

## THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM, REALITY AND PSI

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The body is a largely alien entity even for a healthy normal person. A great many somatic processes take place, in fact, completely apart from man's immediate possibilities of control and orientation. One good example is the feeding process. Man can certainly control the quantity as well as the quality of what he eats. But once the food is ingested, the mechanisms of assimilation and digestion occur completely outside the control and the will of the conscious aspect of the mind, i.e., the Ego as immediate psychological experience. Excepting very particular cases, the Ego "submits" to them, and can only have recourse to external means and remedies if the digestive mechanisms stimulate the Ego beyond certain levels of acceptability.

The aforesaid "estrangeness" of the body vis-à-vis the Ego is, of course, sometimes total, sometimes limited, sometimes non-existent. If the average man cannot by any means accelerate or slow down his pulse-rate at will, he can have full command over some activities and innervations, such as e.g., lifting up his arms or closing his eyes. Other systems or modalities of somatic activities are, so to speak, at the limits of such possibilities; for example, the act of swallowing certain objects or rotating the arms in opposite ways simultaneously.

Up to now, I have mentioned the *conscious* Ego and its relation to the body. But there are Ego-mechanisms that are unconscious (the so-called "defense-mechanisms" for instance), and there are also unconscious processes of the mind that do not belong at all to the Ego, but to the Id. The idea that the body and its activities could be influenced by unconscious processes of the mind occurred to some people even before the inception of psychosomatic medicine. If the aforesaid influences are obnoxious or downright pathological (that is, if their outcome is a psychosomatic disorder), they can be affected and modified by purely psychological interventions, based on the main tenets of psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic method, as it can be applied to psychosomatic disturbances, seeks first of all to obtain the emerging to the conscious level of what was before in the "dark depths" of the unconscious;

and next, the taking place of new and more convenient automatic mechanisms (e.g., digestive or respiratory), all to the subject's advantage. The aforesaid "emerging to the conscious level" is nevertheless something different from the voluntary control which one normally can exert over some bodily processes. This is why I have used the expression "new and more convenient automatic mechanisms." It would be absurd to believe that a person, submitted to psychoanalytic treatment because of some psychosomatic disorder, could thereby obtain conscious and complete control of the mind over his digestive processes or his pulse-rate!

Obviously, acknowledging that conscious or unconscious processes of the mind can influence the body, does not dispose of the problem of the Ego; not only because of the differences that exist between the Ego and the other, largely or totally unconscious, structures and dimensions of the mind, but also because we have to call upon the Ego whenever we try to throw some light upon the famous, mysterious "bridge" that links the mind to the body. Whatever the kind of psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic treatment, the level we have to call upon and our constant point of reference is, in fact, the Ego. It is currently admitted that at least a part of the Ego of the analytic patient (i.e. the conscious and willing part of the mind) must be on the side of the therapist, and that only through the mediation of the patient's Ego is it possible to soften or to neutralize the unconscious springs whereby his organs and functions are continuously kept in a pathological condition.

Currently, it is also said that the Ego is the part of the mind that recuperates and integrates; the instrument whose mediation allows new and more convenient automatic processes to take place. But actually, this work is done—and to what extent—by *what*? For quite a long time, the Ego was thought of as a non-deductible, non-controversial, hardly definable "something." In the first era of psychoanalysis, the Ego was considered as a central and sufficiently stable point of reference—even in neurotic patients. Later on, research showed that things were different. Some investigators have continued to think, as Freud did, that the Ego is simply the result of certain modifications of the (previously totally unconscious) mind-structure, due to the impact of external stimuli. Others have gone back to the traditional concept of the Ego as an *a priori* entity. More recently, the very consistency of the Ego has been submitted to close scrutiny. Heinz Hartmann, for example, has purported that a conflict-free sphere of the Ego exists at birth. Another well-known psychoanalyst, Edward Glover, has contended that most likely the mature Ego is the result

of a fusion of elements, which he calls "Ego-nuclei," that are typical of the mental structure of early infancy. But in whatever way we may consider it, can we ever say that the Ego is really and actually "autonomous"? Even admitting that Hartmann was right, could we say that a "lack of conflicts" is one and the same thing as "autonomy"? The answer must perforce be in the negative. Psychologically, it is well-known (and Freud knew it very well indeed) that in man generally, the Ego has a very limited "autonomy," so limited, that there have been and there are people who do not admit it in the least. It is also well-known that, according to Freud, the Ego is submitted to a threefold series of influences and constrictions. Two of them belong to the mind-structure: those of the Id and those of the Super-Ego. The third one is represented by external agencies. If this is true—and nowadays, nobody can seriously question such formulations on a scientific level—we are bound to ask ourselves what can be the extent of that Ego-autonomy, of which, openly or not, so many people seem to be proud.

