

TRANSFORMATION AS A QUESTION

Translation by Greta Bianchi / Gordon Leonard Symons

“If there was only one science that man truly needs, then it is the one I teach: how to properly occupy that place in creation which is assigned to man, and how to learn from it what one is supposed to be in order to be a man.”

I. Kant

“Perhaps it will even turn out that the total phenomenological attitude and the epochè inherent in it are destined to produce above all a complete personal transformation which at first could be compared to a conversion, but which, beyond this, is the greatest existential evolution that is granted to humanity as such.”

E. Husserl

1. Two paths to metanoia

William James’s work “The Varieties of Religious Experience” influenced many great authors, including C.G. Jung and R. Assagioli. In that work - a continuation of the research in his “The Principles of Psychology” - James set out, with a psychological method, to analyze the human experience of “conversion”, the ancient metanoia. Through the use of numerous biographical sources, correspondences, studies and researches of other authors as well as his own personal experience, James wanted to investigate the essence of what he called “dying to an unreal life before [...] being reborn to a real life “.

One of his fundamental influences were the studies of Professor Edwin Starbuck (1866-1947), a leading figure in the academic world of the United States and pioneer of the “psychology of religion”, of which he also coined the term. His book “Psychology of Religion” was central to James’ reflection. There, Starbuck

argued that ‘candidates for conversion’ have a series of common traits or ‘symptoms’, namely a sense of lack, disharmony, incompleteness, anomaly with respect to one’s current life, a requirement for the experience of existential transformation. This idea influenced James, Jung and we can also find it in Assagioli’s research.

Even more important for James was another idea of Starbuck’s, who said that there are two general forms of consciousness events that lead the ‘candidate’ to the experience of metanoia. These forms correspond in turn to two paths: the first is conscious and voluntary, the second is unconscious and involuntary. In advance compared to more specific studies on ‘character types’, in relation to the experience of the conversion Starbuck presented two different human types: the ‘strong-willed type’ and the ‘self-abandonment type’. In the strong-willed type, the transformation consists in a gradual construction, element by element, of a new order of mental, existential and spiritual “habits”, the result of a true and proper education of oneself - positions that recall the great philosopher Fichte regarding the unification of the empirical ego to the pure ego. In the self-abandonment type, however, the elements of surrender, suggestion and abandonment are decisive. James will summarize these two ways as follows:

“There are only two ways in which it is possible to free oneself from anxiety, worry, fear, despair. One is that an even more powerful opposing affection comes to inhabit us, the other is that we are so exhausted by the struggle that we are forced to stop, so that we abandon ourselves and no longer take charge of it.”

The investigation of this article concerns the resumption of these intuitions, which date back to the end of the nineteenth century, to try to penetrate to the heart of the following question: is there something that can ‘unify’ these two paths for transformation, the way of abandonment and that of will? This is what our study is about.

2. From psychology to phenomenology

“Philosophy is not a body of doctrine, but an activity.”

L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* (4.112)

The ultimate nature of the experience of metanoia is that of a transformation, or a turning point. The turning point is distinguished from other phenomena such as ‘change’ and ‘improvement’, because, while the latter concerns an alteration of the contents of the experience, the former concerns an alteration of the horizon or point of view on the world. In *The theme of our times*, Ortega y Gasset says:

“From two viewpoints, two men look at the same landscape. Yet they don’t see the same thing. The different way in which they are located makes the landscape organize itself in front of each of them in a different way. What for one is in the foreground and clearly shows all its details, for the other is very far away and it appears confused. [...] Cosmic reality is

such that it can only be seen from a certain perspective. Perspective is one of the components of reality. Far from being its deformation, it is its organization. Each life is a point of view on the universe.”

Therefore the ‘form of life’ that we are, the ‘form of humanity’ that we find ourselves to be, always transforms itself together with (in-a-dance-with) our ‘point of view’. *Conversion* indicates a precise, unique and distinct phenomenon: while the efforts of improvement and change are always aimed at ‘objects’ of experience (health, personal relationships, work, etc.), a turning point indicates the alteration of the space that we are, of the point of view or of the open space that we are and to which the ‘world’ is given. Thus, a man is living ... and at some point he has an experience of conversion: his entire universe turns upside down. What’s happened? That from that moment on, nothing will ever be the same; and yet, everything that is in his life will be only as much and still be the same thing as before.

