Ontological Addiction

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Ontological Addiction theory (OAT) presently construed as “the maladaptive condition whereby an individual is addicted to the belief that they inherently exist” risks being caught in a performative contradiction. This is related to an implicit transcendental reductionist assumption operative in its conception. Any assimulation and application of skillful means to mental health within a western context will also seek to integrate the insights of the Western Enlightenment and the value of the individual. Critically this entails a developmental appreciation of the problematic perception of egoic individualism as distinct from the conception of an individuating ‘whole person’, with ontological import. Thus OAT could positively be supplemented, reconstructed and reconceived as Ontological Affirmation Theory.

ego unique personhood ontology epistemology

1. Introduction

Van Gordon et al. (2016), in laying out OAT, chart a path from (i) becoming aware of the imputed self, (ii) deconstructing the imputed self, and (iii) reconstructing a dynamic and non-dual self in order to overcome the ontological addiction, described as a “maladaptive condition whereby an individual is addicted to the belief that they inherently exist” (ibid, p. 1). And indeed, overcoming egoic addictive suffering is at the core of contemplative traditions worldwide, whilst subtle significant distinctions remain as to respective ‘self-systems’. Set within a conscious evolutionary frame, some of the contemporary mapping of this territory, only relatively recent in its articulation, holds profound implications for our way of being and becoming in the world. Our conceptions of ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’, what we value and strive for, our sense of purpose and the very meaning of our lives are all at play.

2. Developmental Implications for Contemplative Paths

Now, within the context of Eastern contemplative-‘Enlightenment’ teachings, from which Van Gordon et al. (2016) principally draw, a ‘traditional’ path predominantly assumes an ‘impersonal’ realisation of identification with ‘Source’, where ‘one’ is an expression of this Authentic Self and this Authentic self is One ‘Being’. However, the metaphysical and ontological assumptions of traditional paths have been called into question by further developments in modern and postmodern scholarship, originating with Kant’s (2008) critiques and the consequent ‘turn to the subject’ in philosophy i.e., epistemology. The subsequent intersubjective turn along with a compelling revindication and differentiation of ontology, from its prior pervasive conflation with epistemology, i.e., the “epistemic fallacy” ([1] [2] 2012), has led many to recognise the subtleties of a “postmetaphysical” perspective in the social sciences, philosophy and spirituality (Habermas and Cronin 2017; [3] 2017; Murray 2019), which seeks to

articulate and affirm 'truths claims', keenly aware of their fallibilistic and provisional nature, from a humbler perspective. And it is problematic, from an ontological and developmental perspective, to claim as Van Gordon et al. (2016, p. 1) do, that our "imputed self" or ego is a "maladaptive condition whereby an individual is addicted to the belief that they inherently exist".

Much confusion in Western spiritual circles can derive from the pearls and perils of traditional interpretations of Buddhist *no-self* teachings, which when not understood in its appropriate context can have a debilitating impact on attempts to efface the ego, rather than embrace an integrative developmental dynamic (Wilber 2000b, pp. 717–34). On one hand, we can note the adage that we first need to develop a strong healthy ego in order to transcend *and include* 'it' (noting (Van Gordon et al. 2016) *emphasis on transcend* alone), or risk attendant mental health issues (Engler 1986). We paradoxically note that the ego is implicated in the desire to eliminate the ego. Cook-Greuter (2013) cites Chogyam (2002) in *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* as "perhaps the most cogent analysis of this mechanism," of how the ego is able to usurp ego transcendent moments or states, for its own vain glorification. Thus, while acutely acknowledging pervasive adult 'developmental issues' and the "impaired functionality" that the authors allude to, healthy 'ego development' can evidently be understood, au contraire to Van Gordon et al. as *adaptation* in action at a certain stage or stages in our psycho-spiritual growth (Cook-Greuter 2010). A matured awareness of 'ego states' can duly assist in catalysing ego-transcendence, with regard to integrating the 'individuating' and 'participative' functions of the psyche, which I will discuss further below. An array of contemporary spiritual authors and scholar-practitioners acknowledge, with nuance, that healthy ego development is a prerequisite stage(s), for balanced psycho-spiritual development, participatory enactment and is part of the gradual process of growing 'spiritual individuation', as cited in Ferrer (2017).

