



Where is the evidence that we are more than one self?

The first quotation from Bahá'u'lláh describes us as not inwardly united which implies that we may be inwardly divided. Bahá'u'lláh also talks of the self but in ways that conflict. For example, we are enjoined to flee the self as a prison[1] on the one hand, and to turn our sight towards it, on the other, and see Bahá'u'lláh as God standing within us.[2] We clearly cannot be talking about the same self in each case. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi develop this idea in many places.[3]

Furthermore 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes character as coming in three kinds – innate, inherited and acquired: there is also natural capacity and acquired capacity.[4]

There is in addition the question of divine attributes. "Upon the reality of man... He hath focussed the radiance of all of His names and attributes... and made it a mirror of His own self" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 65). Some of these attributes are hard to reconcile into one concept of God let alone integrate into a single self at the unwavering centre of a unified consciousness![5]

If the Bahá'í picture suggests at least a family of selves, what does the Western world think? I shall draw for the most part on psychology in the profile that follows.

The layman seems typically to value consistency, which, in effect, means singleness. In psychology too the assumption has often been that there really is a unity, accounting for differences and inconsistencies within the same person by variations of the trait perspective. However a vast body of theory, clinical practice and research has accumulated which calls this assumption gravely into question. Split brain research[6] and resulting theories,[7] clinical experiences with multiple personalities[8] and the auditory hallucinations of schizophrenics,[9] as well as psychoanalytic theory (Freud and Jung especially) and its offspring[10] are useful starting points in getting our bearings.

For instance, Berne, the founding father of Transactional Analysis, saw us as beings organised into at least three different semi-autonomous and incompletely conscious subselves. These he called the Parent, the Adult and the Child.[11] The extent to which these subselves are in harmonious cooperation one of the determinants of well-being.

A model of therapy often used in coordination with Transactional Analysis is the Gestalt Therapy of Fritz Perls[12] whose most fundamental tenet is that we are divided beings seeking to become whole. His therapy is a form of consultation between conflicting aspects of the person.

Split-brain research strongly suggests that the left and right brain function in distinct ways. If they become surgically or traumatically disconnected then the patient can be shown to process reality in simultaneous but conflicting ways. Radical developments in academic psychology and its research take the view that no such thing as personality in the traditional sense exists. We are

constructed from our social experience. Roles and the internalised descriptions of others produce an illusion of solid selfness. However, rather as with the proverbial onion, once you take these layers away there is nothing left above and beyond these disparate and ephemeral imaginings!

If we are a community of selves - what then? Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to "reflect upon the perfection of man's creation, and that all these planes and states[13] are folded up and hidden away within him. Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form/When within thee the universe is folded?" (Seven Valleys 34). Rowan refers to the Buddhist concept of "mutual interpenetration", [14] and quotes Wilber as saying: "the universe is likened to a net of glittering gems, wherein each Jewel contains the reflections of all other jewels, and its reflection in turn exists in all other gems: one in all, all in one, or unity in diversity, diversity in unity" (Spectrum 220).

This suggests that the world within us is as manifold, vast and complex as the world outside us. Outside us there is, as it were, a landscape: inside us there is perhaps, to borrow Hopkins' word, an "inscape". Rowan spells out certain implications by saying: "we are back to the idea that the inner world and the outer world have the same laws and the same features and the same structures. The personal and the political are one". The implications of this, if it is true, or even if it is merely useful, are too vast for this presentation or this presenter to encompass. However, several really do stand out already.

