

## ESSENCE AND PERSONALITY

*'The touchstone it is which knows the real gold.'*  
Saadi

### The Secondary Personality or 'Commanding Self'

In many spiritual traditions an important distinction is made between the essence or real self of a human being and the secondary self or false personality. The Sufis teach that it is "the Commanding Self, the subjective mind, which stands between the 'gold' and the 'touchstone' in everyone." Gurdjieff stressed the intrinsic difference between essence and personality:

Man consists of two parts: *essence* and *personality*. Essence in man is what is *his own*. Personality in man is what is 'not his own.' 'Not his own' means what has come from outside, what he has learned, or reflects, all traces of exterior impressions left in the memory and in the sensations, all words and movements that have been learned, all feelings created by imitation – all this is 'not his own,' all this is personality. A small child has no personality as yet. He is what he really is. He is essence. His desires, tastes, likes, dislikes, express his being such as it is. But as soon as so-called 'education' begins, personality begins to grow. Personality is created primarily by the intentional influences of other people, that is, by 'education,' and partly by involuntary imitation of them by the child himself. In the creation of personality a great part is also played by 'resistance' to people around him and by attempts to conceal from them something that is 'his own' or 'real.' (1)

For most people the primary area of psychological activity is that of the secondary, raw or subjective self. It is a mixture of primitive and conditioned responses, of training and imagination, of emotional and other factors, which seek to protect existing ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving:

The secondary self is the false personality, which, although enabling people to handle many of the circumstances of life, has as its objective the maintenance of itself; not the progress of the individual beyond quite narrow and shallow limits. This commanding Self is manifested by reactions, hopes and fears and various opinions and preoccupations. (2)

In Sufi terminology the dominating or commanding self is known as '*nafs*' – the basic but selfish impulses and desires which control the behaviour of most human beings:

The term *nafs* or 'self' is something like the 'ego' of western psychology: the provisional 'consensus reality' which we passively allow environment, culture

and experience to erect around us since birth. This self is an entirely illusory entity, constantly changing, full of contradictions which only habit prevents us from discerning. But above all the self is – selfish. As if flying in panic from any recognition of its own nothingness, it feverishly erects edifices of self-importance, self-aggrandizement, self-love. More binding than any prison, since we unthinkingly take its very walls for reality, it prevents us from ever realizing the true significance of our being here. (3)

The commanding self or secondary personality has a number of negative manifestations and consequences:

- Dominates and controls human behaviour
- Leads to actions which are mechanical, automatic and uncontrolled
- Tends to make decisions based on habit, obedience to authority or lack of information
- Is easily conditioned and operated by primitive logic
- Rules and limits the scope and possibilities of human functioning
- Inhibits and distorts human flexibility, progress and understanding
- Stifles intuition and blocks recognition of spiritual truth
- Acts as a barrier to higher or extra-dimensional perceptions and experiences

The secondary personality develops early in life and forms a sort of mask or ‘persona’ which covers the true inner being or essential self:

Personality is an accidental thing, which we begin to acquire as soon as we are born; it is determined by our surroundings, outside influences, education and so on; it is like a dress you wear, a mask, an accidental thing changing with changing circumstances. It is the false part of man; and can be changed artificially or accidentally – in a few minutes by hypnosis or a drug. A man with a “strong personality” may have the essence of a child, overlaid by personality. (4)

One of the qualities of the false personality is that it is constantly changing as it reacts to external influences and events. “The false or secondary self tends to filter and distort impressions from the external world by processing outside impacts and situations from an entirely subjective viewpoint.”

Personality is an accidental thing – upbringing, education, points of view – everything external. It is like the clothes you wear, your artificial mask, the result of your upbringing, of the influence of your surroundings, opinions consisting of information and knowledge which change daily, one annulling the other. Today you are convinced of one thing – you believe it and want it. But tomorrow under another influence, your belief, your desires become different. All the material constituting your personality may be completely changed artificially or accidentally with a change in your surrounding conditions and place, and this in a very short time. (5)

The energy, impulses and desires of the secondary self should not be suppressed or denied as they have an important function in human life. Rather, they should be consciously controlled and directed in ways which support the search for higher understanding and development:

Q: Isn't the personality also a part of biological survival?

