

## **MODES OF EXISTENCE: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL POLYPSYCHISM**

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*Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.*  
(Eugene O'Neill)

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, psychology and psychotherapy have witnessed a rapid rise of interest in the concept of 'polypsychism': 'a notion of the human mind as a cluster of subpersonalities' (Ellenberg, 1970, p.145). These subpersonalities are defined by Vargiu (1974) as: 'a synthesis of habit patterns, traits, complexes, and other psychological elements' (p.60); and by Rowan (1990) as a: 'semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person' (p.8). In layperson's terms, the concept of polypsychism can best be described as a theory that all individuals have 'multiple personalities', though not to the dissociative extremes of Sybil (Schreiber, 1973), Billy Milligan (Keyes, 1982), or other infamous sufferers of avowed multiple personality disorder (M. P. D.).

This surge of interest in polypsychism can be attributed to a number of factors. First, Federn's (1952) work on the 'ego-state' led to the development of several polypsychic-based psychotherapies: e.g., Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1961), Subself Therapy (Shapiro, 1976), Ego-State Therapy (Watkins and Watkins, 1979), and Cognitive-analytical Therapy (Ryle, 1990). Secondly, Hilgard's (1977) demonstration of the 'Hidden Observer' phenomenon provided strong empirical support for a dissociative understanding of the mind. Thirdly, work by social psychologists such as Gergen (1971) and Markus and Nurius (1982) have highlighted the fundamentally non-unitary nature of the self-construct. Fourthly, neuropsychological research has demonstrated the inherently divisible nature of the brain (e.g., MacLean, 1973) and consciousness (e.g., Gazzaniga, 1985). Fifthly, psychiatry has increasingly recognised the existence of multiple personality disorder (now known as dissociated identity disorder (D. I. D.)), with diagnosed cases increasing ten-fold in the United States between 1979 and 1986 (Ross, 1989). Finally, the gradual—but inevitable—infiltration of post-modernist thinking into psychology and psychotherapy has led to a growing concern with fragmentary

psychological processes, and a concomitant rejection of monolithic 'grand narratives' of the psyche.

From an existential-phenomenological perspective, however, there would seem to be little room for the concept of polypsychism. The hypothesised existence of, 'semi-permanent and semi-autonomous regions of the psyche,' implies the existence of underlying mental 'entities', a philosophical assumption that existential-phenomenology would take serious issue with (Spinelli, 1995, personal communication). For an existential-phenomenologically-orientated psychotherapist, the primary concern is with helping clients to clarify and 'un-pack' their experientially-lived reality. And, whilst such a focus does not inherently negate the existence of structurally-located intrapsychic entities, it *does* vastly minimise their possible Psychotherapeutic significance - the 'how' encompassing the 'why' and the 'which'.

In this paper, however, I wish to argue that polypsychism and existential-phenomenology are not as estranged bed-fellows as a preliminary analysis might suggest. Indeed, I hope to show that both theoretical frameworks can be substantially augmented through a mutual integration. To do so, the paper begins with an exploration of 'dissociation' - a key conceptual process in polypsychic thinking - and outlines Spinelli's (1993, 1994) phenomenological re-interpretation of this phenomenon. Through a discussion of multiple self-constructs, the paper then extends Spinelli's analysis to a phenomenological re-interpretation of polypsychism. The paper concludes by outlining the foundations for a phenomenological polypsychism.

## **Dissociation**

At the heart of polypsychism lies the concept of dissociation: 'A disturbance or alternation in the normally integrative function of identity, memory or consciousness' (DSM-III-R, 1987, p.269). Through dissociation, 'parts' of the self are hypothesised to split off from other 'parts', resulting in the formation of semi-permanent and semi-autonomous subpersonalities (Rowan, 1990). In cases of M. P. D., the dissociative barriers between these different 'parts' are thought to be such that all integrative identity, memory and consciousness processes may become interrupted. In less extreme cases of polypsychism, on the other hand, dissociative barriers may be semi-permeable, such that subpersonalities may have an awareness of each other's existence, but no empathetic understanding of the other's needs or values. As Watkins and Watkins wrote in pre-*Glasnost* 1979, 'If states within the normal ego, which operate in relative harmony within a general-

ised orientation, can be compared to the political structure of the United States, then individuals suffering from multiple personality could be compared to East and West Germany, where there is almost complete blocking of communication between the two states which were once a unified person' (p.5).

