

*"We are dominated by everything with which we become identified. We can master, direct and utilize everything from which we disidentify ourselves."*

# Identification

— A PSYCHOSYNTHESIS EXERCISE —

The fundamental experience of self-consciousness, the discovery of the "I," is implicit in our human consciousness.\* It is that which distinguishes our consciousness from that of the animals, which are conscious but not self-conscious. But generally this self-consciousness is "implicit" rather than explicit. It is experienced in a nebulous and distorted way because it is usually mixed with, and

veiled by the *contents* of consciousness.

This constant input of influences not only veils the clarity of consciousness — it also produces spurious identifications of the self with the *content* of consciousness, rather than with *consciousness itself*. If we are to make self-consciousness explicit, clear and vivid, we must first *disidentify* ourselves from the contents of our consciousness.

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Adapted from the "Self-Identification Exercise," Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, Viking Press, 1965, pp. 111-125, and *The Act of Will*, Viking Press, 1973, pp. 211-217.

\*"Self-consciousness" is used here to mean being aware of oneself as a distinct individual, and not in the more customary sense of ego-centric or even neurotic "self-centeredness."

More specifically, the habitual state for most of us is to be identified with that which has the greatest pull on our awareness: that which seems, at the time, to give us the greatest sense of aliveness, to be most real, or most intense.

This identification with a part of ourselves can take many forms. Some people are identified with their bodies. They ex-

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perience themselves, and often talk about themselves, mainly in terms of sensation; in other words they function as if they *were* their bodies. Others are identified with their feelings; they experience and describe their state of being in affective terms, and believe their feelings to be the central and most intimate part of themselves. Thoughts and sensations are perceived as more distant, perhaps somewhat separate. Those who are identified with their minds are likely to describe themselves with intellectual constructs, even when asked how they *feel*. They often consider feelings and sensations as peripheral, or are largely unaware of them. Many are identified with a role, such as "mother," "student," "businessman," or a subpersonality, such as "seeker," "victim," "striver;" and they live, function and experience themselves accordingly.

This identification with only a *part* of our personality may be temporarily satisfactory, but it has serious drawbacks. It prevents us from realizing the experience of the "I," the deep sense of identity, of *knowing* who we are. It excludes, or greatly decreases, the ability to identify with all the other parts of our personality, to enjoy them and utilize them to their full extent. Thus our "normal" expression in the world is limited at any one time to only a fraction of what it can be. And the conscious—or even unconscious—realization that we do not have access to much that is in us can cause frustration and painful feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Finally, a continuing identification with either a role or a predominant function leads often, and almost inevitably, to a precarious life situation resulting

sooner or later in a sense of loss—even despair—such as in the case of an athlete who grows old and loses his physical strength; an actress whose beauty is fading; a mother whose children have grown up and left her; or a student who has to leave school and face a new set of responsibilities. Such situations can produce serious and often very painful crises. They can be considered as more or less partial psychological "deaths." No frantic clinging to the waning old "identity" can avail. The true solution can only be a "rebirth," that is embracing a new and broader identification. This sometimes involves the whole personality, and leads to an awakening or "birth" into a new and higher state of being.

The natural process of entering into more inclusive identifications often occurs without a clear understanding of its meaning, and so is achieved haltingly and with considerable difficulty. But a conscious, purposeful, willing cooperation with this process can greatly facilitate and hasten it.

This can be best achieved by a deliberate exercise of *disidentification* and *self-identification*. Through this willed act, we gain the *freedom* and the *power of choice* to be identified with, or disidentified from, any aspect of our personality, according to what seems most appropriate in each situation. Thus we can learn to master, direct and utilize all the elements of our personality, in an inclusive and harmonious synthesis.

This exercise is intended as a tool for achieving the consciousness of the self, and the ability to focus our attention sequentially on each of our main person-

ality aspects, roles, subpersonalities, etc. We then can clearly examine their qualities while maintaining the attitude of observer, and recognizing that *the observer is not that which he observes*.

In the form which follows, the first phase of the exercise — *disidentification* —

consists of three steps dealing with the physical, emotional and mental aspects of awareness. This leads to the *self-identification* phase. Once some experience is gained with it, the exercise can be expanded or modified according to need, as will be indicated further on.