Perhaps more pertinently, from an ontological perspective, it is the case that *we always already assume we exist*, as to assume anything other than this involves a significant performative contradiction. This being the case insofar as our very actions reveal tacit assumptions, or a deeper belief, with which we may consciously theoretically disagree but nonetheless, can be excavated through our behaviour. As Bhaskar (2002, p. 70) suggests, "the source of the paradoxical nature of the self is as follows; whatever it is that is said about the self, there is something other than that which is tacitly presupposed", given that as Murray (2019) also reiterates, "all theories are underpinned by, usually tacit, ontological assumptions…which are deep, omnipresent and unavoidable". Therefore, if the ego (in the sense of EDT), is a necessary but insufficient stage(s) of our psycho-spiritual development and, as recognised by ego psychology, is 'a construct' ([4] 2002), what or who is it (without falling prey to transcendental reductionist assumptions), do we *inescapably* assume to 'be real', 'to exist' in ourselves and in each other?

3. Radical Ontology

This echoes Teilhard de Chardin's (1959) profound contention that the artificial separation between humans and cosmos, lies at the root of our contemporary moral confusion. Jorge Ferrer (2017, p. 15) similarly emphasises the "key difference between modern individualism and spiritual individuation is thus the integration of radical relatedness in the later". The practical and ethical significance of such a 'radical ontology' of personhood cannot be

overstated, insofar as ‘we-space’ research (Gunnlaugson and Brabant 2016) also signals how profoundly such an ontology impacts on collaborative success (or lack thereof) in groups, teams, organisations, communities and indeed, given our ‘metacrises’ (Rowson and Pascal 2021) one might add for, ‘nations’. As McCallum et al. (2016) states, with relevance to an ethic of care:

For us as practitioners, this philosophical view of differentiated and yet unified field of consciousness provides a way of understanding the radically interdependent nature of relationships between parts and whole, individuals and groups, and sub groups within larger and larger collectives…in the instance of individuals who are recognised with genetic or social “frailties”, the degree to which a community understands these individuals not as “other”, but as being integral parts of a larger whole will determine approaches to care, allocation and resources, etc.

Heron (1998, p. 79) is thus concerned that “in elevating the human to the absolute, it ignores the asymmetrical relation between the finite and the infinite” .and regards it in his model, as “an illusionary state of spiritual inflation”. He (ibid, p. 82) thus maintains that “it is important to challenge these claims for the very good reason that they can, for a while at any rate, intimidate and disempower some people from making deep, creative choices about their own spiritual path”.

It is also noteworthy is this context that while Van Gordon et al. (2016) qualify a psychopathologising of “belief in god,” the assumption from “the Buddhist perspective” that “a belief in a divine and/or ruling being requires that there is a self,” is problematic in conception and practice. It is also somewhat ironic in the context of the very aims of OAT, as it is precisely an integrative appreciation of ‘2nd person concepts of Spirit’, or an ‘i-thou’ ‘devotional’ practice (central also in Tibetan Buddhism) which potentially recognises higher-deeper, broader, transcendent, immanent and situational levels of thou, “that before which the ego is humbled,” (Wilber 2006, p. 160) and which facilitates the cultivation of the ‘other’ centered favourable character traits, espoused in the OAT approach. As Wilber (2006, ibid) expresses, “[i]n short failing to acknowledge your own Spirit in 2nd -person is a repression of a dimension of your being-in-the world”. While we can no doubt acknowledge a pervasive developmental conflation of ‘God’ with traditional mythic perspectives alone, a developmental orientation which appreciates the ‘123 of God’ (ibid, p. 161), or first person, second person and third person approaches, integrally recognising perspectives and depth, ‘East and West’ is *more becoming* in a conscious evolutionary age (Corless and Knitter 1990).

