire 1974), it is clear that Assagioli was indeed “an enthusiastic follower” deeply interested in the early psychoanalytic movement. He contributed the article “Freud’s Theories in Italy” to the *Jahrbuch für Psychoanalytische und Psychopathologische Forschungen*, the psychoanalytic periodical conceived by Freud and edited by Jung; was published in the journal *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*, listed with the likes of Karl Abraham, Ludwig Binswanger, A. A. Brill, and Jung (Berti 1988); was a member of the psychoanalytic group, formed by Jung in 1910, whose elected president was Ludwig Binswanger, later famous for *Daseinsanalyse* or *existential analysis*; and received psychiatric training under renowned psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler—who coined the terms *schizophrenia*, *ambivalence*, and

*autism* (Gay 1988)—at the Burghölzli Hospital of the University of Zürich, where Jung also had trained.

However, when Assagioli did complete his doctoral dissertation at the University of Florence, he had entitled it not “Psychoanalysis” but rather “Psychosynthesis” (“*La Psicointesi*”). So even at this early date, Assagioli was beginning to move beyond Freud’s psychoanalysis:

A beginning of my conception of psychosynthesis was contained in my doctoral thesis on Psychoanalysis (1910), in which I pointed out what I considered to be some of the limitations of Freud’s views. (Assagioli 1965a, 280)

In developing psychosynthesis, Assagioli sought not only to employ *analysis*—analytic insight into the human personality and its dysfunction—but *synthesis* as well, an understanding of how human growth moves toward increasing wholeness, both within the individual and in the individual’s relationship to the world at large.

Assagioli agreed with Freud that healing childhood trauma and developing a healthy ego were necessary aims, but he held that human growth could not be limited to this alone; he sought an understanding of human growth as it proceeded beyond the norm of the well-functioning ego into the blossoming of human potential, which Abraham Maslow (1954, 1962, 1971) later termed *self-actualization*, and further still into the spiritual or transpersonal dimensions of human experience. A quotation from the *Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology* follows:

Whereas Maslow explored fundamental issues in transpersonal psychology, Roberto Assagioli pioneered the practical application of these concepts in psychotherapy. Assagioli proposed a transpersonal view of personality and discussed psychotherapy in terms of the synthesis of personality at both the personal and spiritual levels. He dealt with the issue of spiritual crises and introduced many active therapeutic techniques for the development of a transcendent center of personality. (Scotton, Chinen, and Battista 1996, 52)

In other words, Assagioli envisioned an approach to the human being that could address both the process of personal growth—of personal healing, integration of the personality, and self-actualization—as well as transpersonal development—that dimension glimpsed, for example, in *peak experiences* (Maslow) reported during inspired creativity, falling in love, communing with nature, scientific discovery, or spiritual and religious practice. Assagioli (1965a, 1973a) called these two dimensions of growth, respectively, *personal psychosynthesis* and *spiritual or transpersonal psychosynthesis*.

As we shall see, subsequent evolution of Assagioli’s thought has understood the personal and transpersonal dimensions as distinct developmental

lines within the larger process of what he called *Self-realization*. In his concept of Self-realization, Assagioli recognized a deeper *Self* operating supraordinate to the conscious personality. This Self not only provides direction and meaning for individual unfoldment—both personal and transpersonal—but operates as a source of *call* or *vocation* in life. Such call invites us to discover and follow our deepest truth, the most essential meaning and purpose in our lives, and to live this out in our relationships with ourselves, other people, nature, and the planet as a whole.

Psychosynthesis is, therefore, one of the earliest forerunners of humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology—the third and fourth forces in the history of psychology—which emerged in the 1960s to join the first

two forces, behaviorism and psychoanalysis (see Scotton, Chinen, and Battista 1996). Assagioli's conception of personal psychosynthesis has an affinity with humanistic psychology and other approaches (such as existential psychology) that attempt to understand the nature of the healthy personality and the actualization of unique, personal selfhood. Similarly, his conception of transpersonal psychosynthesis is related generally to the field of transpersonal psychology with its study of mystical, unitive, and peak experiences in which the individual moves beyond a sense of independent selfhood to experience a unitive and universal dimension of reality. Accordingly, Assagioli served on the board of editors for both the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*.

So what were the influences on this man who developed a system that so early foreshadowed these important movements in psychology?

#### ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI AND HIS INFLUENCES

Any discussion of influences on a person's life begins most naturally with personal history. However, Assagioli was notoriously reticent about discussing his life. He felt that it was a mistake to focus too much on his own personality rather than on the development of his work. He seemed concerned that such a focus on personality might lionize him, perhaps even encourage the view that he was a spiritual teacher or guru rather than the practicing clinician and psychological thinker he was. Such a distorted perception of himself might have, in turn, distorted the perception of psychosynthesis, leading people to mistake it for a spiritual teaching or a philosophical doctrine rather than the open-ended, evolving, psychological system he had created. In light of this, it makes sense, too, that Assagioli was not interested in leading some sort of movement or organization, and thus he staunchly refused any administrative control over the development of psychosynthesis as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

---

We accept the idea that spiritual drives or spiritual urges are as real, basic and fundamental as sexual and aggressive drives.

—Roberto Assagioli

---

It was only toward the end of his life that Assagioli finally did—yielding to pressure from his colleagues—choose a biographer, the Boston psychotherapist, Eugene Smith. But Assagioli died shortly thereafter, and Smith was left with little direct information from Assagioli himself and thus remained largely dependent on Assagioli's friends and colleagues for biographical information (Rindge 1974). But even this biography has never seen the light of day, so it is no surprise to find that there exists little in the literature about Assagioli's life.

