

Experiential Consciousness and the Nature of Human Identity

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Delphic imperative, “know thyself,” has probably never been as important as it is today. We barely seem to know enough about ourselves as a species to find a good collective life – or even just to survive. As individuals, we also struggle to understand who we are and to make a good use of our personal assets. In this time when images are so powerfully used to influence our emotions - and, along with them, our preferences, our desires, our choices - questioning human nature becomes an obvious necessity. Politicians and Corporate CEOs make decisions about Society, Education, and Economy according to the way they understand human beings, themselves, and idea of a desirable future. Thinking about ourselves as being mainly biological computers and mindful bodies does not at all entail the same consequences as thinking about ourselves as conscious minds influencing brains that might be temporary receivers of them. In this fast-transforming World, one might dare to say many look for themselves in mirrors and in selfies in an almost desperate way. We try to find out who and what we are so that our life decisions might make sense and, if possible, become compatible with our being.

I contend that even the most perfect example of a beautifully human-shaped android AI, even one able to mimic human emotion and voice, will never be human. It will be as self-aware as a toaster and as experientially dramatic as a refrigerator. It will lack the one thing that makes us humans: experiential consciousness, including a sense of being a self, moving and acting in the World. With that, an ugly, not so bright, handicapped person is human; without it, the most beautiful, intelligent, perfect android is not.

Then we have something extremely interesting: consciousness. Consciousness remains a mystery to Science, but we are indeed able to observe some of its characteristics. To me, one of the most salient is that consciousness is like the water. In the same way the former is formless and, because of this, can assume the shape of any container we pour it into, the latter can in a way assume the shape of any identity. The Iogic tradition of India places quite a bit of emphasis on the need for us to learn how to de-identify with some mental, emotional, and physical shapes so that we

can become free from many constraints, pains, and limitations. According to this view, we usually identify with something that is not our deepest identity, the source of our beingness, and we become deluded and suffer accordingly. The things we identify with, that we delusionally feel to be part of ourselves, influence us and our well-being. What happens with them becomes, in a way, what happens to our emotions and the way we feel about ourselves and the world. If they get lost or destroyed, or if they change in some unwanted way, we feel that part of that is happening to us.

So then, what is, and how is, human identity? This book brings together some relevant contributions from authors coming from very different backgrounds. The whole idea is that by looking at the same object - human identity and the way it connects with human consciousness - from several angles, we will get a better view of it.

Speaking of angles and points of view...

In the following chapters, you will find several authors expanding on the complexity of the theme. For instance, Identity is not a unitary thing and concept: we do have several dimensions of identity - or several identities. Stanley Krippner, like Gruber and Fadiman, points us towards the fact that our identity is indeed manifold and not at all reducible to a single entity. Delgado-Raack and Marujo alert us to the possibility that Western individualism might be a hindrance to our understanding of human identity since it also exists in a largely relational context. It is partially a social construct, bound in space and time. Then, as Jim Fadiman puts it, a "relaxation" of identity can occur as one moves towards transcendental states of consciousness, until eventually, all kinds of personal identifications vanish. But upon returning from transcendental states, one finds some benefits carry over into the mundane identity... as long as everything happens in a non-pathological way. Simões shows us that in pathological disturbances such as schizophrenia, the sense of self can dissolve and become fragmented, the feeling of autonomy and agency being disrupted. Then we may have, in a way, the opposite of the harmonious "self-recovery" that happens when one returns from deep mystical experiences and still reintegrates a personal identity that is congruent, coherent, and compassionate - as Gruber and Fadiman put it. An important point is made by Ingo Jahrsetz when he discusses "holotropic states" and "holotropic perception" at length, showing their huge potential for healing both our individual mundane selves and the World, while radically changing our way for being and staying in life. Those states imply a movement, an orientation, and a state attuned to the

Cosmos or the Whole. Sovatsky plunges into a deep discussion of Indian Yoguic philosophy and its relation to human identity - as the Yoguic path brings huge developmental transformations both in our real identity and in the conceptions around human nature. With Lattuada, we see a detailed discussion of the way transpersonal concepts, namely the ones stemming from “integral thinking,” may help us understand the deep nature of the human self and its layers. Then, Di Biase walks us through a special take on the nature of consciousness in relationship to modern Quantum Physics, Biology, and Information theory. With him, we find a way to connect a modern perspective on our Universe with the specifics of the functioning of our human brain and our personal selves. Almendro also brings us a special approach to the understanding of human beings and human identity from a synthesis of modern systemic views and more traditional ones, namely Shamanism. Rodrigues shows us that, along with Science and Philosophy, Literature and the Arts in general may be powerful tools and mirrors, helping us grasp more of who we are. Then we find in the contribution of Fonseca a singular take on the way Music can show us something special about ourselves as he draws a parallel between the structure of music and human nature. In the same guise, Vieira Baptista, creator of Visionism, discusses the role of painting as an instrument for self-discovery. Closer to practical perspectives on bringing consciousness studies to concrete applications, Tudorel introduces us to a very modern, technological way for self-knowledge and transformation, Virtual Reality, and Eva Ndrio brings to us the need for a different approach in the educational field, emphasizing the mind and consciousness and humanizing it a great deal more. Lastly, Matrenitsky takes us on a fascinating tour of the connection between medical issues such as cancer and the lack of meaning in human life, false perspectives on human nature, and the blockage of a free expression of our deep selves.

