

## **Interpretive Aspects of Self Differentiation**

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**Abstract:** Bowen's theory of self-differentiation presents practical steps for reaching a superior human value, for detaching out of the amorphous mass of "the ordinary" that remains in debt to the chronic anxiety. The liberating epistemological leap is to be made by switching from the elements of an emotional system to the elements of an intellectual one. The two systems represent different paradigmatic aspects that are situated at the opposite poles of the human being. The link of the two extremes is the consciousness of the individual that represents the elective and actual action "field" in the same time. For implementing the differentiation, Bowen proposes certain steps that have a pragmatic value and that allow a phenomenological-existential reading which we shall undertake. The Bowenian theory can be applied on at least four levels of different but interconnected readings that will be detailed in the paper. Since the differentiation scale proposed by the American author is not completely elaborated, we propose an interpretation that points to the transcending of the immediate data of the consciousness (given by the emotional and intellectual systems) towards the domain of self-discovery of the human being's nucleus. Our article explores and develops some philosophical aspects of comprehending self differentiation. Surpassing the strict psychotherapeutic frame, we propose a reading placed beyond the domain of psychology. Self differentiation implies also existential issues along with anthropological aspects which respond to ethical and deontological challenges. The accomplishment of a clearly outlined personality, centred on its own values and criteria, presumes at least four directions of investigation. In conclusion, we can say that we try to operate differentiations on the basis of the self differentiation proposed by Bowen.

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## ***Introduction***

In the 1960s, the American psychotherapist Murray Bowen<sup>1</sup> (representative of the New Yorkese school of Family Systemic Therapy) proposed, as a quantitative evaluation methodology (in reaction to the qualitative, non-quantifiable evaluation of psychoanalysis) a scale of self-differentiation that counts from zero to one hundred.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Bowen, *La Différenciation du soi* (Paris: ESF 1984).

The American psychotherapist highlights the notion of anxiety, defined as an existential fear, unavoidable and irrepressible, that is subsistent to any human being. The anxiety may have an acute state (meaning a sudden raise above a usual level or a chronic one) subsistent throughout the whole life, which, by the acute increase, gets specific aspects or themes: fear of loneliness, of losing job, of bankruptcy and so on.

Bowen emphasizes the concept of differentiation and the concept of undifferentiation (of self), respectively, concepts that fetter us in the net of the world. That happens because we are guided by familial patterns and models (often trans-generational), tangled by the knots of a complex emotional/sentimental network. To explain his idea the author postulates the existence of two operation systems: the emotional system and the intellectual one.

Of a phylogenetic origin, the emotional system comprises everything related to affects, emotions or feelings and functions of the autonomous vegetative system. The emotional system is, therefore, the heritage of the genus and of the species, which biologically, physiologically and psychologically branches us to the animal world – our irrepressible, atavistic base.

The components of the intellectual system lie on the ground of thinking, logic and intellect, together with *a set of principles resulted from the conscious reflection on life experience*. While the emotional system is connected to the genotype, the components of the intellectual system give the phenotype. The reflection of one's own life experience creates a foundation for a set of principles (operational any time there is a need) having a paradigmatic character; this produces the structuring/organizing of one's own life, and so, besides the emotional pole (given by nature), it results in a second pole (the psychic one).

The differentiation function of the two systems, mentioned above, may create results covering four large domains. In his attempt to quantify these results, Bowen presents a scale from zero to one hundred, divided in four sectors, corresponding to the four domains above, each domain with its distinctive traits:

- Zero to twenty-five. The inferior stage of differentiation is characterized by the following: emotions that cannot be considered separated from facts, need of confirmation/feedback and supportive relationships, intense emotional fusions, weak (inoperative) functioning of the intellectual system, effort for the continuous hiding of anxiety, remaining in the shadow of parents, a life full of problems and ill luck, failures and misfortunes, disorders and illnesses.

- Twenty-five to fifty. The medium stage of differentiation defined by: dependency on other's view, an amalgam of principles and theories that "sound good" in the society – expressed through quotes or ready made opinions, emotions expressed directly and un-filtrated, problems popping-up or situating at the psychic level (depression, behavioural disorders, abusing substances and alcohol) and so on.

