

The Psyche of the Embryo: A Source of New Awareness

Gino Soldera

Abstract: This article presents a new paradigm that claims the existence of the psyche in the human being from the moment of conception. The author invites the reader to reconsider the outlook adopted up to now, which considers the brain the only unit of reference useful for understanding the mind and its functioning. A global vision of man cannot overlook the existence of the psyche, seen also as the soul. The human being could not live without it. In fact, the psyche appears to be present and functioning with its individual character from the moment of conception. In order to understand this new perspective, we need to look at not only what happens outside us, but also, and above all, what happens inside us, in our interiority.

Keywords: psyche, embryo, awareness, psychogenome, relationship system

“As children must develop, so must our theories about them and their experience” (Review of Daniel Stern’s book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* presented by Daniele Benci during the “Journal Club Cantonal Psychiatric Clinic” in Mendrisio, Switzerland, November 14, 2002).

“The embryo of every organism already contains its future formation, just as the fertilized cell already contains the man” (in *G.H. Graber’s Thoughts on Prenatal Life* by Piera Cenerini, Discobolo Eds, Ascoli Piceno, 1979, p. 33).

Why is it useful to consider the existence of the psyche from the moment of conception, when the nervous system and the brain have not yet formed? Taking this perspective into consideration allows us to elaborate a new paradigm of the human being, capable of explaining the emerging experience from the germinal stage and the feeling of its parents. This

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leads to the formation of a theoretical and experimental model that can be perfected, from time to time, as in the field of physics, to discover elements of human reality that are still unknown and invisible.

Starting from conception, in order to better understand the vastness and complexity of human reality, it is necessary to open up to a global vision, going beyond what has been discovered so far by science, and in particular, by neuroscience. This becomes possible if we overcome the close correspondence, still present in our culture, between the brain, mind, and psyche, because each of these structures (although connected and part of a single whole) expresses specific properties and functions according to its own models. David Chamberlain (2014) writes:

For most of the 20th Century, neither medicine nor psychology provided an accurate understanding of the nature of infant life in the womb or at birth. Perhaps the greatest single handicap of professionals was the idea that brains were the complete measure of mind, self and psyche. (p. 288)

This is also because human consciousness is something bigger and cannot be attributed to and identified with a single part of the body, albeit an important one, such as the brain.

For this reason, it is essential that research and experimentation in this field opens up to a global, psychobiological approach, where the psyche, representing the inner part of the human being, can be considered in all respects an integral part of the entire human organism, being an essential and fundamental component, even if in itinere. The geneticist François Jacob (1970) said:

In the chromosomes received from the parents, each egg contains its entire future, the stages of its development, the shape and properties of the living being that will emerge. The organism thus becomes the realization of a program prescribed by its heredity. The intention of a psyche has been replaced by the translation of a message. (p. 10)

The great biologist, Pierre-Paul Grassé (1980) expresses himself in favor of the potential of the human being:

...it was assumed that the embryo was not human until it had acquired the nervous system. It is nothing. This acquisition, which takes place at an early stage of embryonic life, does not change the nature of the being who is already endowed with all the potential of its species. It adds nothing to the embryo, not even consciousness, which will appear only after birth. (p. 288)

Edelman & Tononi (2000) highlighted how the development of the human being proceeds progressively, according to a global and continuous path that goes from genes to protein synthesis, up to the formation of the anatomical physiological structures. It then proceeds to the organization of the psychic structures, and finally arrives at behavior as a function of the mind.

There is an absolute continuity of the phenomena starting from fertilization that no longer raises doubts among scientists. This helps us to understand why the new psychology tries to go beyond the archaic obstacles of the past, to overcome the traditional, mechanistic approach, and to get closer and closer to quantum philosophy.

The idea is to consider the energetic, vibrational, and organized field that animates and contributes progressively, through its role as organizer, to the formation of the organism during the different phases. These phases follow one another from the fertilized egg to the development of germ cells, passing through the embryonic stage and the fetal one until birth.