Read it. We need human beings to become more sophisticated in their self-awareness and, if possible, a lot more compassionate with themselves and each other.

QUESTIONS ON IDENTITY

THE DURABILITY, MUTABILITY, AND DISSOLUTION OF IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHEDELIC–INDUCED TRANSCENDENCE

JAMES FADIMAN

Definition of “Transcendence”:

- going beyond ordinary limits; surpassing; exceeding
- superior or supreme
- transcending the universe, time, etc.

Introduction

The nature, importance, and centrality of individual consciousness is held differently before and after transcendence. Just as matter approaching a black hole no longer obeys the laws of physics, identity undergoes transformation as it approaches the singularity of transcendence, enters transcendence, and reconstructs itself as transcendence subsides. Experiencing transcendence brings into question the centrality of personal identity and creates the mixed states of consciousness that occur as transcendence and identity overlap.

The experience of transcendence has historically been rare and difficult to achieve, and is usually reported as having happened to someone in a distant country long ago. Moreover, most reports were likely distorted and could simply be dismissed. In any case, these reports were typically not applicable to one’s current life. However, the recent re-emergence of the deliberate use of psychedelic substances to evoke or replicate experiences resembling or identical to these earlier descriptions has shifted the discussion from being historically abstract to experimentally reproducible, personally relevant, and potentially life changing.

The impact of a transcendent experience on an individual—especially if it is had in a safe and supportive situation, and is later validated by the similar experiences of others—cannot be overstated. In recent studies, most people rate their transcendent experience as one of the five most important events of their lives.

The Durability of Identity

...the most fundamental defining characteristic of humans is self-referential, or experiential, consciousness—and its main ‘operational’ manifestation, identity.

—Vitor Rodrigues

Personal identity may be considered, but certainly not defined, as viewing the world as separated into two parts, with an individual’s self-referential view as primary, and the rest of the universe as secondary.

Functionally, there are benefits to maintaining this distinction. Indeed, it can be argued that individuals who believe (or imagine) and act as if their identity stops at their fingertips find no problem in navigating the world, and appreciating its diversity, variability, and myriad delights. In almost all instances, it is unnecessary to argue for the reality of personal identity, any more than one feels a necessity to argue for the reality of one’s nose.

One property of psychedelic substances like LSD or psilocybin (the most prominent active ingredient in so-called “magic mushrooms”) is that under their influence, personal identity is rendered more porous, yet more inclusive.

A contemporary example of a gradual renunciation of his identity was described by Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass), then an assistant professor of psychology and education at Harvard. As the gradually increasing effects of a low dose of psilocybin became evident, he saw his various selves externalized across the room from where he was sitting:

It was as if the Harvard professor part of me had disassociated from the rest of me sitting on the couch... “Well, I worked hard to get that faculty status, but it’s just a role. I don’t really need it.” ... There I was again, this time as a cosmopolitan socialite, my charming and convivial social self. “Okay,” I thought, “so that goes too.” Again and again, the figure changed. I recognized all my social and psychological roles: cellist, pilot, son, lover and so on ... “Okay,” I mused, “these are all the ways I know myself. But how can I be here on the couch when my roles are over there?”

Next came my Richard Alpert-ness, my basic ego identity.... Was my Richard-ness just another role? "Uh-oh.... Oh, what the hell," I thought. "so, I'll give up being Richard Alpert.... At least I have my body."

But then I looked down—and I couldn't see my body! The couch was there, but there was no one sitting on it ... even though everything I thought of as me including my body was gone, I was still fully aware! Not only that, but this aware inner "I" was watching the entire drama, including the panic attack, with quiet compassion and not a little amusement at the fear my ego was experiencing.... I had just found ... the "I" exists independent of social and psychological roles. This "I" was beyond time and space ... I was home. (Dass, 2021, 66-67)

This carefully observed and well-articulated description underscores the durability of what Rodrigues (quoted above) says is central. Even when every condition we associate with identity is stripped away, identity persists. Impressive, important, perhaps even life changing, but not an instance of transcendence.