A famous Zen saying recites: “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water”. In other words, the content remains identical; what is transformed is the entire relationship of the individual with the totality of what is known, that is, the way in which the entire ‘state of the world’ (internal and external) appears to him. If this is the nature of the experience of conversion, how do we unify the path of abandonment to that of will? Our answer to this question also requires a small turning point, that is, it needs a profound alteration of our view of this question. First of all, a premise is needed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the great philosopher Edmund Husserl held a series of conferences and lectures which were later published in the book “The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology”. The founder of phenomenology expressed with great clarity and rigor a doubt that had already belonged to thinkers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. He declared the non-reality of all the exact sciences, and of the same psychological science that adopts their methods, stating that the latter is unable to reach the intimate experience of human life, the forms of the “world-of-life”. The crisis of European humanity,

he specified, is the crisis of its methods, insufficient to touch the reality of our *being* human (where here ‘being’ is opposed to ‘body’, ‘feeling’, ‘psyche’, etc.) . Both the natural sciences and psychology - including psychoanalysis - did not have the necessary authority for Husserl to speak about the depths of the “human experience”.

If we were to compare human existence to a game, a match, they [*the sciences*] - Husserl said – would only describe the match ‘from the stands’ and would not be able to give access to the experience played ‘on the pitch’. In other words, these disciplines deal with the point of view of human experience viewed “in the third person”, rather than “in the first person”. Thus, he founded phenomenology, declaring the absolute methodological autonomy of a knowledge intended to investigate the experience as such, which has its own method, based on the notion of “evidence” (from the Latin *ex* and *vidente*, “what shows itself in the light of the I that sees”). To answer our question about the possible unification of the two ways, we must abandon the psychological method of William James and open ourselves to the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl.

What then is the way that phenomenology provides for the great human problem of metanoia? What is the phenomenological response - the new openness of being and action that this method gives us - on the pitch of the match? First, phenomenology begins by telling us that we can explore the nature and functioning of conversion from different perspectives. What, for example, is the ‘cause’ of conversion? Depending on the perspective adopted, we will approach the phenomenon in a different way, and we will be able to point at diverse ‘causes’. The psychological perspective, for example, will certainly find causes related to the functioning of the mind; the neuroscientific one will find causes related to the functioning of the brain; the economic perspective will examine the social-economic factors of the convert; just as the esoteric perspective will consider the ‘soul age’; the psychoanalytic one will take into account family factors in personal development; the parapsychological one will take into account any ‘superconscious mediumistic influences’, etc.

Phenomenology is simply another perspective from which to examine the question, and it intends to give it from the point of view of the experiencer as such, that is, through the unveiling of the convert's way of being. Phenomenology's answer will therefore start from what is technically called "transcendental reduction", that is, the act of putting all the previous answers in brackets, somehow external to the experience itself. In simpler words, it will be proposed that the 'brain', the 'socio-economic conditions', the 'family influences', the 'age of the soul', the 'psychic phenomena', etc. do not exist. Putting all this in brackets (epochè), what happened at the level of experience - in that event?

Phenomenology will help us to look at a new answer: what has been transformed is the openness-to-the-world, the space, the interpreter, the way of listening to the world - of the individual. «Very good» - someone might ask - «so how can I transform my being by listening to the world, and thus support the transformation process?». To go even deeper into the phenomenological view, let us carefully examine what Hans Georg Gadamer says concerning the question of the source of intuitions (insights). What he says, in fact, is not only valid for intuitions, but also for transformation:

[Insights] always presuppose an indication in the direction of an opening area from which the idea can come, that is, they always presuppose questions. The real nature of the sudden idea (insight) is perhaps not so much the realization of the solution to a problem, as the sudden realization of the question that proceeds in the opening and therefore makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the structure of the question.