- Fifty to seventy-five. The superior level of differentiation characterized as follows: clear detachment in the functioning of the two systems (emotional and intellectual), consistency in the pursuit of established targets, energy oriented towards the personal development, correct self-evaluation (no over- or under- estimation), the individuals are freed of general-human problems (as they have no problem with their problems).

- The sector between seventy-five and one hundred is almost neglected in the author's description. The only thing mentioned is that this score is only reached by a handful of individuals, superior and exceptional.

## **Part I**

Following Bowen, we may understand the differentiation, in a first stage, as taking place between the two systems, the emotional and the intellectual one. However, that does not mean that in the case of the individuals with a superior level of differentiation, the emotional system is suppressed in the favour of the intellectual one. It is more about separation of the two, so that each of them deals with the domain (the slice) where it has specialised best. The emotional system is our autopilot and is functioning quite well for the most part of the time (e.g. the autonomous vegetative system that directs all the life functions), while we are not even aware of that. The function of the intellectual system may be a valuable life guide if, each time needed, it leads to clear judgments, evaluations and strategic programming for complex situations. But if the individual is submerged in the emotional system and lets his affects and emotions run his life, it is not surprising that bad things happen to him (difficulties, problems, misfortunes, diseases and so on). They only come to "revenge" the negligence, limitation and narrowness of the human who does not use all the potential available. As, by a lower level of differentiation, we can also understand a lowly one-sidedness of the psyche that is spinning in a tight circle of options, all based on patterns, inherited or implanted models, awry applied to any situation or conjuncture, under a redundant inertia of habits. Thus, in this case, it is not surprising that poor suitability of the person becomes disabling in contexts that require complex and nuanced assessments that point to the action oriented strategy of the situation. To discern between the world, as it is, and own emotions related to life (however justified they may seem) is already a serious step forward in the matter of self differentiation. Only when man is able to make a bond between him, his thoughts, his feelings and emotions, on the one hand, and surrounding reality, structured independently of his projections, on the other hand, will he be able to find solutions to some problematic situations, respectively, he will no longer have problems with his own problems. Only through such a sustained effort, applied to his own spiritual mechanisms, the individual may realise the adaptation to the reality and the enrolment, without hassles, to the daily issues that require solving in a proper (if not harmonious) way. Such an existential direction accepts issues as ongoing challenge for all the levels of his being, capable to face whatever (realistic) issue in his way.

The Stoic School already, through Zenon, its founder, stated that: "happiness is a life without troubles"<sup>1</sup> and, furthermore, as he would refer to the emotional system: "passion is an irrational movement and against the nature of the spirit, or an impulse that grows in an exaggerate way."<sup>2</sup> To such a passion and unrest of the soul, nothing can oppose but something with a value of a guidance principle, as Marcus Aurelius (the same school mentioned above) said: "The one who doesn't have a strong ideal in life,

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<sup>1</sup> Octavian Nistor, *Antologie filosofică, filosofia antică* (Anthology of philosophy, philosophy of the Antiquity) Vol. 2, revised edition (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1975), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 83.

also cannot have unity or stability in his deeds.”<sup>1</sup> Out of these few quotes we can see that the issue of the relation between emotional and intellectual forces, was already carried on among the Stoic Philosophers, and they have also offered a prescription for healing through activating the rational part and silencing, or at least keeping in brackets, the emotional one.

The merit of the Bowenian theory is that it recognized the fact that the emotional system is indelible, moreover, it has a respectable contribution to the functioning of our human being and that what we need to do is to discriminate between the two without minimizing (or maximizing) either of them. The Bowenian concept of differentiation implies operating both components of the psychic, accentuating either one or the other, depending on the situation or the circumstances. That asks for a specific detachment, namely, the Ego’s inner detaching of the tool (of the two systems) it is operating with.