Stein (2019, p. 279) likewise notes “the widespread failure to understand this radical truth about the [democratic and personal] nature of enlightenment has kept it from being a legitimate modern belief and aspiration”. In a similar vein, De Chardin (1959, p. 283) makes an explicit cultural connection between the discovery of “the sidereal world, so vast” and what he refers to as the *depersonalisation* or *impersonalisation* of modern man, echoing more contemporary insights and remedies from the cosmology of Abrams and Primack (2011) where instead of ‘modern humans’ feeling lost and insignificant in the vast cosmos, we appreciate our profound integrality with the whole. De Chardin (ibid, p. 285) maintained:

[F]ar from being mutually exclusive, the Universal and Personal (that is to say ‘centred’) grow in the same direction and culminate simultaneously in each other. It is therefore a mistake to look for the extension of our being or of the noosphere in the Impersonal.

Fittingly, de Chardin poses the question, “what is the work or works of man if not to establish, in and by each one of us, an absolute original centre in which the Universe reflects itself in a unique and imitable way?” (ibid, p. 287). This characteristic of evolution, he claims, is underscored in any domain, “whether it be the cells of the body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis”, (ibid, p. 288) in the principle *union differentiates*. Teilhard thus maintained:

[T]he peak of ourselves, the acme of our originality, is not our individuality [ego as over identified with the individuating function] but our person; and according to the evolutionary structure of the world, we can only find our person by uniting together.[though] not every kind of union will do…it is centre to centre that must make contact and *not otherwise…*[as] the true ego grows in inverse proportion to ‘egoism’ (ibid, pp. 289, 290).

4. Evolutionary Awareness-A Fourth Turning of Buddhism

The generative implications of our present developing awareness that we live in a vast evolutionary universe is shaping what many are now referring to as the ‘Fourth Turning’ in Buddhism (Wilber 2014) and somewhat contrary to that which Van Gordon et al. (2016) suggest, regarding interpretations of prior turnings, may well amount to significantly more than another “variation on the same theme” (ibid, p. 4). It may indeed hold significant import for interpretations of “no-self” teachings, the “innermost aspect of consciousness”, “transmigration” and “*pashchimadharma* [Sanskrit] or *mappō* [Japanese]” teachings, not discounting their relative insights, within the consciousness of a vast evolving and conrnucopian universe. Indeed each developmental structural stage of ‘spiritual intelligence’ governs how persons interpret their contemplative/spiritual experience and/or their respective traditions, with a recognition that “the very core of the enlightenment experience will change from stage to stage,” (Wilber 2017, p. 9) as we enter anew the hermeneutic circle, moment to moment (Panikkar 1979).

As the reader may recall, in brief, the First major Turning of the Buddhist wheel of dharma refers to the teachings of Siddharta Guatama, represented by Theravāda Buddhism. The Second Turning refers to Nāgārjuna’s teaching on ‘emptiness’, sūnyatā, within the Madhyamika and foundational for the Mahāyāna and Vajrayana schools. The Third Turning focuses its teachings on ‘Buddha nature’, or *tathāgatagarbha,* embryonic Buddhahood, implying ‘enlightenment’ is our true and natural state of mind and is represented by the Yogācāra school. This contemporary Fourth Turning of the Buddhist wheel of dharma, (or variously Fifth, if counting tantric/esoteric Buddhism) includes our own era’s ongoing discovery of ‘evolutionary theory’. It therefore recognizes that the very world of ‘form’, is itself evolving and if as previously taught, ‘emptiness and form’ are not two, i.e., nondual, the Fourth Turning in essence recognises that ‘emptiness and evolving form’, are not two, i.e., nondual. This same complexification of form (for e.g., from strings, quarks, atoms, molecules, to cells, to multicellular organisms, etc.,) is also occuring in humans as attested by the literature referenced, indicated not least by our increasing developmental capacity for perspectival awareness. Thus the supposition is that while tradtional enlightement remains unchanged in its *Freedom* (Emptiness) aspect, its *Fullness* (Form) has evidently continued to evolve. And as the formula of true self plus perspective indicated, the realised ‘true self’ is now being expressed in this Fourth Turning through what

Wilber refers to as “a post egoic nondual realisation of unique perspective”, (Gafni 2012, p. xx) with its attendant ontological, personal and ethical import, as depicted above.

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