Let us replace "insight" with our "metánoia": it is the product of the alteration of the open space - of the place - that we are and within which the "world" appears (world and reality are distinct, as reality is the 'set of objects of our perception, while the world is the set of interpretations on perceived reality). Our problem becomes then more precise, and it becomes: "is there a way to alter the place that we are - and that unifies both the 'way of the will' and the 'way of abandonment'?" Here Gadamer himself comes to our aid, giving us at least an extremely significant hint, that is when he tells us that this open space that we are ["opening area"] has

the structure of the question.

Therefore, if the experience of metánoia, from a phenomenological point of view, is a function of the alteration of the open space that we are, in turn doing this means altering the question in which we are living. The question in which he is already living, gives precisely the 'form of life' or the 'form of humanity' that an individual finds himself to be. In the experience of transformation, the individual comes to live in a new question, which modifies his entire relationship with the contents of his world. In short, according to the phenomenological vision and from the humanistic-transpersonal point of view, it could be said: metánoia is the alteration of a certain way of listening to the world - from a certain question (of the personality) to another (essential) question. Of course, each man has his specific transformation to accomplish and his unique question to discover, but our general problem remains: is there a universal human question by living in which we can promote metánoia - promoting the unification of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' way, of the path of 'will' and that of 'abandonment'? It exists; but to be able to discover it, we must first fully understand the power of the question - as technology before the transformation - starting from the deepest roots and legacy of the entire Western consciousness.

3. Socrates, the question and the transformation

"The sense of Socratism is that philosophy is everywhere or nowhere, that with a little effort you orient yourself on something everywhere, and that you can find what you are looking for. Socratism is the art of finding the place of truth starting from any given place, and thus of precisely determining the relationship of what is given with the truth."

Novalis

In a certain way, Nietzsche was right to consider Plato and Saint Paul as responsible for the way in which we all find ourselves thinking - and therefore living - even today. But as regards our investigation of transformation, the two fundamental figures for the entire Western consciousness are Socrates and Christ. The central message of both, in very different forms but with the

same intention of witness, is that the fundamental purpose of human life is the transformation of one's being. To answer our question, we must re-understand five crucial elements of the lesson of Socrates, one of the main 'masters of transformation'.

1) Humanism. At the heart of his teaching there is a humanism - the first great humanism. The whole problem, reflection and research to which he dedicates his life is related to human knowledge: "I am passionate about learning", confesses Socrates in Phaedrus, "but the countryside and the trees are not willing to teach me anything, while I learn from the men in the city. 'It is therefore a form of knowledge, precisely, within man's terms. The "know yourself", which for Socrates indicates to point to the soul, becomes the place where - living in the committed questioning - the true and greatest knowledge of man is born.

2) Research. However - and this is the second innovation - it is not a given knowledge, but rather a knowledge that is constituted with the research itself, the dialogue, the dialectic of points of view. "Research" is the resolution to live one's existence as a living laboratory for truth. In the Apology, Plato makes Socrates say: "[...] if I then tell you that this is precisely the greatest good for man: to think every day of virtue and of the other topics on which you have heard me dispute and do research on myself and on others, and that an unexamined life is not worth living: if I tell you this, you believe me even less ». What is he telling us? That research is not a 'surplus' of human existence, but the first form of volition of the original instinct of being - the most intimate to what makes us 'human beings'. Plato will complete his speech by stating that authentic research is not a loss, but a return to the original living - it is the light and passion of life, that is, the desire to be. If "truth" can be conceived as the place of being, "research" is walking with being: a man's progressive and ever new effort to strive for knowledge capable of going hand in hand with power of the life that becomes existence; but which, in order to be able to realize itself, gradually awaken, it must necessarily overcome itself, therefore also go beyond the previous forms of synthesis. The authentic researcher is a being on the way: an avant-garde that from the laboratory of its worldly existence undertakes to proceed - as far as possible - hand in hand with the conversation of the Being (both internally and in the historical-social world).