While we may lament this dearth of material—along with those who pressed him for a biography—this lack happily follows Assagioli's own personal wishes. He obviously believed that psychosynthesis should be evaluated on its own merits rather than on the pedigree or personality of its creator. Perhaps we can keep this in mind as we explore the biographical data we do have and move through this to examine psychosynthesis itself as the most valid field for uncovering the influences on Assagioli.

#### BIOGRAPHY

Roberto Assagioli was born Roberto Marco Grego in Venice, Italy, on February 27, 1888. He was the only child of Elena Kaula (1863–1925) and Leone Grego (?–1890). Leone died when Roberto was about two years old, and his mother then married Dr. Emanuele Assagioli.<sup>2</sup>

The Assagiolis were “a cultured upper-middle-class Jewish family” (Hardy 1987), and to this Judaism was added Elena's later interest in Theosophy. The family spoke Italian, French, and English at home, and during his life Roberto also was to study German, Latin, Greek, Russian, and Sanskrit. Clearly, richly diverse currents of philosophy, culture, and religion ran through Assagioli's life from his earliest years.

The family moved from Venice to Florence in 1904 so that Roberto could study medicine at the Istituto di Studi Superiori, and “from 1905 on his friends in Florence were the young philosophers, artists, and writers who were

---

In 1911 I presented my view on the unconscious in a paper at the “International Congress of Philosophy” in Bologna.

—Roberto Assagioli

---

responsible for the cultural and literary review *Leonardo*” (Smith 1974). He trained with Bleuler in Switzerland, as noted above, studied psychoanalysis, made the acquaintance of C. G. Jung, and became especially interested in the work of William James and Henri Bergson. He received his medical degree from the University of Flo-

rence, with specializations in neurology and psychiatry. He wrote in 1910 the dissertation, “Psychosynthesis,” which contained a critique of psychoanalysis.

Upon entering practice as a psychiatrist, he also in 1912 founded the bimonthly scientific periodical, *Psiche (Psyche)*, editing and writing for this until it folded in 1915, due to World War I. This journal published “the first

of Freud's writings in Italian, translated by Assagioli and approved and authorized by Freud himself" (Berti 1988, 25).

During World War I, Assagioli was a "lieutenant-doctor," and after the war he married Nella Ciapetti, a Roman Catholic and Theosophist. He and Nella were married for forty years and had one son, Ilario (1923–1951). Roberto's mother died in 1925, and a year later he founded what became the Istituto di Psicointesi in Rome, "with the purpose of developing, applying and teaching the various techniques of psychotherapy and of psychological training" (Assagioli 1965a, 280). The following year, the Institute published the book, *A New Method of Treatment—Psychosynthesis*, in English.

In the 1930s, Assagioli produced perhaps two of the most seminal articles in psychosynthesis to this day. First written and published in Italian, they also were translated into English and appeared in the *Hibbert Journal*. These two articles eventually became the lead chapters in his later book, *Psychosynthesis* (1965a), under the titles "Dynamic Psychology and Psychosynthesis" and "Self-Realization and Psychological Disturbances." The first article outlines two fundamental constructs in psychosynthesis—the basic psychosynthesis model of the person and the stages of psychosynthesis—and will form the framework for the next two chapters of this book as well. The latter article concerns the tumultuous experiences that may attend a spiritual awakening, and it has been republished many times over the years, from a *Science of Mind* journal (Assagioli 1978), to a popular intellectual journal (Assagioli 1991a), to an important book in the field of spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof 1989) and, finally, to a compendium dealing with depression (Nelson and Nelson 1996).

World War II proved to be much more of a disruption in the life and work of Dr. Roberto Assagioli than was the first war. His institute in Rome was closed by the Fascist government, which was critical of his "Jewish background, his humanitarianism, and his internationalism" (Smith 1974). The government then accused him of being a pacifist, because he claimed that true peace could only be found within, and not by violent, political, or legal means—and consequently he was locked in solitary confinement for a full month. But Assagioli made use of his imprisonment by making it what he called a "spiritual retreat," focusing on meditation and his inner life, and he recorded the following transpersonal experience during this time:

A sense of boundlessness, of no separation from all that is, a merging with the self of the whole. First an outgoing movement, but not towards any particular object or individual being—an overflowing or effusion in all directions, as the ways of an ever expanding sphere. A sense of universal love. (in Schaub and Schaub 1996, 20–21)

There are varying accounts of Assagioli's activities after his release from prison, one author writing that he joined the underground north of Rome

---

sample content of Psychosynthesis: A Psychology of the Spirit (SUNY Series in Transpersonal and Humanistic Psychology)

- [Trouble with Billionaires.pdf](#)
- [click Need for free](#)
- **[download online Kalooki Nights](#)**
- [Frommer's National Parks of the American West \(Park Guides\).pdf](#)
- [Dreaming of Michelangelo: Jewish Variations on a Modern Theme.pdf](#)
  
- <http://www.freightunlocked.co.uk/lib/Ecrits--The-First-Complete-Edition-in-English.pdf>
- <http://toko-gumilar.com/books/Need.pdf>
- <http://fitnessfatale.com/freebooks/Environmental-Science--Problems--Connections-and-Solutions--12th-edition-.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Frommer-s-National-Parks-of-the-American-West--Park-Guides-.pdf>
- <http://www.gateaerospaceforum.com/?library/Dreaming-of-Michelangelo--Jewish-Variations-on-a-Modern-Theme.pdf>