Firstly the individual becomes subject to Bahá'u'lláh's statements that mankind needs to establish unity before other problems can be resolved and that this unity can only be created if we first of all follow His counsels. Secondly the processes of consultation and compassion should apply with equal force within as without. In practice this might mean allowing different aspects of ourselves to communicate one with another, and ensuring that we respond even to the unprepossessing parts of our selves with loving acceptance. After all, can we expect to bring out the best in an "unsavoury" new Bahá'í whom we have just met by cutting him dead and keeping him in Coventry? Why, then, should we expect the people of our inner world to respond well when we treat them badly? Thirdly, as we are within so will we create our world. Hence the vital importance of Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to free ourselves that the whole world might become free. Fourthly, it strongly suggests that we must stop pigeon-holing others, refrain from either-or thinking and nothing-butism and eschew forcing people to behave in ways that are consistent with our expectations and prejudices. If, within them, they contain multitudes, why should we draw conclusions about them based on only a fraction of their being? And last of all, it may not be sufficient to deepen only our most immediately accessible selves in the Faith: we need to reach our minorities inside, our despised and outcast ones within, with the loving Message of Bahá'u'lláh, or else there is very little chance that we will reach those the world at large rejects!

It is perhaps necessary to add that this gallery of selves comprises various levels. The lowest level may correspond to the acquired character which is

fragmented by traumatic experience and the need to play different roles in different situations. Such selves are vivid to us but are not perhaps the most vital aspects of our being. Perhaps at a higher level of significance are the selves that pertain to the inherited character: there is strong evidence, for example, that distinct temperaments are discernible in all of us from day one. Jung also argued for such underlying tendencies as extraversion and introversion; Eysenck contends these also are inherited. Different aspects of our temperament may not always sit easily together.

At the highest level there is the innate character and the innate capacity, which come from God and are all good. It is possible that there is not just one higher self but many. There are, as I have suggested, many attributes of God, not all of which appear immediately compatible. Also Bahá'u'lláh describes the Godlike in us in different ways at different times. For example, in the Arabic Hidden Word mentioned above, we are to experience Him as "mighty, powerful and self-subsisting" whereas in the Gleanings He refers to the "seas of (His) Loving Kindness"[15] moving within us. We are likely to experience those two aspects of God's attributes very differently, it seems to me, assuming that any of us reach the point of experiencing them at all!

Nonetheless the higher aspects of self may be the best or only way of transcending or resolving the conflicts between the lower selves (which have to be consciously understood however if they are not to subvert all our efforts at spiritual development). "(At) the same time, when the person gets in touch with the real self, or the greater self, the question of the subpersonalities becomes less important ... They move gradually from being great feudal barons to being colourful banners brought out on appropriate occasions" (Rowan, Subpersonalities 206). The conflicts between aspects of the higher self may well be more apparent than real.

I have skated over many difficulties but have sought to convey as simply as I could a possibly neglected aspect of our inner reality. If what I have described is true or useful, it will be extremely important to remember for Bahá'u'lláh counsels us in the first Taraz[16] to know ourselves and that within us which leads to loftiness or lowliness.

Perhaps a good place to stop would be the moving words of a clergyman poet:

"The best Journey to make is inward.

It is the interior that calls...

For some it is all darkness;

for me, too, it is dark.

But there are hands

there I can take, voices to hear

solider than the echoes without.

And sometimes a strange light shines, purer than the moon,

casting no shadow, that is

the halo upon the bones

of the pioneers who died for truth". (Thomas, Later Poems, 99)

End Notes

Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words (Persian) no. 40.

Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words (Arabic) no. 13.

See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions chapter 64, and Shoghi Effendi in Living the Life 28.

See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions chapter 56.

See the Long Healing Prayer for a concentrated exposure to this problem.

See M. Gazzaniga. The Social BBB to Look at Human Behaviour. Boston: Houghton Miffrain. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

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See A. Crabtree. Multiple Man: Explorations in Possession And multiple Personality. London: Grafton Books, 1988.

See L.S. Benjamin . "Is Chronicity a Function of the Relationship Between the Person and Auditory Illusion?" Schizophrenia Bulletin (1989) 15: 291-310.

See E. Berne. "Games People Play". Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; and R. Assagioli. Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings. 3d. ed. London: Turnstone, 1975.

For a full and very intelligible description, see S. Woolams and M. Brown. TA: The Total Handbook of Transactional Analysis. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp. 9-40.

F. Perls, R.F. Hefferline and P. Goodman. Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1951.

E.G. the dream.

See J. Rowan, Subpersonalities 220.

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 327.

Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 35.

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