The Mutability of Identity: Approaching Transcendence

Most classic accounts of transcendence describe a leap from no awareness to full awareness—with little or no description of the transition zone. Almost entirely absent from the literature of transcendent experience is that in-between identity and transcendence, there occurs a moment-by-moment relaxation of identity as one leaves non-transcendent space. A case of a naive subject, ill-equipped to understand or describe the nature of his identity in this in-between zone, will illustrate the effects on consciousness of approaching, entering, and leaving transcendence.

On October 19, 1961, James Fadiman,¹ a first-year psychology graduate student at Stanford University, spent the day at the International Foundation for Advanced Study, a small clinic in Menlo Park, California. Under supervision, he underwent a procedure centered on taking a high dose of LSD, specifically developed to facilitate a normal individual having a transcendent experience. (Sherwood, Stolaroff and Harman, 1962)

Very soon thereafter, he recalled (and recorded) what it was like to straddle personal identity as the upcoming overwhelming reality of the transcendent occupied more and more of his awareness.

His personal identity is confused, its edges ill-defined, but still primarily *his* identity:

October 19, 1961. I realize that I am God. While this fact was undoubtedly aided by the ergot-derived LSD I had taken hours before, the discovery was mine. As I looked around the room, it seemed obvious to me that the others knew I had found out. It came as a profound relief to know this truth, but almost as quickly a crashing sense of responsibility emerged as I realized I could never let go, because there was nothing else and no one else that could be blamed for anything.

Less Fadiman identity, more transpersonal and transcendent:

I had created it all—set it into motion and allowed myself to forget my totality so I could fully participate in my own creation. I recalled exactly how I did it, retaining my identity while dividing into an almost infinite variety of seemingly separate beings. I was every actor in every drama, every animal in every habitat, every plant, insect, bacterium, and virus.

Fadiman, briefly back in his identity, reflecting on what he has just realized, but trying (not too successfully) to reason it out from a limited personal identity. He knew nothing about mushrooms except they contained psilocybin:

Only the mushrooms retained awareness of what had happened, but even they were not told why. Call that an insurance policy, in case I truly lost myself in what I was doing.

The “I am God” description stemmed from his ill-equipped vocabulary encountering an experience he had never considered or even knew existed. Still not quite “peaked,” he bounces back and forth between “self” and transcendence. He struggles to make sense of the emerging dislocation of his inner and outer worlds. He identifies himself as God and he does not even consider that the others in the room might have had a similar revelation. All he can imagine was that they knew that he was God, and he set this all up to “out himself.” He tries to stuff his new (and incorrect) realization into some vaguely rational box. All of this demonstrates a recognition that his usual definition of himself—his identity—is dissolving, but he is still just touching in on a transcendent state. His first attempt to hold on to his prior identity is not transcendence, but looks like an expanding egoic balloon that has not yet burst.

It is likely that his early recall was accurate, especially his feeling an overwhelming sense of responsibility for all of creation. When the

pressure of transcendence has not quite overwhelmed the perspective of one's personal identity, this sort of feeling is often reported.

The Complete Dissolution of Identity: The Singularity

Having framed the importance of transcendence in understanding the actuality and ephemeral nature of personal identity, what can be said about the transcendent state itself? (Use of the pronouns "I" or "you" makes as little sense during transcendence as would an attempt to describe the ocean by naming a single wave. However, English—and perhaps all human language—offers us no real alternative.) By definition, transcendent space cannot be described, but general characteristics may be apprehended, cognized, and captured through the recall process. Here is one attempt:

...you lose touch with where your body ends, and the world begins. You can no longer form coherent thoughts. Then, suddenly, you give up the struggle. A moment later, you're gone. All that remains is everything. Reality doesn't stop ...You disappeared, and existence remained. However, there is no trace of the vision or suffering. Just a perfect, blissful wholeness. (Cooke, 2021)

Note that the shift into transcendence is preceded by a struggle to maintain identity, like hanging onto a cliff with your hands and fingers gradually fatiguing. However, once one is in transcendence itself, there is no struggle—in fact, quite the opposite.

As Fadiman is moved closer and eventually fully into transcendence, he writes the following:

Much to my surprise, my little mind washed away. I discovered that my disinterest in spiritual things was as valid as a 10-year-old's disinterest in sex: it came from a complete lack of awareness of what the world was built on.