All these specifications better clarify the differences between the emotional and the intellectual system; the difference is not necessarily axiological, but rather teleological. In phylogenetic terms the intellectual system is a contingent superstructure, its appearance being only anthropologically justified. Ethical function of the intellectual system is possible only by choosing a set of guiding principles, co-constructed over the biological and emotional giving. Life requirements often impose a choice between two systems of values – emotional and intellectual – which are antagonistic, competitive, but can also be complementary. In Freudian terms it would be *das Lustprinzip und das Realitätsprinzip* (the pleasure principle and reality principle), and this crack in principles between the two systems is often difficult to integrate; in the apperception of a dichotomy we may feel tempted to choose one of the options, often the more usual one, consecrated by reflex and inertia. In this case the alternative is not the result of the adequacy of a given reality, but more likely it is due to the direction of the redundant and inertial force of a (single) option of narrowed choice; finally we only have the illusion of a choice.

As we have seen, on the lower levels of differentiation, the individual is in the whirlpool of the emotions that master, and ultimately experience him. Emotion, as a powerful experience, is extremely luring, its power – the energy – is so big as it becomes dominant and monopolizing of the whole being, that remains nothing else but the face and the voice of the imperiously necessary affect. The ubiquity of the emotional is particularly clear from the very beginning of the differentiation scale, the world exists and, one way or another, we are affected by it; the Ego remains with no freedom of choice, the voice of emotion becomes apodictic! Consequently, man finds himself full of worries and problems (see just how often these words are used), stressed, "Life is stressful!" as we hear everywhere. As La Rochefoucauld<sup>2</sup> stated: "In the human heart there is a perpetual generation of passions; so that the destruction of one is almost always the beginning of another one." Only through this mechanism of continuation and interdependence of the soul’s movements can the idea of their supremacy be generated, an idea that maintains the illusion of the rightness of un-differentiation: "Passions have their own injustice and interest that makes their tracking dangerous, in consequence we

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>2</sup> La Rochefoucauld: *Maximes* (Paris: Maxi-Poche, 1994), 13.

have to avoid them even when they seem to be rational.”<sup>1</sup> In such a perspective, we have a reversing of existential values and references, an authentic *monde à l'enverse* where the world is guilty for everything that happens to the individual.

Processing the world by the differentiation or non-differentiation of the individual may be compared to the process of adaptation (elaborated by Jean Piaget), with its two components – assimilation and accommodation – that reach and use very different functioning levels of intelligence. Un-differentiation implies a large openness towards assimilation, in other words, towards the incorporation of the world's elements, as long as they do not interfere with our current mental schemes. Anything can be assimilated as long as it does not offend our own being, opinions, habits or fixations. On the contrary, the process of accommodation assumes reaching the limits given by the current mental schemes and consequently, accepting the challenge, a widening, re-dimensioning or elaboration of these. In some cases the individual (this time, the differentiated one) finds himself obliged to insert new mental “files” in order to contain a new domain that cannot be “packed in” in the old schemes. In the case of the differentiation we may talk, thus, about the capacity to recognize the partiality of one's own mental schemes and the fact that they are not, even by far, universally applicable and comprehensive. The accommodation implies understanding reality from the perspective of an inner modesty – the only capable to engage, *à la longue*, on the perfectibility road.

Based on those stated above, we may conclude that the non-differentiation will result in the incapacity of the mental to accommodate to the surrounding reality or, in other words, it will acknowledge the assimilation but oppose it whenever it comes to accommodation. And so, we can only have a deficient, improper, distorted and incomplete adaptation. The existential insertion/implication of an individual with a low level of differentiation is impeded and astray, he cannot interact with the world as it is, but only with what he can perceive and assimilate of it. His permanent emotional outflow keeps him away, cast on an island, prisoner in his own narrow and centripetal circle, always the same in his chronic miss-adaptation. The centre around which the un-differentiation gravitates is a false one, inauthentic in its immediate and future relations, always affected, inadaptable to the continuous change of the world and life. Remarkable, in this case, are the fixities and redundancy of the existential gravitations, always the same, resumed from the same point just to be operated unto the same frustrating results. One might say that we have here a closed system, self-sufficient, lacking the possibility of any new perspective, which just does not let itself monopolised by the human adventure and all its potentialities.