The Ego of the average man appears, therefore, to say it bluntly, as a sort of appendix or as an underproduct of something else, if we think of its dependence on the Id, on the whole of the unconscious drives and processes of the mind, on the bodily needs, and on external reality. Looked at from a purely naturalistic view-point, the Ego reveals under scrutiny its flimsy consistency, and seems to justify the contentions of scientists like B. F. Skinner or Jacques Monod. Someone has maintained that man at large is just being presumptuous when he says "*I love*" or even "*I am*," not less than when he says "*I am thirsty*" or "*I have dreamt*." The pronoun "I," in such sentences, seems in fact to imply a "primacy" of the Ego, which simply does not exist. The maximum that can be achieved by the human Ego through natural means is a comparatively small amelioration of its dependence and subjection, such as can be obtained by a psychoanalytic treatment or other psychological or psychopharmacological or even external interventions. But loosing somewhat the chains of a prisoner is not the same thing as freeing him of his bonds!

At this point, however, we are confronted with an age-old query. Is the naturalistic approach the only valid one? Is the situation of the mind in the average man the only possible one? Several respectable traditions—philosophical, religious, or otherwise—have said and go on saying "no." In some of them, one can find teachings and technical prescriptions, which are aimed at a complete reversal of the situation, i.e. at the creation of a totally different Ego, which in the end would thereby achieve *real* autonomy and mastery in its relation with the dark side of the mind, with the body and, lastly, with reality. Such are,

for instance, the indications of Yoga, of Zen, etc., in the East; of certain "spiritual exercises" or religiously-imbued practices in the West. Apart from any particular "system," let us now try to have a closer look at the main core of the aforesaid traditions.

According to the gist of many teachings, the organism with its processes, the unconscious with its drives and conflicts, etc., are the result of a "loan." They have "borrowed" their present "primacy" from an Ego that in its origin was—and potentially still is—free and unconditioned in its very essence. Such an original situation of man is reflected in all those myths that describe an earthly Paradise, a Golden Age, the "Halcyonic" days of the human kind—and, conversely, a downfall, a loss, a subsequent state of restriction and subjection (in the Christian tradition, a condemnation, due to an "original sin"; in other traditions, the inevitable consequence of an extremely slow, cosmic succession of eras or ages, of light and darkness).

The very idea of freeing the Ego from its bondages—i.e. from its submission to the body, to the unconscious part of the mind, or to reality—is felt at the same time as "dying" and as "being reborn." This is why, in many mystical and esoteric doctrines, a symbolic "passage through death" is described and prescribed. "To die," in a ritual sense, would mean to subtract from the elements of the non-Ego (body, unconscious, etc.) a "primacy" which they, in fact, have usurped: which means, "let them be extinguished, dissolved, let them die"!

If certain techniques are applied (according to a wide range of traditional doctrines), a new, positively "free" principle, comparable to the first grain of gold in the alchemist's crucible, comes into being. This principle is now called upon to proceed along a backward path. It must go through all the processes whereby the body was organized and "take back" all the powers that the body itself had "borrowed." An irradiation of the new mind-structure upon the different levels of bodily condition takes place—starting with the less "material" ones, such as preconscious or unconscious processes, up to the more material psychosomatic connections, so-called "functional" phenomena or disorders, and, lastly, the obscure and deep activity of the cells, of the tissues and of their molecular and atomic fixtures. In this way, what we called "body" becomes something quite different from the original and customary content of the term. Which means, empirically speaking, that certain premises are established vis-à-vis phenomena and manifestations, that to the man in the street (even if he were an academic scientist) would appear more or less "marvelous"—be they called parapsychological or paraphysiological occurrences, extra-normal performances, or otherwise. Ultimately, the "body" is controlled by a non-

material, radiant principle, and becomes its docile instrument. The reversal process is now over. The successor of the old body has been called by some the "magical body" or the "body of resurrection." An alchemist would say that the original lead has been totally transmuted into gold. If, in the common man, the mind was largely dependent on the body, in the perfect initiate the body depends on the mind, that can now mold it and use it in the same, "natural" way in which thought uses the word. Once more adopting the language of the alchemists, we might say that by now, the "dead stone" has become the "philosopher's stone."