3) Transformation of the being. For Socrates, research - the "examined life" - far from being a purely theoretical-speculative activity, is on the contrary intimately connected to the possibility of altering our way of being as human beings. In controversy with respect to the prevailing opinions of his time, he taught that neither the dogmatic answers of religion on the one hand, nor the certainties of science on the other, were sufficient to generate what most profoundly, as human beings, we pursue: the experience of transformation. More than

anything else, Socrates was interested - according to the great interpretation of Pierre Hadot, fully shared here - in the transformation of man himself. Furthermore, in this regard, Socrates anticipated a great theme - later developed by authors such as A. Korzybski, A. Toynbee and R. Assagioli, namely the gap between the external sciences and the internal science. In Alcibiades II, Socrates says:

"Possession of the other sciences, if one does not possess the science of good, risks being rarely useful, indeed more often than not it is a real harm. [Who, on the other hand, is an expert in one or another science], but also possesses the science of good - which, in the end, coincides with that of the useful - [...], well, we will call such a man wise, capable of advising the City and himself."

4) Living in the questions. Socrates' characteristic question - which made the great Greek philosopher the father of the question as a technology of transformation - was "what is (x)?" (ti esti?). As P. Hadot taught us, the function of Socratic questioning was not so much to seek clarification as to provoke the awareness of the interlocutor itself - pushing it into confrontation. Socrates' purpose in asking was to stimulate the interlocutor with any means, so as to lead him to an evaluation and revision of his own vision of the world - to a 'second thought'. In other words, Socrates conceived the question as the main tool to promote and catalyze the self-reflection of one's being (Self) in the existing (I) - Gurdjieff's 'self-remembering', the 'self-consciousness' by Assagioli.

It is worth emphasizing how much this 'dialectical' vision differs and emerges in contrast to that of scientists, religious and sophists. These people lived in the answers and offered answers. But authentic transformation is a function of living in the questions. And - above all - it is using each answer as a further question to live in, realizing - for ever greater 'synthesis', we would say today - the process that Plato later called "the expansion of the soul". Socrates' revolutionary change of conscience is the invitation to give life to a general conversion of our basic attitude: counter-current to the 'way of being' of the ordinary man, engaged in the answers, we must train a 'way of being' engaged in questions.

At the bottom of this turn is the following assumption: questions are superior to answers. Why? First: because they - unlike the answers - do not block us in the content, but allow us to be free from the contents and therefore to be able to use any content according to the understanding of the concrete circumstance. In other words, questions do not crystallize vitality: on the contrary, they allow us to mediate life - which is always renewed - in the unique forms of space and time, that is, in history. Second: because questions have the unique power to make us see what we did not see before. We have said that the essence of conversion is a new seeing, previously unavailable. And seeing is decisive in transformation, because we cannot be different until we can see things differently. And if what we can see is a function of the question we are living in, then there is an ontological link between transformation-vision-question.

5) The daimon. The fifth element is the "daimon" by which Socrates claimed to be inhabited. In the Apology he says: "There is something divine and demonic in me [...] and it is like a voice that I have heard inside since I was a child, which, every time I hear it, dissuades me from what I am about to do. However, pushing, it never pushes». The decisive importance of Socrates' daimon consists in the fact that it acts as a 'criterion' for his being and his action. The daimon can be interpreted according to multiple understandings. Through the heuristic model of the Ovoid of Assagioli, we can read it in three general ways, roughly corresponding to the dimensions of the lower, middle and higher unconscious.

a) Pre-personal unconscious. First of all, the daimon is the invitation to 'never settle' for what is simply said; to accept nothing except through critical scrutiny, in each instance, case by case and according to reason, through examination, single-handedly thinking, an invitation that Socrates constantly does as much to himself as to others (Socrates himself was a "daimon" for the Greek and Western consciousness, according to Nietzsche's acute observation). This very uncomfortable daimon is in the first instance the criticism of 'letting oneself live', of internalizing without filters the thought that - far from being something abstract - determines in the concrete the very form of our being and acting. This is the irritating and embarrassing aspect of Socrates, which, for conservatives identified with any system of ideas (or herd morality), is the most marked sign of the philosopher's impiety, the work of his overturning of old values, the proof that he was perilous corrupter of the ideals of tradition. In this first sense, the daimon is the restless conscience which, through 'doubt' and 'criticism' of what obscures the truth, exercises the power of liberation from the past. In a single measure, in this first case the daimon is the possibility of learning to (re)see the world from one's own eyes.