In contrast to all this, the higher differentiation level is situated on an entirely different perspective that would correspond to the Kierkegaardian ethical stage. This level implies a clear choice, an irreversible option made by virtue of some principles, and, from here on, the axiological univocal establishment of a sense through which life gets a *telos* based on a new conception; which inevitably requires sacrifices on the altar of pleasures or immediate satisfactions. For reaching one's goal, one should take precautionary measures, elaborate strategies, work hard, constantly and consistently, and all these for a distant objective. Precisely consistency and perseverance is what is

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 12.

missing on the other levels of differentiation, as they require energetic and mental flow management towards the achieving of one's goal. The differentiated can reach Pascal's conclusion: "We have to know ourselves: if that doesn't help in finding the truth at least will serve adjusting life, and nothing is righter than that."<sup>1</sup> The well known French moralist La Rochefoucauld<sup>2</sup> described (*avant la lettre*) the differentiated: "(...) he always acts equally and with the same inclination, he discerns the distant objective as being present, he understands, imagines the greatest things, he sees and knows the smallest ones; his thoughts are revealed, extended, just and understandable, nothing escapes his knowledge, and that always makes him discover the truth beyond any obscurity that hides it from others."

This is about a dosage of the psychical energy which is not allowed to disappear or to explode and, so, to scatter in the void or in senseless problems and conflicts. This dosage asks for a rigorous and parsimonious management of one's own resources for an adequate and teleological usage.

A great and striking difference between those differentiated and those non-differentiated is that the former are "free from the general human problems" (Bowen). Those undifferentiated are in the situation of attracting misfortunes, bad luck, family problems, financial and social difficulties and so on. It seems as if non-differentiation costs, and the price to pay would be the blows of destiny, *fortuna* becomes *fatum* and, since their orientation is exclusively to the exterior, the guilt will always belong to others, the state, the political party, the neighbour, the husband or the wife and so on. As long as the guilt is somewhere else, in the exterior, outside their being, the ones who have to correct themselves (for being faulty) will always be the others.

Curing non-differentiation happens through sacrifices, by assuming one's loneliness and isolation from the overused and generalised paradigms, the redundant and counter-productive *patterns*, the wide and overspread mental stereotypes, and the atavistic and useless traditions. The non-differentiated ones are not ready yet to pay this price, they are like this: "(...) as usually happens with the patients, they want to be cured but never even think about swallowing a bitter pill."<sup>3</sup> The differentiation, still, implies an asceticism of the Ego, a sacrifice for self-development and evolution on the scale of humanity, because: "Not the refusal of happiness – but of one happiness for another, can make us happier."<sup>4</sup>

Things must be well understood and in the sense that the intellectual system comprises much more than just some notorious views and prejudices (Parmenide's *doxa*). To have opinions not necessarily means thinking and by far not rationally reflected life principles or conceptions. Differentiation means also a detachment between the two systems, so that each works autonomously in its own characteristic and well defined domain.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1976), 64.

<sup>2</sup> La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, 160–161.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Marcusse, *Philosophie des Glücks* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1972), 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.



**Șerban Savu, *Algorithm of Stillness*, 2010, 157 x 134 cm, oil on canvas**

## **Part II**

Another dimension of differentiation presupposes the detachment from one's own parents, which is more of a practical modality. Bowen's recommended methodology, in three steps, the differentiation from one's own parents, and implicitly from familial emotions, seems to be the only way of achieving self differentiation. Though the practical ways of doing this do not have an immediate philosophic interest, we will list them briefly in order to have a better idea on Bowen's vision regarding this important aspect of human evolution.

