



The Psychology of the Aware Ego: The Theory

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The Psychology of the Aware Ego is the theoretical way of looking at the consciousness process that was developed by Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone in the early 1970's. It starts with a view of the human psyche that utilizes three normal dimensions of consciousness: the witness state, the ego and the many natural sub-personalities (or 'inner selves/voices') from which a personal identity is constructed.

A person develops his or her overall ego identity, or personality, as a somewhat fixed and somewhat mutable subset of all possible sub-personalities. These sub-personalities are personal expressions of archetypal ways of being. For example, although it is possible to be a responsible, caring person, it's also possible to be a person who is free spirited and self-nurturing. Although we could be a person who feels safest with rules and structure, it's also possible to be a person who feels hemmed in with rules and structure; a person prefers instead to be flexible, to "go with the flow" and to be free to act spontaneously.

Generally, a person will identify with one quality to the exclusion of its opposite in a given context. This person could be identified with being one way with his or her family members and the very opposite while with personal friends, or say, while playing games or sports!

These identifications we have are primarily because of our original familial and social conditioning, although we may also have a pre-disposition (genetically or spiritually) for one way or another. The very act of identifying with an archetype, or, way of being, means that while 'identified', we actually believe and act as if that is who/ what we are. Our sense of ego-self is melded with that characteristic.

As infants, we are all born vulnerable and completely dependent on others. We have basic physiological and psycho-social needs, desires and even spiritual values that must be fulfilled in order to live, to develop our bodies, to be safe, to belong, to have personal integrity, and to eventually enjoy a sense of fulfilled purpose in life. As a psychological being, we have inner parts of ourself whose whole reality is the vulnerable experience of our needs and innate values. If our needs are successfully met, these vulnerable selves feel contentment and satisfaction, not having our needs met causes these same inner selves pain and suffering.

As needy as we are born, we are also born with some potential for meeting our needs, such as our instinctual drives and our native creative intelligence. A primary waking mental and physical task, once we are born, is to construct maps of 'what life is'. These perceived maps dictate our perceived rules for life. We perceive multi-dimensionally through our senses. These 'reality rules' are sensed kinesthetically, emotionally, mentally, intuitively, mytho-spiritually and they are all inter-linked. We perceive and learn from our environment whatever exists in it that will support an opportunity for our needs being met and (our) soul being fulfilled.

Power and Vulnerability

Sensually, emotionally and cognitively, we learn which ways of being induce 'the other' to support our life. This 'other' could be our parents, and other people in our lives, animals, and even nature itself; 'other' is all that we experience that we are not. As we integrate what we learn, these ways of being add to our growing power to protect and fulfill our own needs. Whether this 'other' is other/ not me, is material for a whole other conversation.

These ways of being that we use to respond to our life's conditions (inner and outer) are our power based selves (as opposed to the vulnerable ones I mentioned above.) These powerful selves are governed by beliefs we form from our perception and experience, learned patterns of holding or expressing our physical and emotional energies, and on our instinctual drives for survival. These inner selves are revealed in our outer habits, ideas, body language and our inner experience as somatic and energy-body experience, dream and fantasy figures. The purpose of our power selves is to behave in a way that strives to protect against loss and pain, and to fulfill our survival and our potential to reach deep satisfaction. Again, directly related to each of these inner selves are vulnerable selves who feel the status of our various needs.

For example, related to the inner self in you who is responsible and caring is likely to be a vulnerable inner self who feels your basic need for belonging and connection to others. Your free spirited and self-nurturing selves are likely related to the vulnerable selves who feel your needs for autonomy and basic physical health. Related to your rule making/keeping self may again be your vulnerable selves who feel your need for connection to others, and, likely, a basic need for order, stability and safety from danger. Your spontaneous, flexible, “go-with-the-flow” inner selves are related to paradoxically opposite needs for freedom, change and novelty/chaos.

From childhood, our personality (ego) is developed in such a way that it generally becomes identified with meeting certain needs and values over others, depending on the prevailing conditions of our lives. For example, in one household, order, rationality and responsibility may be the ruling values which are taught and enforced. A child may find that by aligning himself with those values and behaviors, he is rewarded with praise and acceptance. His own basic need for order is fulfilled as is his need for belonging. When this child expresses his potential for dreaminess, silliness and selfishness, he is directly or indirectly punished. He learns first to not act on his needs for freedom, novelty and autonomy and eventually he may even cease to be aware of these needs.