b) Middle unconscious. Secondly, for the ego, the daimon represents a call to vigilance, to live as a 'true man', to be oneself, to live consciously: not taken by

beautiful words, ideologies or faiths, that is, by the possessed truth, but by the pursued truth. Here the daimon is the call to always be present to oneself: that is, to live a life within the sphere of the human dimension, to the extent and proportion of our identity - rather than to the extent of our 'passions', or 'animal nature'. This taking care first of all of our being, however, also means, for Socrates, an awakening to one's own concrete responsibility, which consists in achieving the best of what each one is. At this level, the daimon expresses the ethical and practical awareness of our being, which begins by understanding that it has a 'good' of its own which cannot remain abstract - but which asks to be mediated historically, situation by situation, in the concrete relationship with each other, with the city, with the civilization.

c) Transpersonal unconscious. Unlike Plato, who will interpret Socrates' daimon as the consciousness of his master's spiritual and moral sentiment, and therefore in a 'realistic' sense, Xenophon has no doubts about interpreting the nature of the daimon in a metaphysical and superconscious key. He recognizes in Socrates the ability to listen to the goddess. For Xenophon, the warnings of the daimon manifested themselves to Socrates not only as 'interior prohibitions' (as Plato tended to interpret them), but also in the form of 'propositional advice'. Furthermore, the suggestions of the daimon oriented Socrates' action not only in great moral choices, but also in the smallest things in life. His 'inner voice', which gave him precise indications, had to be understood in the same way as the responses of the oracles. Xenophon says:

"Socrates made sacrifices often at home, often on the common altars of the city, and this was known to everybody. He also used divination and made no secret of it; it was commonly known his saying that the 'daimon' gave him suggestions: from here above all it seems to me that they accused him of introducing new divinities [...]; while most say that they are held back or pushed to act by birds and people they meet, Socrates, on the contrary, believed and said that the 'daimon' guided him."

Thus, in Xenophon's interpretation, the voice of the daimon comes from the superconscious dimension, to

the point of expressing phenomena such as divination, inspiration, the inner romantic voice of 'who we really are' (Herder) and which says what we must do or not do according to the criterion of being. In other words, from this point of view the demon is the transpersonal Self, and prohibitions and proactive advice are phenomena analogous to Yes and No as the two fundamental attributes (qualia) of the "transpersonal will", of the will of the Self.

From the unique place of these five elements, our conclusion is: the main way to convert ourselves (that is, to make the Ego operational function of the Self) is not to obtain new answers or information, but to open ourselves to new questions that have the power to create new openings for being and action. Questions that allow us to look at the totality of things in a different way, since we see them from a different place. The questions of transformation are those that produce a displacement from our place - a displacement of our living ourselves and life.

4. The demand for transformation

"The blood around the heart is thought".

Empedocles

Completing the circle, each specific way of being comes from an original question. And with regard to our general way of being, there is a basic question in which we are all already inhabiting. It is that question that makes us be the way we find ourselves being. To transform ourselves, we must change the question. However, we cannot go and inhabit a new question without becoming aware of the already present one - simply because it is not possible to get anywhere without starting realistically from where one is. "Will I survive?" "Will we survive?" "What should I do?". These are some of our basic questions. In case it does not satisfy us, let us reflect on the fact that we derive our way of being - but also our vitality, creativity, power, identity, sense of connection, etc. - from these questions. These are questions that have their place in existence, but that do not radically transform our experience as human beings. Rather, they lead us to exactly what they are designed for: to survive. We have all the elements to answer our question. We

asked ourselves: "Is there a universal demand to provoke - always anew - the experience of metanoia?". And again: "A question that unifies the path of will (to choose) with that of abandonment (to live in)?" Is there a question that use us in a way that puts us on the path of authentic conversion? It is clear: every man has his personal question to discover. But there is at the same time a macro-question, a universal human question that allows each man to get onto his own path. A transformation of being, in fact, does not need a question about survival or doing, but a question that makes the being self-reflect. And there is no other powerful question like the one that, in its simplest form, is given like this:

What does it mean to be a human being?