The first step needed for de-identification of the family emotional network is "the good observer". This is achieved through a necessary detachment in order to see, in a realistic and non-judgemental way, the family's manifestation in its emotional moments. A good observer is able to put within brackets his own emotions regarding the

events (observed fact), in order to remain a simple witness of the events: unbiased and distancing oneself from the emotional whirlpool of the axiological attachments and judgments. Stepping back, withdrawing to a witness' position, the observer leaves aside his/her usual involvement (with opinions coloured by emotions) and meta-positions himself in relation to a situation he is (actually) a part of. Certainly, such detachment is possible only by turning to the domain of the intellectual system at the expense of the emotional system. Exercising such a difficult swing between the systems, the individual realizes the relativity of the emotional values and the possibility of the epistemological leap towards the intellectual reference points, freed of any constraint and affective-emotional dependencies.

The second necessary step for self-differentiation is the establishment of personal relationships (especially in one's own family). This means that two individuals, in a communicational relationship, will not talk about a third person (gossip is excluded) and, also, they will not talk about impersonal issues; and this way relationships are improving and personal development takes place. This is of a great importance especially for one's relationship with one's own parents in order to reveal the emotional problems specific to the relationship.

Un-triangulation (particularly out of emotional situations) represents the third necessary measure, according to Bowen, for the success of self-differentiation. It is characterized by the following aspects:

- seeing and understanding "the triangles" (as mother-father-son) in which the individual grew up and then differentiate from them;
- staying in contact with an emotional problem (between two persons) without taking sides, without attacking or counter-attacking, without defending or justifying oneself;
- permanently having emotionally neutral answers.

This implies that one must remain calm in the middle of a family that is in full emotional storm.

The above prescriptions, although pragmatic in nature, refer, at a closer analysis, to the individual's qualification on the route of self-development, of detachment from the ordinary – *Sosein* –, of "this is how it's done," "this is how it must be," etc. All this conformism of the attitudinal stereotypes ends up between the brackets of some strong intellectual benchmarks that provide the individual's detachment of the ordinary habitual so widespread and "accredited" that it looks almost normal. The more an individual is detached from the emotional network and its knots, the easier will he accomplish the leap into authentic in-dividualization. This settling in one's own place facilitates the approaching or even overlapping of human existence and its essence in a unity without fissures. Once the existence is a priori given, through Bowen's theory we discover a valuable indication of direction with clearly delimited steps regarding the question or problem of the accomplishment of human essence.

### **Part III**

The differentiation has a clear *telos*; Ken Wilber's observation is very pertinent: "Anything that has not been previously differentiated cannot be integrated."<sup>1</sup> The task of differentiation and so that of detachment from the parents, falls within the young adult's

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (Boston: Gateway, 2001), 48.



attributions; he has to break out from the Gordian knot of familial emotions, attachments and dependencies, in order to individualize. Through this problematical process, self-differentiation also becomes a differentiation from one's own childhood; a detachment from the habit of being protected, looked after, helped, supervised and, ultimately, from the habit of being important for someone, of being in the centre of attention. This is a detachment from all these and some others, towards an I-self, towards a self-sufficient being, independent and autonomous, which is able to govern him/her-self fully responsibly. The drama of such an approach is given by its direction: the isolation/alienation. For, as Bowen formulates, the differentiated ones represent only as much as ten percents of the grown-up population. Differentiation inevitably leads to isolation, but this is responsibly assumed. Being differentiated means to be one of the few, as the amalgamation with those at the lower differentiation levels does not work anymore very easily and it may only be possible in a superficial manner.

Through self-differentiation the individual no longer belongs to someone else but he is facing himself, his own rationally filtered values and reference points. In the field of names that we bear, this is the moment of passing from "...s" (family name, the indicative of affiliation) to one's own individual name, by which one delimits himself from one's family system of provenance. This does not mean one's alienation from the family or parents, but that one has earned a place of one's own, as an individual human being or one's own. This is not about breaking off one's relationships, nor about disrupting from one's emotions, but about a detachment that finds its new parameters, personalized according to rationally reflected individual reference points. The relationships with others (including the close ones – family members) get, after such a process, a new dimension due to the achievement of a new level of personal development. We may say that it is a change of paradigm, from the one that defines the child to the one defining the grown up adult. In other words, we may see it as a move, from the disruption of the parental womb of the genus that we belong to by birth, to the settling in the specific, self-defined individual we choose by our personal criteria. This process brings about the accomplishment of the individual and particular human being which, even if preceded by existence (as Sartre saw it), is able to define its essence. Of course, such an approach singles out the individual, with the risk of a certain degree of isolation that every grown up has to face eventually. The benefit of the endeavour of differentiation may be seen in the acquiring of a strongly individualised "monad" with an existential route freed of any stereotypes, traditions, redundancies and common places of the ordinary *doxas*.