I went to a place of total aloneness—the "you've got to walk this valley by yourself" deep awareness of separation from the universe. There was really nothing at all you could hold onto...because there was nothing at all.

In that total darkness, which seemed both endless and timeless, far, far away there was a tiny point of light, like a single small star in a totally dark sky. I turned toward that light and then moved toward it, faster and faster, with desperation. Suddenly before me, a light shining around him, Jesus raised his arms to welcome me.

Having had no prior interest in Christianity, and with enough personal identity left to feel amazed and chagrined, I flew into those arms. Then, perhaps with the agility of a bullfighter pulling the red flag away from a bull, I was past the Jesus, moving even more quickly towards the light. Puzzled, I looked behind me and saw that the Jesus was a two-dimensional cutout, as would be found on a stage set. I could see where the canvas had been tucked around the framing, and saw how the wood crossbars kept the whole thing stable. I don't recall whether I considered this in that instant or later, but it seemed to me that each traveler might come across such a cutout of Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, or perhaps one's Ancestor, only to pass them by—orienting beacons to help one traverse the unknown vast space between being an individual and being the light.

This space of total aloneness gave way to the place in which there is only one thing, and I was part of it. As I realized this, there was what can only be described as songs of jubilation throughout Heavens.... Not jubilation at the realization of Jim Fadiman, but what he was actually part of. What a relief! I moved into a space of feeling that I was not part of everything, but that everything was part of everything, and I was clearly part of that everything. Suddenly, it was obvious that there is no death, and that the fundamental waveform of the universe is best described in human terms as 'love.' This was all incredibly obvious.

In this period, personal identity, as we understand it, is essentially missing. The effect of a single such experience can forever shift someone's worldview.

The Consolidation, Post-Transcendence, of a Modified Stabilized Identity

The resumption of identity—altered but similar—begins as one integrates the recall of transcendence and the incorporation of the memory into a not-yet-integrated identity.

Later that day, one of his guides drove Fadiman into the hills above the Stanford campus where he could see the entire Bay Area and the Berkeley and Oakland Hills:

I looked out and had an amazing feeling of identification with Creation. I walked around saying things like, "I've really done a splendid job at all of this." 'I' was clearly not me, not Jim Fadiman, but the 'I' was pleased with creation and pleased that part of it, part of me, was observing other parts of me.

Fadiman was already assembling his new identity, trying to include the revelations he'd just experienced. A few hours away from the transcendent peak, the separation from unity into Fadiman and Creation has reappeared, as in the period shortly before the transcendent experience, when he reported his initial attempt to normalize the situation. On the surface, "God" is congratulating himself; in reality, a non-transcendent identity has almost fully reemerged and is working, however ineptly, to integrate the transcendent experience. It is unclear to him that "Fadiman" was a tiny, tiny bit of what he is part of. It is as if a hair on Bach's head began to tell the other hairs what an amazing composer it (the hair) was.

Although Alpert did not experience transcendence or go beyond his personal identity, he also needed to reestablish who he was to be.

As my mind reengaged and thoughts again began to occupy my consciousness, I felt I would always remember and be able to reenter the state of being, this newly discovered calm center in myself. (Dass, 2021, 68)

Still, even though I was back in my psychological self, my thinking mind and ego, I was different. The roles—professor, son, pilot, cellist—returned, but I didn't identify with them in the same way. (Dass, 2021, 70)

Discussion

Being "enlightened" is a more or less transitory state, and often does not include all the diverse identities or selves within an individual. One can see that while the other facets of personality may have been put aside, they have not vanished. This is regularly observed, but not generally recognized or understood (Fadiman and Gruber, 2020). Even those rare beings who regularly access transcendence often fail to understand the transitory nature of transcendent experience. This failure causes their followers to often misconstrue—or even glorify—the actions or decisions these individuals make in a non-transcendent state.

Not surprisingly, this natural shifting of the origin of actions and decisions confuses or frightens core believers when their spiritual teacher does something particularly egregious, be it drunkenness, sexual abuse, excessive greed, misuse of personal power, or even normal human behaviors like irritation, impatience, or lack of consideration. In the novel *Candy* (Southern and Hoffenberg, 1964), an astute satire on many spiritually dubious practices, a "guru" attempting to seduce a naive young

woman, explains that his erect penis is not “an ordinary penis” but a “very spiritual” one. This satire is painfully close to many genuine spiritual individuals, whose non-transcendent behaviors contribute to their downfall.

In the case of Fadiman, the identity that was dominant before and after transcendence tried to harmonize his limited personal view with his recently experienced transcendent one.