Certain bodily or material conditions, to which the mind is usually submitted, can be diluted or dissolved, in particular cases and in some particular people, outside all control or participation of the Ego. In those cases, the forms and accompaniments of such dilutions or dissolutions have totally unpredictable duration, extension, and aspects. An external observer could only look at those aspects, describe them, find evidence for them, while the subject of the manifestation is usually their passive, often unconscious instrument. This, obviously enough, is the way (if we may call it a way) of the possessed, of the *shamans*, of our so-called mediums. The "observers" are the parapsychologists of our time. One can easily see the difference between the above mentioned, truly new, autonomous principle, and the Ego-disruptions that appear to be the premises of certain mediumistic phenomena. This difference could be metaphorically described as follows: in the first instance, we would have a person who controls a luminous energy; in the second, we would have a fellow in the dark, perceiving in a discontinuous way some flickering lights, without knowing where the light comes from, whether it is the light of the sun, or if a fire has started somewhere and is perhaps threatening to burn down his home.

I would now dare to go even further with my speculations. Up to this point, I have considered the relation between the mind and the body, and I have tried to show that, according to certain traditions, the relation itself can be completely changed and overturned. I wish now to extend my remarks to the relation between the mind and what we call reality, i.e. the "material" world.

An alchemist would probably say that, for the average man, the body is "lead," just as is any material object that his mind can perceive. In fact, such a body is itself submitted to the interplay of cells, molecules and atoms, and is unaware of the subtle laws and mechanisms of the same (laws of "chance and necessity" according to Monod). In other words, that entity which we call reality or material world is currently "external" to the mind, just as the "lead"—i.e. the body—of man-at-large. This

body and the material world of reality, both belong to that "objectivity" that, according to some Eastern traditions (e.g. the *Advaita Vedanta* of India), is pure delusion or *Maya*. But if the newly-born Ego of the initiate can little by little modify the *Maya* of the body, and transform its delusional veil into a "robe of glory," one doesn't see why one could not extend this concept to the general connections between mind and matter, mind and phenomenal reality, mind and the cosmos. The reclaimed new mind is a truly autonomous, luminous center. As such, it should be capable of achieving mastery not only over the body, but also over the so-called "inert" matter, and finally, of obtaining a complete reversal of the relation between Ego and non-Ego, Ego and Reality, Principle and Phenomenon.

Such further, extreme possibilities seem to receive some evidence by certain manifestations that for many centuries have been ascribed to mystics, saints, yogis and men of power; also by the observations of modern parapsychology and parapsysics. The practical possibility of the mind exerting a direct influence over matter (the so-called PK effect) has been given innumerable demonstrations in parapsychological laboratories (not to mention the "physical phenomena" of the mediumistic seances of old). Only, as it is widely admitted, the ways and means of such "effects" are still largely unknown both to the performers and to the observers; and, needless to say, the "effects" themselves cannot be obtained at will, or according to any precise scheme or program, owing to the fact that with extremely rare exceptions, the mind of the performer has not undergone any modification or transformation whatsoever.

The aforesaid views seem to be in full accordance with Eastern as well as with Western traditions and wisdom. If one accepts them, one looks differently at phenomena such as, for instance, full control over all bodily functions (see, e.g., what some yogis can do in that respect), and, furthermore, levitation, telekinesis, walking on fire or water, modifying natural events—not to speak of certain controls over processes of the animal or of the vegetable worlds. Such phenomena cease to appear "marvels" or "miracles." They can be considered as perfectly logical consequences of a fact: the fact that the mind of the individual who produces or evokes such "marvels" is situated on and operates from, a plane completely different from what to other people—the vast majority—is the empirical, everyday reality. In a similar fashion, the customary operations of a tridimensional being would appear "marvelous" or "miraculous" to the inhabitants of a bidimensional world.

It appears quite obvious that the very concepts which we are using in

our daily, scientific work, are bound to undergo a radical change if we adopt the aforesaid premises and accept their outcome. How could we talk in the same way of the mind, or of the body, or of the mind-body problem, with regard to the average man, and to somebody who would have achieved complete self-realization and enlightenment—a Buddha, a Lao-Tse, a Milarepa, a Jesus Christ?