Only through the difficult process of differentiating can one reach a state of being eschewed by general human problems. Non-differentiation is only the expression of a child's dependency (of any age, including *puer aeternus*) on his parents (the fact that they are alive or interiorized by their bearer is irrelevant). For gregariousness, besides its advantages, also has its price: it makes "children" well beyond the legal age grow up in the shadow of a familial homeostatic system and its principles. But as long as the individual remains a part of his family (and of his dependence on his family) and he is not himself, he will have to cope with failure, misfortunes, problems and permanent difficulties of adequate integration. All failures will get their revenge somewhere-sometime, because there are hindrances in the way of human fulfilment, stops on the route of self-perfection, voids in the field of existence, white spots on the consciousness that continuously searches itself.

Let me make this clear, this is not to say that the differentiated ones do not have problems, it is just that they have no problem with their problems. They are capable to reframe the problems and understand them as life challenges, using them towards their own development, extension of their limits and self-deepening. Whereas the non-differentiated individuals only complain whenever they have the occasion – *lamentation* – the differentiated individuals dare to face the problem, becoming a sort of “toreadors” in life’s arena. But accepting the challenge creates the premises of a positive attitude, full of self-confidence for solving or resolving the problems. Differentiation also means reaching a state of inner maturity that leaves behind the child’s (and, why not, childish) thinking and feeling (implicitly dependent). Non-differentiation, on the contrary, remains attached to declared, traditional, and widely used values, not having the courage to throw themselves in the whirlpool of self-discovery.

#### **Part IV**

Bowen presents us a differentiation scale from one to one hundred, but refrains from speaking about differentiation above level seventy five. He only states that the individuals above that score are highly exceptional, peaks of humanity like Pythagoras, Socrates, Buddha, Lao Tze or Jesus. But, what more differentiation can still be achieved once the two systems are already working autonomously and independently? Or, what else can we do after reaching the superior level of differentiation?

There is here a new stage that can only be understood by having a leap to another realm. The differentiation between the systems, once performed, cannot show any other progress, it’s a “job done” that has achieved its purpose. Yet, beyond this purpose, the differentiation between the emotional and intellectual systems,, there is something more, something that goes beyond the two systems, and, paradoxically, places itself right *between* the two of them. The one who realises that between the two systems there is an oscillation from one set of values to another, can also understand that *between* there is the Self (in Jung’s understanding the centre of the being, the source and target of all energies and impulses). Resettling in its own origins, the Ego actually transcends the dichotomy inherent in the polarity of the two systems. It finds thus itself, becoming an “I myself” for whom the two systems are just attributes.

The immanent ego accomplishes thus its transcendence; it surpasses itself to re-find its authenticity in and through itself. It re-finds itself in the Self, somewhere between the emotional and the intellectual and even beyond the two. By exhausting the realm of the two systems of values (emotional and intellectual) their limits are reached and precisely by that, they are to be surpassed. The ego is no longer in one system or the other, but it can perceive itself freed of emotional or/and intellectual determinants. In this stage, the subject meets itself on a meta-position beyond the biological, physiological or psychological determinants of the emotional system, but also beyond the psycho-*logos* of the intellectual system. From this position, the subject realises the necessity, but also the sufficiency of the reference points, norms and values of both systems, understanding, in the same time, his self-referential ubiquity and uniqueness. The ego is no longer polarized (the differentiated) or monopolized (the un-differentiated) but equal to itself, settled in its own essence. If differentiation (level fifty to seventy five) managed to parenthesize the emotional side and conceal it at least temporarily, the superior level (seventy five to one hundred) can overcome the dimensions and concerns characteristic to the intellectual system.

