

## Chapter 6 The Triune Mind

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*“Our psyche is set up in accord with the structure of the universe, and what happens in the macrocosm likewise happens in the infinitesimal and most subjective reaches of the psyche.” — C.G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

Although the concept of the triune mind is not new, it is perhaps one of the most important psychological understandings for us to grasp, allowing us to create a true and solid foundation for our conscious evolution. It is essential to recognize that each person exists as the unity of three domains of mind: the subconscious, conscious and superconscious. It is a simple conceptualization, the terms are familiar to many of us and are common in various psychological writings, yet it is not yet fully embodied in our understanding of the human psyche. It may be a disservice to our understanding of the self to ignore the triune mind construct. After all how we perceive and understand the mind generates attitudes, choices and lifegoals which shape not only our experience of mind but of life itself.

The triune mind, which is the natural state of mind for humankind, can be seen to contain the full spectrum of any experience in consciousness from the most sublime mystical states (experiences of absolute boundless, changeless non-dual awareness), to our most primitive instinctual impulses and potentially destructive desires. The postulation of the triune mind is not a metaphor but a living reality that each person experiences. Evidence supporting the triune mind is rooted in the psychological research of the past 150 years. [1](#), [2](#)

The triune mind perspective also allows for a resolution of the “mind-body problem,” constructed by Descartes, which questions the extent to which the mind and brain are related. In looking at the mind as a unification of various states of consciousness, we eliminate the need to differentiate between mind and brain. From the triune mind perspective, all sets of experience coexist within the mind as a whole. The range of experience from the superconscious to the subconscious encompasses all levels of experience, including the body. Thus, there is no dichotomy since the triune mind functions as one continuum.

The triune mind allows for integration in all areas of life and the value of this viewpoint is that it creates a subjective experience of flow, harmony and balance by significantly reducing the need for resistance, suppression and repression of important elements of the psyche. Living in the experience of openness to the three essential aspects of mind generates joy, unique currents of grace and, in time, a creative synergy. This is important because humankind tends to suppress either or both the superconscious and subconscious elements of our psyches. You may have felt this yourself, with a sense that something is missing from your overall perception of life.

## An Historical Perspective

Given how natural a concept the triune mind is, it may seem odd that it has not taken deeper root in psychology. Unfortunately, this is because time honored teachings have neglected one or more of its parts.

The philosopher Plato was one of the first to delineate the triple nature of the human psyche in his tripartite theory of soul. He primarily wrote about his ideas in the *Republic* and the *Phaedra* where he used the allegory of the chariot. He viewed the psyche as having three parts: the logical (*logistikon*), spirited (*thymos*) and the appetitive (*epithymetikon*). These correspond and are generally analogous to the modern conception of the superconscious, conscious and subconscious dimensions of mind.



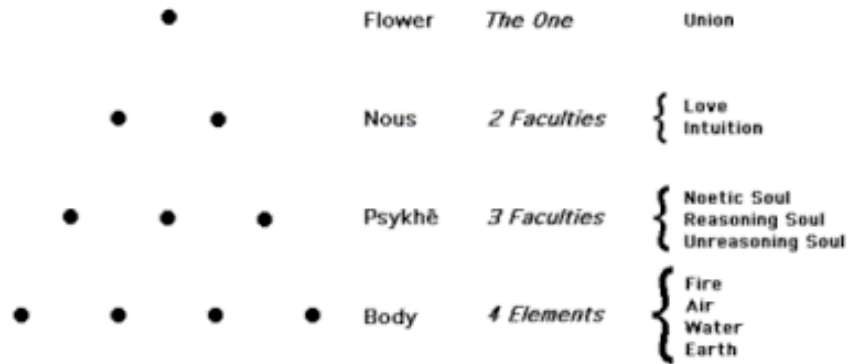
“Plato believed in an immortal soul that is able to exist in separation from the body.”<sup>3</sup> This immortal or rational part (soul) found its source in God and he viewed it as immaterial and metaphysical in nature. It could not be perceived by the senses, much like the superconscious. The part corresponding to the subconscious was described by Plato as the animal part and the seat of bodily appetites, irrational passions and symbolized by a black horse. The part analogous to the conscious mind was spirited (*thymos*) seen as honorable and noble, having a moral impulse and depicted as a white horse. According to Plato, these two horses or aspects of mind were often in conflict. The charioteer (*logistikon*) was to tame the horses and guide the chariot to its destination, which was the realization of god.<sup>4</sup>

Plotinus, a philosopher in the Hellenistic tradition, continued the view of Plato of a triune mind with different language and described the parts as the noetic self, the dianoetic self, and the physical self.