Therefore, we assume that the embryo, like any other being, could not live without the soul or psyche. In fact, for the ancient Greeks, the psyche is the vital principle that animates all living things: To be alive means being an animated body (Pangallo, 2007). The aim is to identify, giving great importance to the knowledge acquired during this first stage of life, a paradigm of the human psyche able to open up new innovative perspectives, not only in the field of science and technology, but also in daily clinical and educational practice.

An example of this comes from the techniques that allow restoring the bond between mother, father, and child, once interrupted (Licata et al., 2020). This is needed to face and overcome the inevitable obstacles that the human being encounters during their life. It allows the individual to develop in a healthy and balanced manner and to create increasingly authentic and effective human relationships, especially in situations of premature birth. Entering into the unknown territory of the functioning of the psyche from the moment of conception (which until now has been considered non-existent or unexplored) could provide human beings with new elements useful to project themselves with greater security and confidence towards their future, which becomes such when it is powered by the perspective of realization of their own life plan (Soldera, 2000).

We should not forget that testimony of the existence of the soul from the moment of conception has always been present in religious tradition in what is called the “Visitation,” reported in the Gospel of Luke (*King James Bible*, lines 41—45), which describes the meeting between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elisabeth, who was expecting her own son, John:

And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the

Holy Ghost. And she spoke out with a loud voice and said: Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb! And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

How is the Psyche of the Embryo Constituted and How Does It Function?

The psyche of the embryo expresses its essence and therefore also its subjectivity (or individuality) in continuous interaction, not only with the heritage from its parents, but also with the environment. It is a shared reality, which, in this case, is represented (in particular) by the mother. According to the psychosynthesis diagram (Assagioli, 1973), the psyche is made up of three parts:

1. **The lower unconscious:** formed by the genetic heritage received from the parents, which constantly influences the people themselves, contributes to the formation of the organism, and is modifiable, not only by the influence of environment but also by the individual themselves.
2. **The middle unconscious:** given by the direct action of the environment, by what surrounds the person, but also by the willingness to relate and socialize with its altruistic propulsions.
3. **The higher unconscious:** formed by essential archetypal structures of the psyche (Jung, 1997) in which the essence of individuality is found, whose influence can be regularized through one's behavior or state of life.

The psyche is governed by states of consciousness referable to three aspects that are real organizers and centers of synthesis (Soldera et al., 2019):

1. The Self or Bodily (or Genomic) Ego. This takes shape with conception and is extinguished with death. It is the reflection of the Personal and Transpersonal Self. It represents the first state of consciousness, i.e., that of the subconsciousness that appears more limited and restricted than the others.

The role of the Bodily Ego is to put the person in contact with the boundaries, limits, and possibilities of their own body, through which they begin to explore the surrounding world. It contributes to the formation, development, and organization of the brain through neurosensory and motor activity. Moreover, it is subject to continuous changes during the

same day, while always remaining itself, according to a line of continuity that extends from the past to the present and the future.

The Bodily Ego is very active in prenatal life and in early childhood when the human being starts to become aware of their body. Furthermore, it forms the basis of a person's ego, which is powered by instincts that aim to promote the survival of the individual, since they are hereditarily transmitted behaviors. Instinctive behaviors are carried out automatically by performing some schematic actions, such as attack or escape, without being able to "or having to" choose what to do in specific circumstances. We usually get to know the Bodily Ego very well, willingly or not, during the course of an illness and, generally, we feel it when we wake up—when we begin to realize who we are and where we exist.

2. The Self or Transpersonal Ego. This is related to the superconsciousness, which represents the most mysterious and unexplored part of our being. Unlike the Bodily Ego which is concrete and external, the Transpersonal Ego is linked not so much to causes but to purposes (values) and also to the goal, to the project (Mercurio, 1992). It appears to be different for each of us, also according to the ways in which it is realized.

The Transpersonal Ego is essentially composed of an abstract inner nature and therefore is less directly perceptible. This does not mean that it is less real or present than the first one. On the contrary, the Transpersonal Ego, with its radiant essence, represents unity and operates under the influence of primary archetypal forces such as the power given by energy and movement, the love given by warmth, expansion, understanding, and the knowledge that is possible through enlightenment of an inner nature (similar, yet different from the outer one).