As Watkins and Watkins' (1979-80) quote suggests, however, polypsychic theorists tend to conceptualise dissociation in primarily topographical terms: intrapsychic frontiers that divide up a psychological landscape of semi-permanent, concurrently-existing subpersonality-states. Yet such structural logistics are not an inherent part of a dissociative analysis. Spinelli (1995) takes a very different approach when he states that dissociation occurs when, 'one's beliefs about one's "self" (or, more accurately, one's constructed self) and one's experience of being are in conflict' (personal communication). From this perspective, there is no need to posit the existence of intrapsychic—and a-phenomenological—'entities': boundaries, landscapes, or re-ified subpersonality-states. Rather, dissociation is seen as a *process* whereby the individual is led to, "'disown" experiences that the believed-in self-construct cannot accommodate' (Spinelli, 1994, p.351). Hence, from Spinelli's perspective, dissociation is not a *state* of being but a *way* of being: a phenomenological means of encountering the world whilst maintaining one's 'sedimented' self-construct.

Spinelli's account of dissociation provides a conceptual bridge between polypsychism and phenomenology: a non-topological analysis of the individual's potential to split off self-incongruent 'parts' of his or her experience. Yet, in itself, Spinelli's account limits dissociation to a one-way 'di-psychic' bifurcation - the 'me' disowning the 'not-me' - an analysis still substantially discrepant from the model of a multi-dissociatory, multi-directional polypsychism.

### **The Multiple Self-construct**

Central to Spinelli's analysis of dissociation, however, is his assumption that the self-construct is a unitary phenomenon—a conjecture increasingly challenged within mainstream psychology. 'The popular psychological notion of the self-concept as a unified, consistent, or perceptually "whole" structure is possibly ill-conceived. A review of the construct of self seems in order, and such a revision might well be directed towards a theory of *multiple selves*' (Gergen, 1971, p.24). This notion of multiple self-constructs has been supported by empirical research. Lester (1992), for instance, found that 84% of undergraduates were able to describe several 'subselves' in

their mind, with a mean of 3.46 selves per student (range: 2-6 selves). Equally, Rosenberg and Gara (1985)—through a constrained Boolean factor analysis—found that professional women had a small number of high order 'major' identities: e.g., mother, daughter, overeater.

What distinguishes this notion of multiple self-constructs from Spinelli's analysis of the self-construct is not the idea that the self-construct is transmutable. Spinelli (1994), himself, writes that the self is an 'impermanent, plastic construct' (p.347); and goes on to state that, 'the belief in a permanent, fixed, relatively stable and on-going "self" is *itself* both a personally and culturally sedimented belief (p.348). What distinguishes these two perspectives is the question of whether an individual can 'hold' more than one self-construct concurrently. That is, do individuals have a single, unified notion of self; or do they have the possibility of accessing a range of *discrete, qualitatively distinct* self-constructs? Lester's (1992) and Rosenberg and Gara's (1985) studies would seem to support the latter proposition.

From a multiple self-construct perspective, then, an individual has the capacity to have 'multiply sedimented' self-constructs. These self-constructs are likely to be incongruent with each other—hence their qualitatively distinct nature—and may even be diametrically opposed. A client, for instance, may have a sedimented view of himself as a failure and wimp, but concurrently see himself in self-aggrandising terms. Another client may talk about himself as a 'Jekyll and Hyde' person: friendly and well-behaved one moment, vicious and selfish the next.

To suggest that individuals have access to a range of self-constructs, however, does not imply that all self-constructs are equally prominent all the time. If a client's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are cognitively dissonant and incompatible (Festinger, 1954), for instance, then the individual may tend to see himself as *either* Dr Jekyll *or* Mr Hyde. And if Dr Jekyll is utterly ashamed of his Mr Hyde, then he may completely dissociate from this 'part' of himself. So, at any one time, only one self-construct is likely to be 'working', 'on-line' (Markus and Wurf, 1986) or 'regnant' (Martindale, 1980); whilst other self-constructs - particularly contradictory ones - will be dis-owned. This may explain why individuals tend to experience themselves as coherent, integrated and unified - despite the fragmentary nature of the self-construct. Only when an individual is asked - in the explicit terms of the social psychological studies - to name his or her different selves do the multiple self-identities become manifest.