It is important to recognize the limits of personal identity in the light of transcendent experience. It is, perhaps, equally important, for those who have had transcendent experience to recognize that their personal identity is still an active part of their total personality.

Conclusions

When one is learning to write fiction, one learns that many stories have what are called “unreliable narrators,” who may or may not believe what they’re saying, and whose reporting isn’t true or accurate. This is the case with both Alpert and Fadiman, but more especially Fadiman, whose lack of experience and limited spiritual or metaphysical vocabulary, make his observations seem more like guesses.

When an individual (whether through psychedelics or some other way) approaches transcendence, their identity is no longer integral to their awareness. In Alpert’s description, while he tossed aside all of the descriptors he used in describing himself, he was amazed that he still existed and was observing physical reality around him.

Fadiman’s descriptions were attempts to make sense of experiences totally beyond his comprehension. He confuses the oncoming aspect of transcendence with his usual identification. After transcendence, his confusion is different, as he considers himself a direct extension of divinity rather than one wave in an ever-moving ocean.

During many high dose psychedelic experiences, there is a period in which identity, as we understand it, is totally missing. Personal identity breaks apart before transcendence, then vanishes during transcendence. Just as a single observed difference between real life and theory can cause a massive theory to be reformulated, so might the recognition of the fragility of identity, seen through the lens of transcendence cause us to rethink the validity of the centrality of identity in understanding the full scope of

consciousness. This in turn may open us up to seeing others, the world, and ourselves in ways that are functionally healthier and increasingly expansive.

Note

ⁱ Fadiman will be described in the third person throughout this essay.

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CONSCIOUSNESS, VAMPIRES, AND MIRRORS: THE DANCE OF HUMAN IDENTITY

VITOR RODRIGUES

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

William Blake

Human beings have been fascinated by mirrors and other self-reflections for a long time. Let us just consider the way Shakespeare's Hamlet sees the reflection of his own mortality in Yorick's skull, or the way Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray portrait bears his degenerating soul while keeping his outside appearance juvenile and untouched - until Dorian destroys it with the same knife he used to kill the painter friend who created it: then the whole reality of his damaged soul falls upon him, transferring the malevolence of his sinful life to his body and killing him. Bram Stoker's Dracula shows his inhuman nature by having no reflection in mirrors, and he furiously destroys Jonathan Harker's shaving glass, therefore exposing two "fictional facts": vampires are not reflected in mirrors as they have no soul - and so, no deep self-awareness; they hate the Soul, and so Dracula destroys the mirror that is "a foul bauble of man's vanity"- but shows his fundamental emptiness... The mirror reveals by not showing. The non-reflection reveals the character's dark nature better than anything else. Indeed, mirrors in all their forms represent our human capacity to wonder about ourselves and our nature, and search for clues in our physical image, our deeds, and the social reflections from others.

Now, what is it that we see when we search for ourselves in such reflections? Our deep nature, as it manifests in our body, our actions and their products. In the same way the quality of a tree is revealed by its fruit, we search for our quality as human beings in the qualities of our productions. Another amazing literary example is the famous novel Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley. In it, we see how a noble character's deeds

can give rise to intense tragedy as he is not able to foresee the consequences of his creation. A very powerful analogy for the many monsters modern technology is creating, monsters who are still reflections of their creators – even as they lose control of them in the same way Dr. Frankenstein did.

When we look in a mirror, we see our body, not our soul, although bodily, mental, and emotional expressions do hint at the whole quality of a human. I would say that our identity is the typical aggregate of body, thought, emotion, and sensation we usually associate with our sense of ourselves. Whatever we project ourselves onto, associating it with our sense of self, there is our identity. However, identity is not consciousness, in the same way that a cup filled with water is not water, even if the water takes its shape. Also, different qualities of water can take the same cup's shape, even when they are not at all equivalent, one being pure and drinkable, the other being contaminated. Our consciousness can identify with all sorts of mind-body states while not being equivalent to them or restricted by them. In this sense, I take personal identity as the "operational" manifestation of our consciousness. Consciousness can indeed identify with all sorts of things - or de-identify with them. One can easily find, in the spiritual traditions of the World, directives that instruct us to de-identify our mind, with our "false self" or "false sense of self," and to detach our emotions from it. Otherwise, that with which we identify has a grip on our fate and well-being, because what happens to the things or ideas with which we identify directly impacts our well-being.

I like to bring people's attention to the art of insult, which is, to some extent, the favorite sport of bullies: it consists not of searching for truth but for what might hurt the other. But what is insulting to me? Something that assaults my identity. If you call me a poor salesman, you haven't insulted me because I am not, indeed, a salesman, and also because being a salesman does not belong in the category of stuff I identify with. However, if you call me an incompetent psychotherapist or a liar, you may be closer to damaging my day. Truth and competence are important to me, and they tend to be part of how I define myself. Threats can only disturb me when they concern what I am attached to.