In this Self, we also find purpose. The Transpersonal Ego is not linked to the ego, the earth, and the survival instinct, but to the universe, since it moves within synchronic events, such as significant coincidences (Jung, 1991) that manifest themselves in a harmonious context. It is the expression of the "Unus Mundus," which has been present since the origin of creation, where the psyche and matter are not separate, being the foundation of the primal source of the personality. This need for unity and self-realization is felt, in a particularly pressing way, when the physiological needs of belonging, security, and appreciation, at the base of Maslow's pyramid (Maslow, 1973), are satisfied.

For example, this occurs rather spontaneously in despair; when confronted with suffering, we turn our gaze towards Heaven in order to grasp a hint or an inspiration that can help us overcome the difficulties. Its nature is impersonal, as are the values that guide our existence from above. In a poetic sense, we could say that the Transpersonal Ego is formed by stardust, also because it is at the origin and goes beyond the

consciousness of Self. A healthy meditation practice helps us to understand that we can enter a pure state of consciousness that transcends our body, our emotions, and our thoughts. This helps us not only to fly high, but also to discover the true love that is openness, appreciation, and gratitude for everything, because we do not exist as separate individuals. We are part of a single reality that is life, which manifests itself in multiplicity and diversity.

3. The Self or Personal Ego is the result of the encounter between the Bodily Ego and the Transpersonal Ego. It represents the psychophysical synthesis of the whole person, with his/her characteristic systems and ways of behaving, thinking and feeling, which develops through the experience of interacting with the environment.

In his dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato (370 C.E./2013) uses the Chariot Allegory to illustrate his view of the Self, where a charioteer drives a chariot pulled by two winged horses, one white and one black. The white horse, in our case, represents the Transpersonal Ego and the black one represents the Bodily Ego, while the charioteer, the person who leads, impersonates the Personal Ego that begins its adventure from the moment of conception and then forms and matures in terms of wisdom (rationality for the ancients), understood as the ability to face life during existence. It is no coincidence that the child at birth has already had nine months of experience, which is understood as the ability to face life as the protagonist of its life, since the embryo, according to Pearson (2002) “is an active orchestrator of its system and its destiny” (p. 14–15).

The personal self as a reflection of consciousness has already been present in an unconscious way since conception as a subjective reality. With Solms (2012), we could say that the Self is unconsciously conscious, because it does not know it is, as it is not yet able to reflect itself in the external reality. It begins its adventure in the maternal womb, identifying with its surroundings. The womb is the place where it lives its first experiences and receives its first imprinting which, as epigenetics (Lipton, 2006) has shown in recent years, will condition its future life. The body starts taking on its shape at the very source of the being and at the same time, it self-educates, acquiring new information through experience (Bertin, 1988) with consequences for future generations (Reik & Walter, 2001).

We know that, from prenatal life, the unborn child is able to have exchanges with the outside world and to communicate internally (Chamberlain, 2003), as well as to express its own “intentional attitude” (Zoia et al., 2007, p. 217–226). This is demonstrated by observations of fetal behavior in the womb. We can define this intentionality as a typically human characteristic, in which the individual tries to understand himself in order to attribute meaning to experience and to anticipate mutual

actions (Dennett, 1992). It can represent an instance capable of acting as a bridge between the internal world of the psyche and the external one of the body, because its causal power presides over some mental states involving the whole nervous system (Searle, 1987).

Naturally, after birth, the newborn child still has a long journey of growth and maturation in order to reach direct self-awareness. We must not forget that the human being commonly grows up believing that they are only the whole of their experience and history. In reality, something greater remains present in the human being, in addition to everything that they have identified with. It is represented by their Transpersonal Ego.

What is the Role of the Personal Ego from the Moment of Conception?