In contrast to Spinelli's notion of a continuous, fluid self-construct then, a multiple self-constructs position suggests that individuals have the capacity to *switch* between a series of discontinuous, discrete regnant self-constructs. And the experiences of the self that the individual dissociates from will be primarily dependent on the on-line self-construct. Hence, whilst a client - identified with their Dr Jekyll - may dissociate from their violent behaviour; the same client - identified with their Mr Hyde - may find it easy to 'own' their violence. Indeed, whilst identified as Mr Hyde, they may find it difficult to relate to their experience of themselves as friendly, outgoing, and approachable. Spinelli's notion of the 'me' unidirectionally dissociating from the 'not-me', then, would seem to be overly-simplistic. Dissociation may be better conceptualised as a complex web of one-way and two-way multi-directional relationships - each sedimented self-construct having its own specific dissociatory patterns.

### **Towards a Phenomenological Polypsychism**

Combining Spinelli's phenomenological dissociationism with the notion of multiple self-constructs, then, leads to an understanding of Being-in-the-world as a multi-dissociatory process. Rather than coming from one 'me' position, the individual encounters and experiences the world from a variety of 'mes', each based on a discrete self-construct, and each with their own disowning definition of the 'not-me'. In contrast to traditional polypsychic theories, however, this phenomenological polypsychism avoids the need to posit the existence of reified intrapsychic entities: 'subpersonalities', 'subselves', 'ego-states', etc. Rather, it might be suggested that the individual has a number of discrete 'modes' - each based on a particular self-construct - by which they encounter and experience the world. These modes are not semi-permanent or semi-autonomous structural regions within an individual's psyche. Metaphorically, they are more like coloured filters, through which an individual's perception and stance towards the world are modified - perhaps even distorted. And, like all filters, they serve to both highlight and conceal particular elements of the perceiver's world. Hence, they are not a thing, but part of a process - an experiential process without which they could not exist.

Such a phenomenological analysis has much to offer the conceptual and theoretical foundations of polypsychism; but has polypsychism anything to offer existential-phenomenological psychotherapy, or is it just one more theoretical red herring which serves

to detract both client and therapist from the client's lived experience? In conclusion, I would like to suggest two reasons why an awareness of polypsychism may facilitate the existential-phenomenological Psychotherapeutic process. First, for many individuals - particularly those tending towards M. P. D. - a multi-modal dissociatory existence is their experience of Being-in-the-world. Without an awareness of the possibility of multiple sedimentation, it may be difficult for the therapist to 'stay with' the client's fragmentary and contradictory experiences, without attempting to impose an 'integrated', coherent norm. Secondly, because of the relative consistency of the therapeutic environment, the client may tend to identify with the same self-construct within the therapeutic relationship. Hence, the therapist may make the mistake of assuming that the client's working self-construct is her self-construct - and overlook any dissociatory relationships occurring outside the therapeutic frame. If a client always identifies with his well-behaved 'Dr Jekyll' in the therapy session, for instance, both therapist and client may overlook the fact that 'Mr Hyde' has as much hatred for his alter ego as vice versa. Hence, an awareness of the possibility of multiply sedimented self-constructs offers both client and therapist an opportunity to gain a more complete picture of the client's lived experience. Not just from the perspective of the therapy-identified self, but from the client's total repertoire of self-constructs.

Clearly, polypsychism is not relevant to all individuals. Self-multiplicity would seem to be a 'person variable' - a dimension along which all individuals lie. Some people do seem to experience a number of discrete self-identities, yet there are undoubtedly many who tend towards a more singular, fluid self-construct. Clearly it would be therapeutically obscene for a therapist to 'cram' their client's lived experience in to a polypsychic framework; yet, for those at the polypsychic end of the spectrum, the therapist's assumption of a single sedimented self-construct may be equally problematic.

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