

The Psyche

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The history of psychology has attempted to explain the human person from either a spiritual or a material perspective; emphasising our freedom to choose on the one hand, and our limited ability to do so, on the other. Our own experience confirms both aspects. We are 'limited choosers' of the lives we lead. Take the example of day-dreaming. We drift off on an imaginary tangent conjuring up any number of possibilities, and then bring ourselves 'back down to earth'.

Our personal experience also shows us that we are more than the sum of our parts. Any effort to comprehensively explain the human person seems to come up short. For example, when we discover that we've been kidding ourselves about the impact of a loss, we demonstrate both conscious awareness, and an unconscious dynamic between our avoidance and our anxiety-laden grief.

As one philosopher put it, the definition of a human person is: 'Mystery'. This is reflected in the origin of the word 'psychology', which derives from the word psyche meaning 'breath, life, soul'. We still reference this term when we describe someone as a 'good old soul', 'full of life', or 'spirited'. What evocative language!

How do we plumb the depths of our unconscious experience, our desire to heal or find meaning, or the courage to persevere?

Relationships are an area where we can experience the psyche in operation. For example, when we exchange smiles or empathise with another's pain or joy, something is communicated between us in a non-material way. While essentially spiritual, it is still experienced as real and for this reason it is sometimes termed the 'third space'. This is why we benefit from being in good company. The reverse is also true. For example we can find ourselves quite affected by an 'atmosphere' of gossip. The 'Olympic spirit' is another example which illustrates what happens when there is a collective responses to shared values.

The full scope of the psyche is demonstrated where an individual 'rises above' their circumstances. We use terms such as 'grit' 'guts' and 'spirit' to describe the intangible reality where someone uses determination to avoid being determined by their environment. Think of Nelson Mandela who overcame such tremendous odds. Sometimes we also surprise ourselves with our resilience. This serves us well in life, as its course is often unpredictable. It is especially so when 'pulled' down by trauma or illness, but by 'drawing' on our resources, it is as if a counter force is engaged within or beyond us.

This capacity has been demonstrated in individuals who have survived abuse, who are often able to do so by mentally distancing themselves from their bodies. During the Second World War, the Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, starved, beaten and forced to work for his captors. While doing so Frankl discovered that he could put his best foot forward and sacrifice his work for his wife, and could thereby dignify and manage suffering which at first glance appeared 'soul destroying'.

This capacity of the human spirit has implications for anyone who is realistically limited by their current environment. This would include individuals born into a dysfunctional family, those with financial pressures and no sight of advancement, and obviously those suffering a

terminal illness. Some people exercise, some pray, some paint. Others do all three and more. In doing so, like Frankl they are exercising an innate drive to find meaning in whatever context they find themselves in. These creative processes require 'taking stock' of life, and assessing its direction against one's values. Existential psychotherapy can be helpful through its use of the 'third space' as a gentle witness to decisions made by the psyche, the hallmark of humanity.