

# Ontopoiesis and Unity in the Prayer of the Heart: Contributions to Psychotherapy and Learning

Olga Louchakova

[olouchakova@itp.edu](mailto:olouchakova@itp.edu)

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**Introduction.** Phenomenology makes an unprecedented contribution to human science by suggesting an other than reason based Method, equally valuable for research, education and personal development. Present study suggests that Prayer of the Heart, the central contemplative practice of Apophthegmata and Hesychasm ( Louchakova & Warner, 2003), uses a phenomenological approach to consciousness in its pursuit of Theosis. In fact, the early phenomenology of the self in Apophthegmata can be viewed as a predecessor of the famous Husserl's method. Some phenomenological approaches to consciousness-self, i.e. "knowledge by presence", are found in Advaita Vedanta (Shankaracharya, 1947) and Sufism (Suhrawardi, 1185/1999; Yazdi, 1992). Phenomenological explication of the self in Prayer of the Heart points out to unity of existence in the ontopoiesis, interplay of thetic and operational/act intentionalities, and essential architecture of self-awareness.

Reconstruction of the practice of the Prayer of the heart lead to development of the dialogical method of explication of the phenomenological architecture of the psychological system commonly called "self" in focus groups, interested in personal development. The depth-phenomenological knowledge of the structure of the self served to develop the techniques for learning and psychotherapy, based on the enhancement of the essential elements of self-structure.

**Research methodology** includes a) the phenomenological analysis of self-explication in the interviews of living practitioners of the Prayer of the Heart and in the texts of Philokalia (Theophanis the Monk, 1994; St. Simeon the New Theologian, 1995); b) application of the phenomenological dialogical self-explication in the focus groups interested in personal development ; c) using the results in therapy and as an educational mnemonic technique.

**Results of the phenomenological analysis.** Prayer of the Heart consists of a systematic focusing of attention on the pre-reflective components of the lived embodied experience of the self, i.e. self-sense ontologically associated with the chest area of the human body. Through the series of spontaneous phenomenological, eidetic and transcendental reductions of this embodied "I"-sense, the practitioner acquires the direct perception of the phenomenological architecture of self-awareness and the gestalt of the essential meaning-structures. Prayer also includes the ongoing repetition of the Divine Names in the dialogical interiority of I-Thou, spatially identified in the interior space of the chest. The Name has to be "located" "inside the inward flow of "I"-sense, gradually absorbing towards its phenomenological origins in pure subjectivity. Over the years, this process causes deep characterological, perceptual, cognitive and epistemological transformation, known as the "purity of the Heart", and the direct apprehension of the transcendental Subject. The systematic longitudinal explication of the interior meaning-structures of consciousness in this process can be viewed as an essential activity of self, i.e. a particular form of autopoiesis.

**Phenomenological architecture of the self-awareness** Once marginalized in the wake of a limited empiricism, the notion of self now enters the center of psychological discourse (Benson, 2001; Misra, 2001; Schweder, 1991). The current typology of the self does not accommodate all the evidence (Matsumoto, 1999), and needs more research.

The method of the dialogical explication of the deep structures of self-awareness, based on Philokalia, was used in the 7-year study in the personal development focus groups ( $n > 35$ , number of participants over 300). Results show that spatiality is the primary organizational principle of the self, pervasive to the whole internal organization. The components of the self are organized in the “internal space” of introspection as layers around the central experience of the “I am” – consciousness. “I am” in association with sensations, emotions and feelings, images, verbal thoughts, deeper non-verbal understandings, mental states such as torpor or confusion, and “nothing” forms the easily identifiable phenomenological clusters.

Deeper analysis uncovers the inner, essential structural groupings, such as self-concept/self-sense, interiority/exteriority, constancy/changeability (subjectivity/objectivity), selfhood/transcendentality, and body-schema relatedness/unrelatedness. Self-concept/self-sense axis includes the polarity of self-related concepts versus the body-based, spatial sense of one’s own self. Interiority/exteriority includes the polarity of meaning and verbal \_expression, constancy-changeability relates to the subject (constancy)-object (changeability) relationship within the introspective field. Transcendentality accommodates transpersonal psychological dimensions of experience such as “larger-than-self” or “no self”, and body schema relatedness refers to the psychological phenomena, which emerge in connection with particular locations within the body schema.

**Applications in psychotherapy and education.** “I am”- sense, a persistent component of self-awareness, can be easily differentiated from the changing components by the subjects in guided open-eyed introspection. After some initial training, “I am”-sense becomes available for the continuous fixing of voluntary attention. This causes sense of well-being and the increase of higher-order thoughts about the self. The increase of these secondary reflective thoughts corresponds to the human experience of becoming more conscious. Since the knowledge about the self is typically remembered better than other types of semantic information (Kelley et al., 2002), the focusing on “I am” - sense was used as an educational mnemonic technique with graduate students ( $n = 70$ ) in psychology seminars. Students reported that the voluntary focus of attention on the constant aspect of the self in the process of learning decreases the performance anxiety and enhances learning.

The focusing on “I am”-sense was also used in therapy with the clients ( $n = 7$ ) diagnosed as having the “religious or spiritual problem” (DSM – IV category V-code 62.89). This technique helped to neutralize the depersonalization, helping to reestablish the normal structure of self-experience.

The phenomenological map of the spatial components of the self resonates with the *in situ* distribution of neuromediators and neuropeptides, challenging the belief in the exclusive neurocentricity of consciousness (Louchakova & Warner, 2003). Research suggests that the positive effects of focusing on the “I am” sense may have the biological basis connected with the changes in the chemistry of the body.

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