*“The first is the noetic self... and is experienced when we pursue the goods of intellect in the intelligible world. The second is the dianoetic self... and is experienced when we pursue the goods of the soul in the sensible world. The third is the physical self... and is experienced when we pursue the goods of the body in the sensible world. Though the soul-body composite remains at the level of nature, the person can self-identify with the physical self, the dianoetic self, or the noetic self depending on the way of life he leads.”<sup>5</sup>*

A view of the triune mind can also be seen in this diagram (source unknown). This is a Neopythagorean perspective of the human mind (Nous) with elements of psyche including: 1) a noetic soul, 2) a reasoning soul and 3) an unreasoning soul. These correspond to the superconscious, conscious and subconscious mind.

## Pythagorean Tetractys



Pythagorean Tetractys <sup>6</sup>

Plato was not the only philosopher of mind in the Axial Age to recognize the tripartite division of the mind. An interesting theoretical model of the triune mind was developed by Canadian Buddhist scholar Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri. His work on the Triune Mind <sup>7</sup> attempted to clarify the three terms used by the Buddha for consciousness, namely, Mano, Citta and Viññāṇa. To formalize his definitions, he looked into the fields of Pali Buddhism, neuroscience, anthropology, linguistics, and embryology, among others. The overall thrust of this research moved toward scientifically refining our understanding of consciousness and assimilating functions of the mind with structures of the brain. His work not only supports the premise of a three-part consciousness, but also addresses the mind-body problem as discussed earlier.

While the concepts of consciousness of Plato, the Neoplatonists and Buddhists are not identical to our contemporary psychological understandings, there is an analogous and corresponding relationship between these historical views and our current understanding of the human psyche being composed of three distinct elements. This concept has been around since humans first began questioning such things and continues to be explored by scientists, philosophers, and theologians alike.

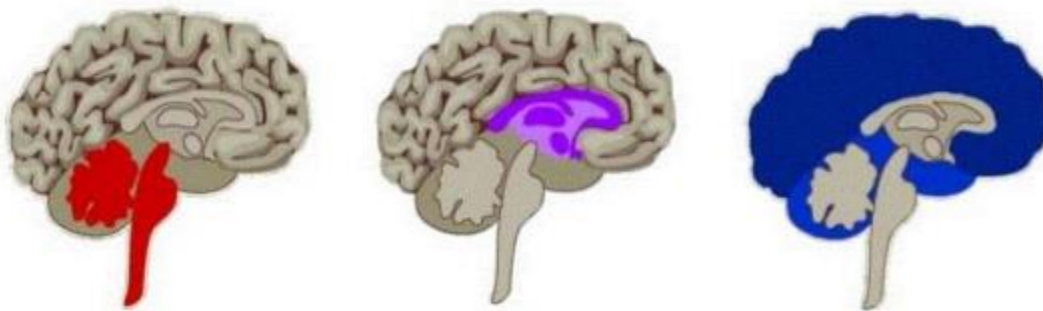
### The Triune Brain

Let us also note that conceiving the human psyche as “three in one” was extended into the structure of the brain in the 1960s by neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean. In *The Triune Brain in Evolution* <sup>8</sup> he formulated that the brain consisted of the reptilian complex, the paleomammalian complex or limbic system and the neomammalian complex or neo cortex which developed sequentially in the course of human evolution. There is not a clear relationship between the neocortex and the superconscious mind. However, it was suggested by Glynda-Lee Hoffman in *The Secret Dowry of Eve* <sup>9</sup> that the prefrontal cortex function is very involved in the integration of brain functions and the personality which is often seen as a

necessary precursor to transpersonal awareness. [10](#)

## Triune Brain Theory

Lizard Brain	Mammal Brain	Human Brain
Brain stem & cerebellum	Limbic System	Neocortex
Fight or flight	Emotions, memories, habits	Language, abstract thought, imagination, consciousness
Autopilot	Decisions	Reasons, rationalizes



The Triune Brain in Evolution, Paul MacLean, 1960

### Models of the Mind

The mind is a vast area of study. There are numerous systems, models, theories and philosophies of mind which have developed over several thousand years with the aim of helping us understand our states of awareness, our various mental capacities, and even that thorny issue of “What is consciousness?” We won’t go into detail here on each of these, but if you’re interested in learning more, you’ll find an excellent historical overview and primer on this topic in David Chalmers *Philosophy of Mind*.<sup>11</sup> Chalmers explores what the mind is, the relationship between the mind and the brain, how the mind represents the world, and the nature of the self.