This child may then grow up to experience himself as “I am rational, very orderly and responsible.” Those sub-personalities become his primary selves, his primary ego identifications. Alternately, that very same child, in the same context could look at those same prevailing values and energetically assess the level of contentment or suffering the family (including himself) is experiencing. “Dad is orderly and self-controlled, but also very sad, stuck and lonely.”

If there is more suffering than contentment, this same child could decide to abandon the prevailing familial values in favor of the disowned ones. This child grows up to be identified with the inner dreamer, the playful one, or the one who strikes out to make his own path in life regardless of others. This child seeks contentment in a way that is lost to his parents. He seeks to fulfill his need for free-flowing possibilities, creative chaos and would feel safer when those needs are fulfilled. His rational, orderly self would be disowned and there would be limiting consequences for that as well.

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Whichever way we chose, what happened to all the potential selves- and needs - that we have disowned? They are judgmentally projected out onto others and either amplified positively or negatively. They can also be displaced into neurotic behavior or transformed into bodily phenomena. The stress of frustrated needs can easily be recognized in muscle tension, headaches, intestinal distress, addictions and accident proneness. These disowned inner selves appear in our dreams and fantasies and they pop out under the influence of drugs, alcohol and severe stress. Collectively, we experience them as ‘what’s wrong with/ scary/ unhealthy about society.’

It is absolutely the norm for people to reach adulthood with an array of primary and disowned selves. Our primary selves were our psychic solution for surviving and existing in the world we were born to. As we move out from that small world circle, we are eventually confronted with the need to redefine and expand ourselves. It may be that while being a generous person was admired -and even required - in our family of origin, it’s called being a sucker in the business world. We may have grown up to be a responsible person, but, may fall in love with someone who considers those very traits to be controlling and uptight. In other words, all those disowned selves, so long ago judged and discarded become necessary for continued survival and, even more, for fulfillment in the very different, larger world we live in as adults.

In Conclusion

So far, we’ve been describing a normal developmental process in which our Ego is identified with a certain selection of inner selves, to the exclusion of others, due to social and familial conditioning. Voice Dialogue is a consciousness process in which we are gradually introduced to the reality that our very sense of who we are has been enraptured with a constrained spectrum of potential ways of being (“This is the right way to be”) and that we have had limited or no access to the other human attributes in their generative expressions. Since each powerful inner self/sub-personality/inner voice has its own unique point of reference (how to take care of its own underlying needs), a person comes to realize that they are literally missing half of their human potential. Once we sense something to the effect of, “It’s not that “I am” generous, but rather, “I have” the capacity to be generous, which both benefits and limits me, we are having an “Aware Ego Process.” In that moment, we are having a conscious process of recognizing and honoring a self without identifying with it as “who and what I fundamentally am.” That self is a possible way of being, no longer the only one.

The Voice Dialogue facilitation process induces the same type of non-attachment of ego to fixed form that simple breath meditation sponsors. In this work, we call it 'separating from a self,' because we start out ego attached to a particular self, and we separate our identification from that self by inducting an awareness / witness process relative to the ego and that self.

One way untrained people often address this realization, usually because of a crisis, is to flip from one side of a pair of opposites selves, to the other. Instead of being so controlling and uptight, they think, "It's time to be more carefree!" Instead of being such a sucker, "It's time to look out for number one!" This kind of switch often feels like the way to overcome pain and disillusionment. We feel like we're finally growing up and putting innocence behind us. It can work temporarily but one is just as likely to encounter yet another life crisis where the 'old self' needs to reassert itself in order to save the day. It's like realizing we've been hopping through life on one foot and resolving to even things out by hopping on the other foot from now on. All we do is dis-identify from one side and quickly identify with a new self system. The point is, we live within many paradoxes: in order to survive and thrive in life, we must learn to be aware of the existence of a plurality of needs within us and learn to creatively honor and meet them. Walk with both feet on the ground, hop temporarily when the moment calls for it.

Once we apprehend that any given inner self (which we have been identified with) is not the only way of safely and honorably being, there's now the potential for a different way of being to be perceived, neutrally. Previously, the only way that the opposite self (or selves) were perceived, was through the value system of the self that we were egotistically identified with. For example, if we thought of ourself as a primarily responsible and caring person, any time our free spirited and self-nurturing selves wanted to arise, our primary self system saw it as irresponsible and selfish behavior. By training and practicing the Aware Ego Process, these parts of us can be perceived with the neutrality of the Awareness or Witness state. Now, temporarily, there exists a person who has access to a non-judgmental Awareness which just openly perceives. We are now in a position to psychologically operate in a manner that originally defined what an Ego was: a consciously aware, decisive function of embodied Psyche (soul). Only in this place can we exercise true free will. Choice is born of true options within a present context.

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