A: You bring with you into the world certain characteristics that belong to your biological survival in this existence. But what we call the personality is acquired early in life. It is an accumulation of experiences and information born from your interaction with society. We are the result of our surroundings. We have believed what we have been told, crystallized it and identified with it. But the apparent continuity of the personality is only memory reinforced by society. See that the personality can be perceived like anything else. The perceiver is your wholeness, consciousness. The personality is only a fraction of what we really are. A fraction can only see a fraction. It can never be harmonious. All acting which comes out of the fractional point of view is reaction. (6)

Although the secondary self is very useful when used for certain purposes, its operation may be useless or even harmful when applied to areas which are not appropriate to it. For example, individuals may set themselves up as teachers, guides, therapists, trainers or counsellors before being qualified to do so:

The Commanding Self, always agile in its sophistication, conceals from the individual that he/she is trying to run before being able to walk. When people start to approve of what the individual is doing, this is misread as a validation of his or her role. In fact, it is usually only the fact that some people are dependent characters by nature or formation. The answer? Time and service rather than wanting to take a place on the totem-pole. It is for this reason that Sufi teachers divert vanity from the spiritual area, by encouraging their disciples to channel the Commanding Self's activities to any worthy worldly ambition; while continuing to study the Sufi Way in a modest and non-self promoting way. (7)

### **Personality and 'Roles'**

The issue of identity and self-image is a major preoccupation and concern of most human beings. The personality of many people is an artificial one, almost a series of 'roles' which they play in social and interpersonal situations. In fact, the behaviour of most people in customary social situations is based on particular roles that they play. "As soon as we define ourselves in relation to another we feel more comfortable, because now we know how to be and act."

If you are awake enough, aware enough, to be able to observe how you interact with other people, you may detect subtle changes in your speech, attitude, and

behaviour depending on the person you are interacting with. At first, it may be easier to observe this in others; then you may also detect it in yourself. The way in which you speak to the chairman of the company may be different in subtle ways from how you speak to the janitor. How you speak to a child may be different from how you speak to an adult. Why is that? You are playing roles. You are not yourself, neither with the chairman nor with the janitor or the child. A range of conditioned patterns of behaviour come into effect between two human beings that determine the nature of the interaction. Instead of human beings, conceptual mental images are interacting with each other. The more identified people are with their respective roles, the more inauthentic the relationship becomes. (8)

The average person has a limited repertoire of roles, drawn from the secondary personality, which he or she exhibits in ordinary life:

You must realize that each man has a definite repertoire of roles which he plays in ordinary circumstances. He has a role for every kind of circumstance in which he ordinarily finds himself in life; but put him into even only slightly different circumstances and he is unable to find a suitable role and *for a short time he becomes himself*. The study of the roles a man plays represents a very necessary part of self-knowledge. Each man's repertoire is very limited. One or two for his family, one or two at his office (one for his subordinates and another for his superiors), one for his friends in a restaurant, and perhaps one who is interested in exalted ideas and likes intellectual conversations. And at different times the man is fully identified with one of them and is unable to separate himself from it. To see the roles, to know one's repertoire, particularly to know its limitedness, is to know a great deal. But the point is that, outside his repertoire, a man feels very uncomfortable should something push him if only temporarily out of his rut, and he tries his hardest to return to any one of his usual roles. Directly he falls back into the rut everything at once goes smoothly again and the feeling of awkwardness and tension disappears. This is how it is in life. (9)

Most people are unable to live without roles, preventing the real self from emerging. "When we see clearly how we function, how we contact our surroundings through memory from the point of view of separate roles and patterns, the already known, we can only be astonished."

When you are free from the concept "mother," you are really a mother. Then when circumstances call on you to be a mother, when the child asks for a mother, you are a mother. But don't live in mothering. You are nothing, and in this nothingness the mother comes and goes. Then there is a current of love. The problem is not biology but psychology. To take yourself as a father, mother, lawyer or businessman is fractional living. Then you act according to certain patterns. When you are established in your wholeness, the father or mother appears in

this wholeness. Similarly, conception, memory, is an essential tool of our brain, but to live in memory is the problem. (10)

In some spiritual teachings the importance of identifying and being aware of unconscious role-playing is the initial step in restoring elements of the personality to their proper functions as “servants rather than masters of the mind.”