For the purpose of simplicity and clarity we will use the lens of two dominant paradigms for understanding the mind: **the psychological** and **the spiritual**. From these views of the psyche we can gain insight into why the triune mind has not become a more predominate theory before now. What it boils down to is that many historical and contemporary views ignore one or more parts of the mind.

To put it simply, the psychological paradigm has tended to discount or repress the superconscious mind while the spiritual paradigm has tended to disparage or repress the subconscious mind. Fortunately, we now find ourselves in a time where these biases are beginning to dissolve and change. After all, we don't ignore a part of the body when it is sick or hurt. Likewise, we must take the entirety of the mind into account to understand it effectively.

## The Psychological View

In the psychological view the emphasis historically has been on the conscious and subconscious mind as the domains in which to explore, understand and transform. With the emergence of depth, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, this dual model has begun to shift with increasing focus on the superconscious mind as a valid dimension of human experience.

An enduring image of this dual model is seen in the supposed words of Sigmund Freud that "the mind is like an iceberg; it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above the water"... meaning that the conscious mind is a fraction in comparison to the functioning and potency of 85% of the unconscious mind. Some have suggested that Freud's model of mind was a "model that represented a tripartite division of the mental apparatus into three major structures or agencies, which he called id, ego, and superego" <sup>12</sup> This may look like a version of the triune mind at first glance. However, since the id and superego were both operating within the subconscious the model was basically a dual model of the conscious and unconscious mind.

In looking at dual-mind models, there is also the elegant and more lifelike metaphor from Johnathan Haidt (reference) that "The mind is divided into parts that sometimes conflict. Like a rider on the back of an elephant, the conscious, reasoning part of the mind has only limited control of what the elephant does." <sup>13</sup> This image conveys a more cooperative and dynamic relationship between the conscious and subconscious mind as well as the raw power and awe at the might and strength of the unconscious. <sup>14</sup> Yet the superconscious mind is missing in this metaphor as well.

It is not simply that Freud and Haidt ignored the existence of the superconscious. Freud in particular made noted references to the superconscious domain of the mind, but emphatically negated its importance. While he did not use the term *superconscious* directly, he wrote much on the religious experience, which he variously termed "an illusion"... "a childhood neurosis" <sup>15</sup>. He said, "*If one attempts to assign to religion its place in man's evolution, it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity.*" <sup>16</sup>

The aversion to the superconscious was described by the French Psychologist Robert Desoille in 1945 with the term "repression of the sublime" which was explained and clarified by the Psychosynthesis writer Frank Haronian in a monogram of the same title. <sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this



repression of the superconscious has been a notable feature of psychological perspectives up to the present day. This is perhaps due to the fact that psychology, rooted in the sciences, attempts to manage backlash from religious fervor. This idea was voiced by Albert Ellis, the father of rational emotive therapy, in *Why Some Therapies Don't Work: The Dangers of Transpersonal Psychology*. "Most transpersonalists honestly believe in the psychic phenomena they supposedly experience – including astral projection, extrasensory perception, encounters with people from outer space, and past-life experiences. Many of these devout believers are psychotic, but most probably neurotically deluded. Wishing very strongly to have supernatural experiences, they creatively manage to have them." <sup>18</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed more recently by Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology. He emphasizes our capacity for love, courage, compassion, creativity, self-knowledge, self-control, and wisdom. Interestingly, these are arguably qualities of higher consciousness, yet Seligman also rejects humanistic and, by implication, transpersonal psychology. He describes them as "narcissistic, lacking a research tradition and being fundamentally anti-scientific." <sup>19</sup>

Most notably, this impulse to reject a "transpersonal identity" as a valid realm of human experience shows up today in the absence of a unique transpersonal psychology division within the American Psychological Association. Currently there is a division within the APA for the study of religious experience, but not a transpersonal psychology division per se. The purpose of APA Division 36 (Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality) is "to understand the significance of religion and spirituality in people's lives." This is an important and useful objective in understanding the mind and the scope of human experience but it is one step removed from recognizing and validating the study of the superconscious as an aspect of mind in individuals. More recently, however, a Transpersonal Psychology Special Interest Group was subsumed under *Division 32: Society for Humanistic Psychology*. It was instituted after a three-year effort to become a unique division failed in 1986, precipitated in part when Rollo May disputed the conceptual foundations of transpersonal psychology, to be fair a position he later modified. <sup>20 21</sup>

### **Healthy apprehensions in the psychological paradigm to the superconscious mind**

Psychology has been loath to cross too far into the realm of the superconscious for a couple of reasons. As transpersonal experiences are commonly spoken about and explored in religion, psychology wanted to differentiate itself from the spiritual and religious domains so that it could be studied in the paradigm of science. In addition, there could be a deep fear of the harm and dangers of the cruelty and dogmatism associated with religion in the collective subconscious of psychology. Evidence of harm caused in the name of religion and within religious institutions over the past two millennia have done nothing to quell this apprehension. The history of the explanation of the human mind prior to the renaissance is not a pretty picture, as it was often based on superstition and fear, especially in the Western world. It is understandable that the establishment of psychology, as a unique scientific field, attempted to approach the knowledge and experience of consciousness free of any religious remnants.