The previous considerations might take us towards a relevant theme: how does stress work? To begin with, we may define stress as an alarm reaction, a general body-alert that happens when our brain detects danger – real or imaginary. In animals this generally triggered by the perception of real

danger: for example, the detection of a possible predator or competitor for territory or sex. They then have the general alert response: the central and autonomous nervous systems collaborate with the endocrine system to produce an increase in muscular tension, blood pressure, breathing rate, available oxygen, heart rate and flux, general alertness, and anxiety. There are other effects, but these illustrate the main function of the stress response: increasing the chances of survival through the fight or flight (or, sometimes, freeze) response. But what produces the stress response? Obviously, the perception of threat. This, in turn, implies *evaluative processes* (Reisenzein 2001; Scherer, 2000): emotions in general are constantly influenced by evaluative processes about stimuli (both those that internal to the organism, such thoughts, feeling, and sensation, and those that are external). In humans, such evaluations might include how new they are, how pleasant or unpleasant, their degree of relevance to the needs of the individual, the individual's perceived coping capabilities, and their compatibility with the self and social norms he deems important (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). A Component Process Model of human emotion implies that human emotions are driven by the effects of cognitive appraisals and that "the feeling component constitutes a central integration and representation of these processes" (Scherer and Fontaine, 2019). Human beings share the general characteristics of the stress response with a huge number of animal species; however, because we generally have a greater amount of intelligence, memory, and imagination, we have a specific problem: our emotional system tends to respond both to real, ongoing situations, and memories or imagined futures. All of these present stimuli to our emotional system, stimuli that may be evaluated (both consciously and unconsciously) as threatening. Now let us emphasize that each time we evaluate anything, we have an underlying pattern: to know if something is high or low, we always need a relevant, patterned measure for altitude. So, when we consider human stress before perceived threats, we must concede that such perception is a form of evaluative and therefore has an underlying pattern: *in us humans, the main pattern is our identity*. This might be taken to be implicit in the Component Process Model (Scherer & Fontaine, op.cit.). We feel or believe, both consciously or unconsciously, that something is a threat only when at some level we perceive it as dangerous to who or what we are. If you point an AK-47 at me and tell me you are about to murder me, this will produce stress in me only if I value my body, I identify with it, and I feel that if you shoot me, you will hit something important. If I am a mystic, living in a state of consciousness that might be different from the

“normal” ones and I do not identify with my body-mind states, your AK-47 might even be unable to change my breathing pattern.

The ideas presented so far might have huge implications. As with the previous example about insults, the things or events that may insult, hurt, frighten, enrage or, on the other end, appease, encourage, soothe, or please depend on appraisals. Such appraisals, to us humans, depend on the main “measure” used: our identity. I would contend that any human emotion and hence, all human suffering and happiness, depends on the way inner and outer events are evaluated by us, the main pattern for this evaluation being our own identity. This implies that if I change my identity, I change everything about what can or cannot disturb me or harmonize with me. We find all sorts of testimonies in the literature about the way some spiritual experiences change people - and so change the way “the arrows of luck” strike them, or stop striking them. Some research seems to show that people who have “awakening experiences” undergo important changes in the way they see themselves and the world (Taylor and Egeto-Szabo 2017). Such experiences imply “a temporary expansion and intensification of awareness, in which our state of being, our vision of the world and our relationship to it are transformed, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being. We perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world, experiencing a sense of connection and even unity” (op. Cit., pg 45). To the authors, awakening experiences are connected to an intensification and stilling of life forces associated with a dissolution of the ego boundaries. This, in turn, can come from a reduction in “thought-chatter” brought on by spiritual practices, or from the dissolution of the ego after “intense turmoil” (the most frequent trigger of such experiences): turmoil might be connected with a “dissolution of psychological attachments such as hopes, beliefs, ambitions, or attachment to possessions, status or achievements” producing a “sudden release of a large portion of life-energy. At the same time, with the attachments absent, there is a new inner clarity and openness” (pg. 60). In more intense situations, this could amount to a dissolution of the ego caused by the loss of psychological attachments. Then, eventually, the usual sense of identity and boundaries disappears and gives place to a sense of unity and “a sense of connection to a deeper self, an essential being that seems to underlie the ego” (pg. 60). The quoted authors also emphasize the fact that the typical consequences of awakening experiences are transformative in a positive sense, leaving people with a change in perspective and values for life.