Human beings play different roles in life, and relate differently to different people and situations through these different roles. The question is this: “Who and what is the real self underlying and undertaking these roles? The Zen point is that these roles are not the real self, but are more properly like guests or servants of the real self. Confusion and loss of freedom arise from a fundamental misapprehension: Identifying with a role, people can forget and lose the rest of their potential; shifting from role to role unconscious of the central “pivot” of the essential self, people can experience stultifying conflicts among their commitments to different roles. (11)

### **Essence or Essential Self**

The powerful influences of contemporary culture and civilization exert a profound effect on the human being. One of the negative consequences is a one-sided development away from one’s essential, natural type and real individuality:

The life of our times has become so complex that man has deviated from his original type – a type that should have become dependent upon his surroundings: the country where he was born, the environment in which he was brought up, and the culture in which he was nurtured. These conditions should have marked out for a man his path of development and the normal type which he should have arrived at; but our civilization, with its almost unlimited means of influencing a man, has made it almost impossible for him to live in the conditions which should be normal to him. While civilization has opened up for man new horizons in knowledge and science and has raised his material standard of living, thereby widening his world-perception, it has, instead of lifting him to a higher level all round, only developed certain faculties to the detriment of others; some it has completely destroyed. Our civilization has taken away from man the natural and essential qualities of his inherited type, but it has not given him what was needed for the harmonious development of a new type, so that civilization, instead of producing an individually whole man adapted to the nature and surroundings in which he finds himself, has produced a being out of his element, incapable of living a full life and at the same time a stranger to that inner life which should by rights be his. (12)

Essence grows and develops under favourable conditions, but in most cases any real inner development stops at an early age. “As long as one regards what are in fact secondary things (including one’s secondary, conditioned self) as primary, the subtler but more real primary element – Reality and the Essence of the individual – will not be perceived.”

With most people, essence continues to receive impressions only until it is five or six years old. As long as it receives impressions it grows, but afterwards all impressions are taken by personality and essence stops growing. Sometimes if education is not too unfavourable, the essence may continue to grow, and a more or less normal human being can result. But normal human beings are the exception. Nearly everyone has only the essence of a child. It is not natural that in a grown-up man the essence should be a child. Because of this, he remains timid underneath and full of apprehensions. This is because he knows that he is not what he pretends to be, but he cannot understand why. (13)

The essential being or essence of a person has an inner hunger and capacity for spiritual growth. But in the majority of undeveloped humanity, the essence operates in such a way that it gives its potential (the development of higher consciousness) to the secondary self:

Take the case of a young child. The sense of ‘I-am’ is not yet formed, the personality is rudimentary. The obstacles to self-knowledge are few, but the power and the clarity of awareness, its width and depth are lacking. In the course of years awareness will grow stronger, but also the latent personality will emerge and obscure and complicate. (14)

An analogy by the great Sufi mystic Rumi alludes to the hidden nature of the essence within the dominating structure of the secondary self:

In *Fihi ma Fihi*, Rumi says that there is a minute insect in a field, which cannot be seen at first. But as soon as it makes a sound, people are alerted and see it. People, similarly, are lost in the field of this world, their surroundings and pre-occupations. The human essence within is concealed by all this disturbance. (15)

The essence or inner being exists at birth as latent pure potentiality but requires appropriate circumstances and conditions in order to ripen, unfold and ultimately harmonize with sources of higher energy, knowledge and wisdom. Essence works in subtle, refined ways through intuition, sudden insights, necessity (times of danger) and selfless actions. Signals from essence are optimally received in states of relaxed awareness and openness and may be communicated in the form of physical manifestations, strong compelling ideas or even dreams:

Essence is a subtle substance that has physical characteristics. This means that in order to experience essence the physical organism has to become sensitive enough to perceive these physical characteristics, which are usually coexistent with the ordinary physical sensations. The physical characteristics of essential

substance are very subtle, in the sense that they are quiet and silent compared to the sensations of the body and its feelings. Usually, they are drowned out by the grosser sensations. So his awareness will have to become refined enough to be sensitive to the subtler and finer sensations of the essence. (16)

In many spiritual teachings individuals are classified into various 'essence types' based on common similarities and patterns of behaviour. "If you observe yourself and note the things that attract you, what you like to see, to hear, to taste, to touch, you may discover your type."