The constant permutations caused by consciousness between the emotional and the intellectual, inevitably lead to the realization of the limits of this approach and the discovery of a sub-sistent or a sub-stance permanently present, existent and on its own, in a space void of the attributes of the discussed systems. The consciousness sets up the possibility and ability to station in this (apparently) narrow space, but with a hard-to-express deepness of a self-perception. Applying an *epoché*, that is, putting within brackets the immediate data (continuously supplied either by the emotional or by the intellectual) represents precisely the consciousness' leap into its own pure substance. Having become a perceptive substance that is auto-perceiving, the consciousness accomplishes an *Aufhebung*, in the sense of switching from the binary and dichotomic logic of the oscillation between two systems of values towards a synthesis, independent of the immediate data. Of course that the rift with the immediate data of consciousness needs a serious level of abstraction that can be done through the re-bounding of the Ego that perceives itself and is centred on its own essence. From such a perspective the consciousness finds itself suspended between two worlds, positioned in an "inter-planetary realm", raised in the fugal point of all its dimensions and potentialities (innate or acquired).

Through such an independent approach, in the end, one reaches a *coincidentia oppositorum* whose epitome is Cusanus'<sup>1</sup> *docta ignorantia*, that he defined as: "Even the most zealous of human beings cannot raise to a superior degree of wisdom, except if he is highly *doctus* in his own ignorance; and we are the more *doctus* the more we realize that we are ignorant."

We are talking here about an ignorance that goes very deep; one that does not ignore itself but one that ignores, or parenthesizes, a whole cognitive universe accumulated during one's lifetime due to education, environment, self-education and all elements imprinted in ourselves through social pressure, constant and conditioning: beliefs, myths, explicative theories, maybe scientific, customary laws, truisms, stereotypes, presumptions, *doxas* etc. The result of this social pressure is that the individual starts to believe himself *doctus*, but he is hindered to realize how limited and limitative his knowledge, approach and reasons are. To be *doctus* inevitably leads to a self-satisfaction followed by the inflation of the ego that closes access of the individual to a superior knowledge (of self) that one finds in a continuous process of self-exploration. This stage corresponds to the adult that has not done enough efforts toward personal differentiation, who is intellectually self-sufficient, filled with opinions, with the egotism of the one who hasn't got anything left to learn and progress towards self-development.

The *docta ignorantia* however manages to surpass the haughty pride of the experienced, accomplishing, in this way, the limitations of *doxas* and even of the judgments of the intellectual system. The intellectual system has a major role compared to the emotional contamination, but its principles only represent a threshold that can be surpassed towards an emotional and intellectual transcendence. From this perspective, the ignorance, elevated at its stage of being *doctus*, makes a paradigmatic leap to a superior level of polarity yielded by the functioning of the two systems. Leaving behind reference points, tradition or values, the *docta ignorantia* is happy with itself and its own

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolaus von Kues, *Philosophisch-theologische Werke*, Band I (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002), 9.

contents, being detached from the transience of exterior stimuli or even the mental processing of these. Settling itself in ignoring the *doctus*, the consciousness re-finds itself in its a-priori, which used to give to it, in the most subtle way possible, all the conditions for the possibility of sensible and rational knowledge.

Leaving behind (traditional) recognized values is a serious step towards independency, but this is hard to get and needs support as if, being unfamiliar and unconfident with itself, it would make itself frangible; however: “Our possible independence is actually a dependence on transcendence.”<sup>1</sup> And this need of transcendence can prove to be the only salvation in front of the insinuation and attacks of existential anxiety. The insidious presence of the anxiety can be counteracted and compensated in an adequate way, only by the permanent call to the transcendent as a reference base solidly anchored beyond the ordinary mundane (where the two systems discussed are placed). The shifting of the reference points of consciousness within itself, by the solid anchoring in the core of being, trans-substantiates the anguishing impulses that are so stressful in normal life. From here comes the interest in the appeal to superior differentiation on Bowen’s scale. The human being may live freed from the whispers of anxiety if he can oppose to it a solid rooting in *beyond* the instant, conditional and mediated.