In case these speculations may have seemed too bold for someone, I will just add a quotation from a reputed essayist and scholar, John White:

“Certain esoteric, occult and spiritual traditions claimed to have solved the mind-brain problem long ago, and parapsychology has rightly investigated them. If the rest of science will seriously investigate their general position then their further indications for research should contain useful guidelines to the nature of the cosmic interface—the meeting ground of inner and outer reality. With a new perspective, and with an acknowledgement by science that much of value to it can be learned from metaphysical domains, neuroscientists would probably learn in rapid fashion the details of how mind and brain are related. Then that very old question would be a question no longer.”

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#### DISCUSSION

PRIBRAM: If I had read this paper or heard it fifteen years ago, I wouldn't have had the slightest idea what you were talking about. I think that shows how powerful, to me at least, the holographic view is—that I now understand what someone like yourself is talking about. The fact that you start with Freud and can go on to this makes some good sense, if we go from Freud to Jung, for instance. Merton Gill and I wrote a book which was published in 1976 and it has been translated into Italian, so it's available in Italy. You might find it interesting to

see that Freud thought of the Ego as a neurological mechanism. He built the ego of super-ego functions and Id functions—the Id functions coming from the inside of the body and super-ego being what the mother and the care-taking person adds. Ego structure is simply a network of neurons. Freud has a drawing which looks very much like a computer program with its connectivities. He spells out the conditions under which connections are made: a lowering of synaptic resistances.

SERVADIO: What is the title of the book?

PRIBRAM: *Freud's Project Reassessed*. In America, it's published by Basic Books, and in England by Hutchinson Press. I don't know who put it out in Italy.

SERVADIO: Of course, the Ego is a concept. It's not an entity, really; Freud used it conditionally.

PRIBRAM: But he gave it a very definite neuropsychological basis, so that one at least knows what he's talking about.

BELOFF: I am very interested in the conclusion you reached—that the path of enlightenment might also be the path to the production of various kinds of physical effects such as you mentioned, like meditation, etc. This is borne out to some extent by the general literature on the paranormal. I mean, there are some levitations, for example, that are associated with some persons of great spiritual training, and of course, there are numerous claims of the Indian mystics who, by no standards whatever, could be called spiritually elevated people. I'm interested to have your views on this because at the present time we have the Maharishi claiming that at the end of a few week's training you're going to be able to levitate. How far should we take seriously the idea that we should all be able to achieve this if we go through this training?

SERVADIO: Well, I hope I'm not offending anybody by saying that I don't take the Maharishi Mahesh very seriously. But I think that I pointed out in my paper that on certain occasions these phenomena occur independently of a real achievement, of a real progress. A real transformation of the Ego is part and parcel of the work of the initiate. I pointed out that the shaman or the medium sometimes can help obtain some psi phenomena. But, in my opinion, there is an enormous difference between these kind of occurrences which just come about without any particular preparation and what can happen to a true initiate. Usually, people like St. Theresa and all the yogis, maharishis, etc., in the East dislike these phenomena very much because they consider



them obstacles in their path. They're not proud of them at all. Whereas, mediums are usually proud—that makes another difference between them and the other people.

SMALL: Yes, in relation to claims about levitation, it seems that something that hasn't come up and that would help us to see this in perspective, is the kind of physiological reactions that seem to go along with the transforming mystical experience you find in a lot of people—different religious conditions. You can look in the United States at the Shakers, for example, in the nineteenth century. That to me is along the same continuum. You can find it in Quakers, and revival meetings, and shamanistic healings, for example, where people will go into convulsive states. It seems to me that the Maharishi is making claims along those lines, and should be seen in the same perspective. Then, in relation to another point that I wanted to make, it seems to me that the Eastern tradition is often not fully appreciated because we tend to see a kind of introduction here of another principle. In other words, coming back to this homunculus, we spoke of something that radiates, and people, I think will feel that we're just going from one thing to another. I think that the point is, though, that in a lot of these Eastern traditions, such as Buddhist metaphysics, you can find a very clearly worked out system within which the very points you were making about the structure of the Ego, its relational quality, etc., are made. Now, we tend to see a continuum of progress, and I think this is one difference that should be pointed out between us and the Eastern tradition. The same kind of thing that LeShan points out, that we're rising upward and if we eventually attain this state, or some state, all these things are still in one continuum. In the East, there's a kind of dichotomy. So that, within our reality, these things function very well.