Each one of you has probably met in life people of one and the same type. Such people often even look like one another, and their inner reactions to things are exactly the same. What one likes the other will like. What one does not like the other will not like. You must remember such occasions because you can study the *science of types* only by meeting types. There is no other method. 'How many fundamental types are there in all?' asked someone. 'Some people say twelve,' said G. 'According to legend the twelve apostles represented the twelve types. Others say more.' (17)

The concept of 'types,' which is related to the essence or real individuality of people, plays a major role in human life in the attraction and relationship between the sexes:

If people were to live in essence one type would always find the other type and wrong types would never come together. But people live in personality. Personality has its own interests and its own tastes which have nothing in common with the interests and the tastes of essence. For this reason personality can dislike precisely what essence likes – and like what essence does not like. Here is where the struggle between essence and personality begins. Essence knows what it wants but cannot explain it. Personality does not want to hear of it and takes no account of it. It has its own desires. And it acts in its own way. But its power does not continue beyond the moment. After that, in some way or other, the two essences have to live together. And they hate one another. No sort of acting can help here. In one way or another essence or type gains the upper hand and decides. (18)

According to some esoteric teachings the laws of 'fate' and 'accident' play a fundamental part in the life of humanity – although affecting different aspects of the human being. It is said that personality corresponds to the workings of 'accident' and essence to that of 'fate':

Most people are separated from their fate and live under the law of accident only. Fate is the result of planetary influences which correspond to a man's type. A man can have the fate which corresponds to his type but he practically never does have it. This arises because fate has relation to only one part of man, namely to his *essence*. (19)

## Relationship Between Essence and Personality

There is a mutual, parallel and interdependent relationship between the two fundamental aspects of the human being – the essence and the secondary self or false personality. In most instances it is difficult to distinguish between the workings of essence and that of the personality:

Only a conscious man can tell which are the manifestations of essence and which are personality. The ordinary role we play in life is personality, and with some people it becomes a fixed habit and is no longer even a role. Yet personality can react differently with different surroundings and people. Essence, when it does react, will always react in the same way. Essence means being, intrinsic nature, the thing in itself, inborn character, something that *is*. The opposite is personality, persona, a mask, that which is not ours. But essence can be spoiled and warped: 'Man, most ignorant when he's most assured. His glassy essence plays such fantastic tricks.' (20)

For most human beings their secondary conditioned personality dwarfs and dominates their essence or real self. "Essence is truth in oneself, personality is the false. But in proportion as personality grows, essence manifests more and more rarely and may stop its growth at a very early age and grow no further." However, in certain instances essence emerges fully grown and developed in an individual and naturally connects and harmonizes with the higher spiritual elements of life. Yet this is rarely the case and for the majority of humanity personality is the active element while essence is the passive element in their life. "Inner growth cannot begin so long as this order of things remains unchanged. Personality must become passive and essence must become active."

The proper development of essence requires serious 'work on oneself.' In order for essence to mature naturally it is necessary to weaken and reduce the effects of personality:

For inner growth, for work on oneself, a certain development of personality as well as a certain strength of essence are necessary . . . Without some store of knowledge, without a certain amount of material 'not his own,' a man cannot begin to work on himself, he cannot begin to study himself, he cannot begin to struggle with his mechanical habits, simply because there will be no reason or motive for undertaking such work . . . Thus evolution is equally difficult for a cultured and uncultured man. A cultured man lives far from nature, far from natural conditions of existence, in artificial conditions of life, developing his personality at the expense of his essence. A less cultured man, living in more normal and more natural conditions, develops his essence at the expense of his personality. A successful beginning of work on oneself requires the happy occurrence of an equal development of personality and essence. (21)

The secondary self is interposed between objective reality and the real self or essence. In a sense personality hides behind essence and essence hides behind personality. They mutually screen one another in such a way that “while the Commanding Self says: ‘Give me what I want,’ the Real Self, which lies beyond it, is saying ‘Give me what I need’.”

The essence or real self must re-establish a living contact with the Divine. In most human beings the inner self is trapped by the operation of the secondary self and the strong chains and fluctuating tides of conditioning and environment:

The secondary (‘commanding’) self in everyone is the false self which everyone takes to be the real one. It stands in relation to the real being of the person as the face does to the person: virtually a persona. Everyone, says Rumi in *Fihi ma Fihi*, likes a mirror, and is enamoured by the reflection in the mirror of his attributes and attainments: though he does not know the real nature of his face. The veil which he sees on the looking-glass he imagines to be his face. ‘Take the covering from your face, so that you may see me as the mirror of your real face.’ (22)

Gurdjieff related that in schools of higher development precise methods exist which are applied to separate essence from personality and experimentally verify the relation of personality to essence. “In Eastern schools ways and means are known by the help of which it is possible to separate man’s personality from his essence. For this purpose they sometimes use hypnosis, sometimes special drugs, sometimes certain kinds of exercises.”

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