Anxiety is, in the end, a “driver” of our attitudes, of our ways to deal with life’s problems, implying the inherent capabilities of our being. A weak self-differentiation pushes the cause of problems outwards, to the apparently objective given (system, politics, society, injustice, etc.), while a differentiated individual will try to face the problem, to evaluate the situation correctly and realistically, to find solutions (without whining) or to develop applicable strategies, objective and in real time. It can be observed that the differentiated individual has the necessary mechanisms to handle difficult situations and issues, precisely because he can disregard the anguishing stimuli, keeping his clear judgment. Of course this does not mean to eliminate the anxiety in any way, but to work with it in an integrative way, in full understanding of the general situation. Only a high differentiation can facilitate the equitable balance of the subjective (inner, personal, haunted by chronic anxiety) with the objective (outer, external, impersonal and situational). Precisely the positioning between the two reference points allows working with them, finding the possible common points, clarifying the connection bridges, forging some unexpected perspective that, by extracting it of the usual system of values, could give a viable way, adequate to the inner and outer data of the problem.

By the integration of anxiety, the Ego meets the Self, standing face to face with the unconditional imperative of its own being, of the personal *Dasein* (with own being, after Heidegger). It is over there, far from *Sosein* (the social, conventional being of the individual) where the clear laws of *man* (it is) are active; these are losing their imperative and monopolist character and they can be interrogated, verified, acknowledged or denied. Leaving them, the subject becomes himself because he has to become and be himself. This “dimension” of consciousness is even beyond the intellectual system. Only this way can the conditional of some notorious value systems be overtaken, to meet the conditional of the un-conditional, situated in the transcendent. This un-conditional offers subsistence to

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Unabhängigkeit des philosophierenden Menschen* (München: dtv, 1997), 104.

the conditionings, and, in the same time, it fixates its scopes; the un-conditional is ultimately the base and *telos* of life.

We have here the meeting of Bowen's system of self differentiation with Jung's concept of achieving of Self; in his theory Jung stated that this operation is a (possible) duty for the second half of life. Surpassing the individualization, or achieving individuality (as a duty for the first half of life), as an operation of constructing the Ego, is performed, in the Swiss psychiatrist's view, through the individuation which is understood as the circumambulating path towards one's Self.

## **Conclusions**

We have presented here above some possible readings of a theory of psychotherapeutic origin. Certainly, these interpretations are not exhaustive, but allow for interpretive developments as well as a widening of the reading itself or its connection to other directions of philosophical reflection. What concerned us was the development, on four levels of understanding, of the concept of self differentiation that affords an anthropologic reference of an existential character.

By doing this interpretative "dance" I think that the initial theory finds itself enriched by some aspects which, because of the stress on the therapeutic aspect, the American author neglected or even ignored. Important, as a reflection theme, is not only the modality of performing this (operating it in practice), but also the possibility to widen the comprehension area with challenging extensions, often fertile and clarifying. This is not usually done at a psychotherapist's level – confined within his practice and his clients' problems – but from a position away from the consultation room, detached from the pragmatic and transposed in the cognitive domain of theoretical developments. The fertility of this research is, of course, facilitated by the good knowledge of the object of reflection, but also by the possibility of keeping it within mental brackets to allow, precisely on this basis, further elaborations of a theoretical manner and exploration of possibilities offered by a specific material.

Using materials coming from "non-classical" approaches and bringing them in the field of philosophical reflection can only enhance its horizon which, already from its origin, claimed itself exhaustive. There is a while now since the philosophic act does not follow the direction of constructing a theoretical system, but is satisfied with explorations, often punctual, which propose to reframe and resize the themes in order to enhance them with aspects that bring new perspective in the cognition field. Such an approach has to be flexible to match the subject, has to be fresh, in the sense of opening towards the new and has to be cleared of any prejudices that might delineate, in a strict way, what is worth and what is not worth considered by the philosopher. This intellectual flexibility is the more desirable the more postmodernism has got us used to its unconventional approaches, centred on subjects of a smaller extent as explorations and clarifications restricted to partial areas.