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Sit in a comfortable position, relax your body, and take a few deep breaths. Then make the following affirmation, slowly and thoughtfully:

*I have a body but I am not my body. My body may find itself in different conditions of health or sickness, it may be rested or tired, but that has nothing to do with my self, my real "I." I value my body as my precious instrument of experience and of action in the outer world, but it is only an instrument. I treat it well, I seek to keep it in good health, but it is not my self. I have a body, but I am not my body.*

Now close your eyes, recall briefly the general substance of this affirmation, and then gradually focus your attention on the central concept: "*I have a body but I am not my body.*" Attempt, as much as you can, to realize this as an *experienced fact* in your consciousness. Then open your eyes and proceed the same way with each of the next two stages:

*I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. My emotions are diversified, changing, sometimes contradictory. They may swing from love to hatred, from calm to anger, from joy to sorrow, and yet my essence — my true nature — does not change. "I" remain. Though a wave of emotion may temporarily submerge me, I know that it will pass in time; therefore I am not this emotion. Since I can observe and understand my emotions, and then gradually learn to direct, utilize, and integrate them harmoniously, it is clear that they*

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are not my *self*. I *have* emotions, but I *am not* my emotions.

*I have* a mind but *I am not* my mind. My mind is a valuable tool of discovery and expression, but it is not the essence of my being. Its contents are constantly changing as it embraces new ideas, knowledge, and experience. Often it refuses to obey me! Therefore, it cannot be me, my self. It is an organ of knowledge of both the outer and the inner worlds, but it is not my *self*. *I have* a mind, but *I am not* my mind.

Next comes the phase of *identification*. Affirm slowly and thoughtfully:

After disidentifying myself from the contents of consciousness, such as sensations, emotions, thoughts, *I recognize and affirm that I am a center of pure self-consciousness, a center of will*. As such, I am capable of observing, directing, and using all my psychological processes and my physical body.

Focus your attention on the fundamental realization: *I am a center of pure self-consciousness and of will*. Attempt, as much as you can, to realize this as an *experienced* fact in your awareness.

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The purpose of the exercise is to achieve a specific state of consciousness. So once that purpose is grasped, much of the procedural detail can be dispensed with. Whenever it feels right, you can therefore simplify the exercise by going swiftly and dynamically through each of the stages of disidentification, using only the central affirmation, and concentrating, at each stage, on its *experiential* realization.

*I have* a body, but *I am not* my

body—*I have* emotions, but *I am not* my emotions—*I have* a mind, but *I am not* my mind.

You may find it valuable at this point to make a deeper consideration of the stage of self-identification along the following lines:

What remains after having disidentified myself from my body, my sensations, my feelings, my mind? Who am I then? I am the permanent factor

in the ever-varying flow of my personal life. I am that which has a sense of being, of permanence, of inner balance. I am a center of identity and pure self-consciousness. *I affirm my identity as this center.*

(pause)

I recognize and affirm that as this center I have not only self-consciousness, but also creative, dynamic power. I recognize that as this center, I can learn to observe, direct, and harmonize all the psychological processes and the physical body. I will to achieve a constant awareness of this fact in the midst of my everyday life, and to use it to give increasing meaning and direction to my life.

Later, as the ability to experience this *state of consciousness* is increased, the identification stage can also be abridged, using the central affirmation:

I am a center of identity, self-consciousness and will.

The goal is to gain enough facility with the exercise so that you can go through each stage of disidentification and achieve the "I-consciousness" swiftly and dynamically, and then maintain it for as long as you choose. You can then — *at will* and at any moment — disidentify from any overpowering emotion, annoying thought, inappropriate role, etc., and taking the attitude of observer, gain a clearer understanding of the situation, its meaning, its causes, and the most effective way to deal with it.

To reach this goal, it has been found most effective to practice the exercise daily, preferably during the first hours

of the day. Whenever possible, it is to be done shortly after waking up, considering it as a symbolic *second awakening*. It is also of great value to repeat it in its brief form several times during the day, as a means to remain in touch with your "I-consciousness."

### Variations

The exercise may be modified appropriately, according to your own purpose and existential needs. In addition to disidentifying from the three fundamental personality functions (physical, emotional and mental), you can also disidentify from other functions such as desires, impulses and imagination, or from subpersonalities and roles, or even material possessions. Some examples follow:

*I have desires, but I am not my desires. Desires are aroused by drives, physical and emotional, and by many other influences. They are often changeable and contradictory, with alternations of attraction and repulsion; therefore they are not my self. I have desires, but I am not my desires.*

I engage in various activities and play many roles in life. I willingly play them as well as possible, be it the role of son or father, wife or husband, teacher or student, artist or executive. But these are roles, important but partial roles, which I, myself, am playing. I choose to play, and can observe myself playing. Therefore I *am not* any of them. *I am my self*, and I am not only the actor but *the director* of the acting.

### Other Applications

The exercise, up to this point, has been