One can't but think that the finding of a "deeper self," and therefore of a core identity that is more important, stable, permanent, joyful, and deeply connected with the world or universal whole than the mundane personal ego or self, brings with it a sort of invulnerability to stress.

Some authors might introduce an element of complexity here. They might ask: which self are we talking about? Indeed, the psychological literature tells us about the possibility for each human being to be divided into several selves or parts. Sala, Krippner, Speer, Newton and Leverett (2017) make a compelling case for this, quoting many authors who assumed that we have subpersonalities, parts, or selves and that they may include at least a "inner me" or core identity, a "primary identity" or assumed self - the one we are aware of most of the time and a shown self. However, a lot of people might have several different assumed selves or self-states (and, of course, shown ones). This, according to the authors above, may be due to situations of intense stress and/or trauma: when our assumed self is confronted with a situation it is unable to deal with, a dissociative mechanism may give rise to a new self. To them, our primary identity develops from childhood as a way to deal with, and adapt to, the social and physical Worlds. When we confront something that is too unbearable to this identity, we may develop a new one - and the process can repeat itself, giving rise to several assumed selves. This helps understand the origin of Dissociative Identity Disorder, a syndrome that gave rise to a lot of Literature and Movies. Of course, one classic that comes to mind is "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide," by Robert Louis Stevenson, where the inner conflicts of the main character lead him into finding a systematic way to self-divide (radically and using a drug he invented) so that in some moments he can be a nice and prestigious medical doctor and, in others, an evil and later twisted killer, indulging in depravity. He loses control of the whole process and soon the "Mr Hyde" part becomes too strong, and he transforms into it even without wanting to as Dr. Jekyll. Fortunately, our self-splits are not usually so dramatic and catastrophic as in Stevenson's famous novel. However, we can indeed become maladapted and suffer thanks to them. Sala, Krippner, Speer, Newton and Leverett (op.cit.) map out the way to recovery as one connected with expanding our awareness about who we are and returning to our core identity as the healing and unifying factor. In my own private practice, I have seen cases when this mechanism described by them is at play: someone had a big trauma such as sexual abuse, forgot about it as it was too unbearable, but later had trouble because it produced some tendency towards behaviors and feelings that felt painful and inexplicable (other ego states). Regression therapy helped a lot (Rodrigues, 2016).

We all have a bit of crazy and a bit of sage, and indeed, a bit of many ways of being human. Sometimes, we build such strong inner splits that pathology ensues. In a way, we might lose the ability to manage our inner states, becoming either (1) too rigid and enclosed in some ego state (examples to be found easily in the repetitions of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders or the “closed.circle” deliriums in some psychotic states) or (2) lost in our own inner world, sometimes changing into the next self-state when something resonates too well with our traumatic past.

Indeed, authors such as Jung (1976) and Assagioli (1971) have long assumed that the direction of health and inner joy is marked by the attempt at becoming more and more attuned to, or united with, our deeper, truer nature. We may call it the higher self, soul, transpersonal self or something else: the general idea is that we have a deep core, connected to pure consciousness, that is also the deepest source of our humanness and can help us unify our body and mind, including emotions and ego states, in an harmonious and meaningful way. I tend to agree, since my own clinical and spiritual experience and readings point to that. I would even assert that, in the same way there might be no point in saying “we should align our chakras” without asserting what it is we should align them with, there is no point in searching for unity and harmony within ourselves without a unifying and harmonizing factor. Such is the role of our inner core, higher self, or “essence.”

Now there is another, perhaps unexpected, point we might consider when discussing the dance of human identity: superheroes. Mostly when we think about their connection with human transcendence. LoCicero (2008) takes us on a fascinating trip, acquainting us with superheroes from such ancient lands as Babylonia, Persia, India, Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia while establishing systematic parallels between them and modern comic book superheroes. For instances, Billy Batson uses the magic word “Shazam” to become the mighty Captain Marvel. Then we find out that this magic word is an acronym for someone with the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Heracles, Atlas’ stamina, Zeus’ power, Achilles’ courage, and Mercury’s speed. To me, one of the most interesting facets of most superheroes is indeed their double identity: both human and godlike, both fragile and super-powerful. Superman is the ultimate example: born in Krypton, created on Earth, he is the heir of Kryptonian wisdom and, thanks to his Kryptonian body, he has superpowers on planet Earth. He seems to be Clark Kent, a regular guy, until the moment when he must be Superman, to help Humanity. However, he has a weakness: kryptonite, the fragments created when his home planet exploded, might kill him. We see