The Personal Ego is formed by the fusion of the feminine ego with the masculine ego: One is represented by the ovum and the other by the spermatozoon. From conception, it has (in its uniqueness and originality) its own biopsychic identity that is well represented by the genome, called the “psychogenome” by the French psychiatrist Bayle (2005). Due to its integral features, this psychogenome confers a specific connotation through the naming in the human relational system. Identity represents the key element to build an authentic “You-I” relationship that is mutual by its nature and contributes to build “We.” As we know, “We” is the basis of the life of a couple, of the family and society. It is very important to recognize this “You” right from the beginning, because when the maternal or paternal Ego enters into a relationship with the “You” represented by the child, exchanges are created that lead to a mutual modification. If the rhythms of these exchanges take place in an irregular, indolent, lazy, one-sided, jerky or automatic way, rather than in a harmonious way, there is the risk of obtaining a detrimental effect on the whole relationship system.

The other fundamental aspect of the Personal Ego of the embryo first, and then of the fetus, is that it can feel, perceive, and even make itself heard, despite its external inability to perceive and manifest itself, since it does not yet have sensory organs. We notice this in its ability to affect the mood of its parents (Soldera, 2014) who, in turn, can perceive and contact it inwardly and communicate with it. On this matter, I will share the first part of the dialogue between a mother, Stefania, and her ten-week-old (gestation) daughter, Lucia:

“Who are you?” *I’m your baby girl.*

“How do you feel in your Mom’s belly?” *Fine, I’m rocking.*

“Where are you from?” *From far away. From a beautiful place. From the light.*

“Where are you going?” *Where the Lord takes me. I’m coming to you, Mommy, to my daddy and to my little brother.*

“What do you look like?” *I’m small, beautiful, smiling, radiant, special.*

“Can you show yourself?” *Don’t rush Mom, you’ll get to know me little by little.*

In this dialogue, Lucia appears to be aware of what she is experiencing, conscious of who she is as a human being and as a person, of the reality that surrounds her, of the people who live in her environment, of her family and parents, and in particular, of her own mother, with whom she already seems to have developed a deep and intense bond.

In order to get a clearer and more complete idea of how the Personal Ego works, we can look at Chiara Sozzi’s synthesis (2011), the result of a detailed study on the dialogue between mothers and children during pregnancy. Sozzi wrote:

During the prenatal and neonatal life, the child manifests his/her self-awareness on a certain level. He/she appears particularly conscious of:

1. the limits of his/her own physical reality;
2. the depth of his/her consciousness;
3. our limited understanding of what he/she is and what he/she knows; and
4. the specific level of awareness of the mother and father: what they feel, how they live, their values, their emotions and their beliefs. (p. 42)

It should not surprise us that, in this way, the unborn baby demonstrates having greater awareness than that attributed to them up to now. As opposed to what commonly happens, the unborn baby turns their gaze from top to bottom, from abstract to real. It could not be any different, because their life is essentially rooted in the inner dimension of the psyche, not yet having a mature physical body that allows them to adapt their inner perception to the body and, from that, to the outside world. Moreover, the baby’s attention and sensitivity is much higher than an adult’s. This is due to the easy access to the Transpersonal Ego that represents its center, its vital core from where life takes shape and manifests itself through archetypes. This is well highlighted by David Chamberlain (1998) in his study and research on prenatal life and birth, when he said children seek from their parents and those close to them:

1. to be accepted, loved, respected, and to come into contact with them immediately;
2. to experience the pregnancy and to be born in a more intimate, peaceful, and comfortable environment than is commonly the case today; and
3. to be recognized as people, for their collaborative and proactive ability, but also for their wisdom and love.

All this helps us to understand the importance of the role of parents and the quality of the relationships with children, if possible, starting from the moment of conception, because it is the first phase of prenatal life that depends on the harmonious development of all subsequent phases.

I think the time has come to start looking not only at what happens outside of us, in our external life, but also and above all, at what happens inside of us, because this is where the relationship with the child takes shape and is structured. This is amply demonstrated by studies on prenatal attachment (Nava, 2006). It is a matter of leaving the door of our hearts open to unborn life in order to listen to the voice of silence that, with its wisdom and love, hovers in our existence, whispering sweet-colored notes that embody a fragrant touch of life and a message of hope for all of humanity.

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