

To see the integral nature of each person

A fascinating challenge

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There is a growing awareness that formation and accompaniment cannot be limited to any single human dimension, but instead requires a global perspective. The author is a psychologist and psychotherapist specialized in family and relational integrative approaches, EMDR, and Brainspotting.

With scientific progress in research and observation of the human phenomenon, various disciplines are able to arrive at non-divergent – indeed complementary – understandings around the integral development of the human person. If there is only a focus on respective, individual ways of thinking about the human person, can we truly affirm that all the varied dimensions of a person are taken into account?

It should be noted that both Eastern thought and African culture offer significant contributions towards such an approach in which varied human dimensions interact in harmony. They offer a vision, a tried and tested practice, that could considerably enrich discourse in this regard. But for our context here, however, it is not possible to dwell on these potential contributions and we will limit our focus to Western perspectives.

An Important Influence

Western thought has been influenced by the Greek philosophers. We refer here in particular to Plato, with his basically dualistic "body-mind" or "body-soul" vision, who considered the body as the shell of the soul, and thus risked dividing person into two parts. Plato believed in the immortality of the soul living in *hyperuranion* (heaven), which then at a certain point descends to earth and becomes incarnate in a body from which it will be freed only by death.

Centuries later in the early modern era, Descartes re-proposed a tendentially dualist way of thinking about the human person. According to Descartes, the bodily and spiritual parts are clearly distinct and united through the pineal gland, located in the brain. This kind of clear separation had important consequences for approaches to the human person and their concerns: Life, health, illness, etc. The body seemingly becomes a machine to be understood through its operation, and in need of repair when damage occurs in one of its parts.

Descartes' mechanistic thought influenced various disciplines, and even today its considerable impact can still be recognized. If we look at various specializations, we notice they often focus on individual parts of the human body as if unrelated to the whole, and this is even more true if we speak of the body's relationship to the inner life and the human mind.

It is enough to look carefully at one's own professional formation to see the subtle, decisive tendencies towards focusing only on those "parts that belongs to us", independent of the other "parts" of human life: Physical health, mental health, civic and family life, etc.

New paradigms

In his book *Descartes' Error*, the Portuguese neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, challenges Cartesian thinking. He notes not only a continuous, real interrelationship between body and mind, but that this interrelationship emerges also within social environments.

In considering the context in which a person lives, relational systems theory offers a significant contribution to an emerging new paradigm. Systems thinking highlights aspects of connection and relationships and the given context in which a person finds him or herself. According to this thought, attempts to understand a living 'system' – in this case the human person – is possible only if one observes interactions between everything that constitutes it. Understanding does not come from an isolationist viewpoint but rather from looking at the whole, and in the context in which it is inserted.

And the soul?

The word "soul" refers not only to an individual's spiritual dimension, but also to their relationship with God. Although no less important, it should be noted that the soul and the relationship with the transcendent are dimensions which are the least considered by science. In reality, the relationship with what transcends the human person is universal and varied in its expression. It is a support in times of crises and most certainly contributes to human growth and development. Only by giving consideration to the human soul in its relationship with the transcendent can there be a truly integral vision of the human person.

Integral formation and accompaniment

With the complex challenges of today's world, a vision that encompasses every human dimension and considers each of equal importance, is now an imperative for those involved in formation and accompaniment.

To give only a partial glance at the challenges ahead will lead only to partial answers. They will not be wrong, but they will be incomplete. This is because it is not possible to understand complexity from only a single perspective. Training becomes enriching if it takes into account varied aspects. There is a need for an understanding not only of

psychophysical dynamics, but of how these dynamics are both expressed in one's respective societal reality of today and influenced by one's own societal roots.

Personal accompaniment can be more fruitful and more effective in the measure that one is open to all its varying components: Mind, body, soul, and social and interpersonal realities. Lack of health and illness can be seen as disharmony between dimensions, a weakness of one or another. It is enough to think of how an intense headache can arrive after a grueling week of demanding project work, or the experience of numbness after facing sudden, shocking news. While these examples may seem trivial, we could offer many others that speak to how a malaise in one human dimension is often reflected in all the other dimensions, and can condition one's own personal recovery.

It is not necessary for a companion to have any particular skills, but rather simply an openness and ability to ask questions before offering a response. In the face of varied situations being faced, we will typically want to offer a solution that arises from our own personal baggage. But, instead, is it possible to go a step further and ask yourself these questions: Aside from the easily identifiable elements in this situation, what else may not have been considered? Do other aspects or dimensions of a person deserve more attention?

In my early work as a psychologist and psychotherapist, this was not immediately obvious. It has been a journey of growth to acquire a gaze that is not limited to one aspect – in this case the psyche – but rather considers the varied, intertwining dimensions of a person. In particular, in listening to consecrated women and seminarians, I could more clearly grasp the interweaving and reciprocal impact of multiple human dimensions. I recall, for example, one consecrated woman who, after an important and painful communication from her congregation involving many changes, entered a state of deep sadness and a seeming loss of meaning in her life. That initial state – though quite understandable – led to further physical ailments that then prevented her from carrying forward her apostolic work. Through this and other similar experiences, the importance of enlisting help from other professionals in order to bring a person to that needed harmony within their being, has become more evident for me.

Another aspect, particularly in working with consecrated people, is the lack of formation and knowledge relative to the dynamics of the human psyche. In listening to their struggles, many crises could have been experienced differently had there been a deeper knowledge base and clarity around this aspect. Thus, offering elements of human self-knowledge in a formation context has often been important in relation to life choices, and helped many to live with greater authenticity and coherence.

The Challenge

Scientific research is continually revealing discoveries around the complexity of the human person and closing oneself within partial or fragmentary models is now impossible. By accepting the challenge to develop a more integral gaze that humbly recognizes that one's own singular knowledge is often insufficient when responding to the needs of another, it will be possible for humanity to foster healthier futures for all.

In this way, new possibilities will be opened for the individual and be to the collective benefit of all.

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