Or, the same question in its most advanced form:

What might human beings be capable of being?

This is the essential question: engaging in it generates the horizon, the linguistic game or the space in which transformation - as a possibility - can continually occur. Living in it means reorganizing the 'form of humanity' that we find ourselves being every day. Everything that may emerge within this question - the infinite activities, researches, syntheses, discoveries, distinctions, etc. - can come into existence, be recognized and coagulate in that whole represented by the same essential question. Transformation as a way of life is the result of a question in which we have committed our existence. The commitment of our life is nothing more than the question in which we live every day. And although within the space of this question there are 'answers' that touch us, move and access according to a sort of hierarchy of possibilities, the generative source of new possibilities of life and transformation remains the same question. Today we have learned that the problem with the answers - even with the best ones - is that when we get them, these are the answers we received and they can easily become all the possible answers. But by remaining firmly in the place of the question, many other answers can be obtained. The question is therefore the place of self-transcendence, of ulteriority as an essential characteristic of Life itself:

One day life will flash its deepest secret before the eyes of the dying Zarathustra: 'Look, it told me, I am the one who must always go beyond myself'.

Precisely this question - what is the possibility to be for a human being? - is the foundation of the ontological approach to conversion. In other words, it is the yardstick on which the transformation of our being is measured every day - every single time. This simple question therefore wants to be the foundation of the ontological transformation, and it must be able to be. And ... how can it be? Understanding a fundamental principle about the functioning of all questions: every question in which we choose to live contains and always eludes another question, removing it from consciousness. The ordinary man who lives by asking himself the basic question “will I survive? will we survive? “is simultaneously removing from his consciousness - thus avoiding the responsibility for – a different question:” And if I survive ... then? - what would I do with my life? ». Likewise, the very ancient and very important spiritual question “who am I? what am I? “ contains and simultaneously removes another - which is perhaps the most important question and responsibility of our entire life:” What could I be? “. The question we were looking for, the most powerful question about man, is the one where the origin and purpose, who we are and who we can become, coincide again - bringing us back to the original unity with ourselves and, at the same time, overcoming what we found ourselves to be.

As on the day she gave birth to you,
the sun was greeted by planets,
and you are hardy and continuously growing
according to the law that made you appear;
so you must be, you can't escape yourself,
Sibyls and prophets have already said it,
and no time, no force can break
the imprinted form, which develops through living.
Goethe

GRIEF AND JOY

While the pandemic is still far from ending, in the world of psychosynthesis numerous online proposals are being offered, also by Italian centers, for conferences, meetings and group work. An increasing number of group facilitators and trainers are “collaborating with the inevitable”, and while aware of the importance of face-to-face meetings, they are facing the difficulties that arise from the use of online platforms, opening up to new technologies, and discovering the numerous positive aspects they offer. Outside Italy, as well, initiatives in this sense are multiplying, perhaps more easily, in that online psychosynthesis had already been adopted by numerous centers and associations to overcome geographical distances.

My feeling is that, in this period, the whole community is quietly facing the challenges of planetary extension that so much affect our life, in order to cope with events. Demonstrating its resilience skills, it is reorganizing itself to continue spreading psychosynthesis. In this process, the discussions and synergies with “peers”, animated by the same purpose, can only favour new bonds and interactions, and strengthen the existing ones.

In the past few weeks I have leafed through two periodicals of the psychosynthetic community with interest and appreciation. This has prompted me to make a few considerations that I would like to share with the readers of Rivista.

The first serial is the June issue of the Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis's Psychosynthesis Quarterly magazine, dedicated to a theme that you don't always have the courage or the desire to talk about: grief. The topic is very timely, as stated by the guest editor, Ami Ji Schmid, in explaining the reason for her editorial choice.