this again in several superheroes: their frailty comes from infancy (such as Batman's, which was created when he witnessed the murder of his parents). Superheroes are usually very flashy in their garments: we see that with the aforementioned Captain Marvel, or Superman, another good example being Wonder Woman. She is directly inspired in Hippolyte, the Amazon queen, and also in the goddess Athena, typically bringing together warrior qualities such as strength and courage but also compassion and wisdom. Superheroes have abilities that make no sense for regular humans: amazing psychic abilities (such as those of Doctor Strange or Professor Xavier, the head of a school for Mutants, dedicated to helping them master their powers) and also amazing physical abilities (the incredible speed of The Flash, superstrength like Superman or The Hulk, control of the Elements, such as that of the Fantastic Four who in a way "become" the elements, and so on). Now, how can we make sense of super-heroes, who have been part of Humanity's cultural legacy since the ancient times? To LoCicero (op. Cit.), "the preceding study of the archetypal superhero, which is one of the most significant universal myths, clearly demonstrates that the superhero has a common origin, whether he appears in ancient Babylonia or Gotham City. Arguably, he is the ultimate product of the human psyche" (pg. 228). In this line of reasoning, superheroes represent a refined product of the archetypal world mentioned by Jung (for instance, Jung, 1958). To my thinking, however, we might also add that they are understandable, with their flashy garments, if such garments represent the powerful colors of the auras of the evolved; with their superpowers, because such strange capacities are quite strange in our world but plain normal in the world of the Soul; with their double identities, because they represent our own double identity as ordinary human beings and as souls with a "divine" inner nature, therefore being both mortals and demigods. Too bad many of us are unable to be in tune with the inner vibration that brings on transcendence (the energy of the soul, vibrating with our personal "Shazam" - or mantra). To me, superheroes are fascinating because they show us, in a somewhat naive way (along with the childlike fascination), that perhaps our "real" identity is a lot better, brighter, stronger, wiser, than our mundane ego or self-states. Bellow our worldly garments, which correspond to our body, we might have other flashier garments, corresponding to psychic or even spiritual bodies; behind our "presented selves" we might have a core self that has all the qualities synthesized in the word "Shazam." This self, in turn, has all it takes to face our world with a loving heart (once more, superheroes are typically at the service of Humanity), a sense of meaning, and all the super-strength we need to face stress and all our fragilities.

Rama, the ancient superhero from India, is an extreme example: he looks like a human, but he is the seventh reincarnation of the Avatar Vishnu, returned to Earth to help Humanity getting rid of the super-demon Ravana, who could rape all women and break all laws. Ravana had been granted a wish by Brahma: that he be invulnerable to gods, celestial beings, or other powers on earth. So, Vishnu came, because Ravana could still be terminated by a human being. He took a human shape and, after Ravana kidnapped his beautiful wife Sita, he battled him with the help of Hanuman and his monkey army. After quite a large amount of trouble, he killed the super-demon. The fact that he could resort to three magical weapons, the bow of Vishnu, the quiver of Indra, and the dart of Brahma was quite handy. To me, some super-weapons represent the powers of the soul when its supramental wisdom is focused through the mind. Of course, we have no time here to elaborate on this myth as it is a lot more intricate; but it shows us how accomplished superheroes might represent the embodiment of the soul or our essential self when it really flows through the personal ego, which is then unified, purified, and directed towards its high destiny. The fact that Rama was helped by a monkey god, and an army of monkeys, could be an interesting symbol for the result of placing our human “monkey” mind and our animal nature at the service of the essential self - it even allows us to defeat our most potent inner demons.

Take Superman (or Superwoman): even when our home planet has exploded (a symbol for big trouble at birth or during infancy) and the fragments of our personal past remain as a threat, the heritage of our soul, going deeper and bringing along the wisdom of primordial ancestors (a symbol for perennial philosophy), can still help us overcome everything. Superheroes are solitary to some extent but, as we see in many DC Comics or Marvel stories, they find a deep sense of family with fellow heroes who work in service of Humanity. Many different testimonies about experiences in the realm of the soul, or in “cosmic consciousness,” talk about a very deep love that places the experiencer in awe and love of all beings (Weil, 1992). So, in a way, all sorts of “fantasy” stories, such as some epics, fairy tales, hero journeys, superhero myths, tend to point towards the idea that our deep soul is the real superhero or superheroine, and the fountain of wisdom and power that may unify our internal kingdom of thought, emotion and body and move beyond all deviations from our inner path (deviating souls from it is the typical task of demons).

Now let me come back to where we began: all sorts of great stories, all sorts of myths, and all great Literature – and taking a modern example, all great Cinema - are mirrors for the complexities of our identity. They show