There was a concern about how to approach the superconscious mind scientifically. In addition to the transpersonal connection with religion, the superconscious has historically also been the

territory of philosophy and metaphysics. It is a vast and complex subject not readily available to measurable observation. In a recent article by Aryeh Lazar, he asks “what is spirituality?” <sup>22</sup> He concluded that “there is little agreement in the literature as to what spirituality actually is. However, almost all researchers appear to agree that spirituality is a multi-dimensional construct.”

Fortunately, the value of the superconscious mind is beginning to become more apparent in the psychological field. This is especially true with the increased popularity of meditation and mindfulness and the understanding that these transpersonal methods are tremendously helpful in healing the fractured and wounded elements of the psyche.

## The Spiritual View

In contrast to the psychological lens, the spiritual view acknowledges the transpersonal, but still often presents a dualistic model. In the religious and spiritual paradigm of the mind, the focus has been on the divine self (Buddha mind, Christ consciousness or *soul*) and the personality or ego self. There is the superconscious mind and the conscious mind, also described as the higher self and lower self. The ego self and its reflection of subconscious elements of mind is typically seen as an illusion or fetter to achieving spiritual realization or communion with the divine, and subsequently is disregarded as unnecessary or even harmful. One popular American spiritual teacher describes the personality as the “wretched lower self.” Historically the trajectory of spiritual development in major spiritual traditions has been to ignore or repress the subconscious as the “false ego” and to practice “divine indifference.”

Some examples of the view that the personality or personal self is intrinsically flawed, harmful and an impediment to realizing the higher or spiritual self can be seen in these passages from various spiritual teachers of different traditions. These views refer to the ego, but intrinsically also refer to the subconscious life of a person. These attitudes highlight the often unintegrated, impulsive and destructive aspects of the psyche, or in a word the “shadow.” This view that the ego is a reflection of subconscious elements is corroborated by neuroscience research that reveals that what we refer to as our identity is almost entirely based on unconscious brain processes. <sup>23</sup>

### Spiritual Teachers from Various Traditions

"Love and ego cannot go together. Knowledge and ego go together perfectly well, but love and ego cannot go together, not at all." "...nature is always beautiful, ego always ugly." Osho Rajneesh <sup>24</sup>

"The ego is the father of all lies. It is a lie to begin with, for your ego is not real and does not exist." "...the ego is the enemy of what you want and of what you have" Jacob Israel <sup>25</sup>

"the *ego*" must be put to shame, curbed or *killed*" *Yogananda* <sup>26</sup>

“The hallucination of separateness prevents one from seeing that to cherish the ego is to cherish misery. We do not realize that our so-called love and concern for the individual is simply the other face of our own fear of death or rejection.” Alan Watts [27](#)

As you can see from these passages, the spiritual view tends to disparage the subconscious aspects of the mind for the sake of the transpersonal. The value of this view is that it has been useful and necessary when people do not have the psychological resources to care for the subconscious. Although these statements about the ego (subconscious mind) are harsh, there is a truth that the separative self needs to be suppressed at times, such as when there is a desire to kill, rape, steal or engage in other harmful behaviors.

However, there are now many resources necessary to care for the subconscious. Bringing an awareness that is mindful and compassionate to the subconscious often leads to its healthy transformation. Given this, it is incumbent upon us to begin incorporating and integrating all aspects of the mind. Only in doing so can we hope to learn what the totality of the mind has to offer and encourage the evolution of a co-creative synergy of the three aspects of mind.

### **Metaphor for the Triune Mind**

Now that we’ve seen what other models are lacking, it is valuable to look at a more cohesive and holistic view of the mind’s dimensions. An imaginative metaphor for the triune mind is the Symphony Orchestra. The value of this metaphor is in its correspondence to the human character in its multiplicity, complexity and yet integral functioning. Like the triune mind, the symphony orchestra is able to create “works of art” so beautiful that their music is often a catalyst for transcendent and peak experiences.



[28](#)

In this metaphor, the subconscious mind is represented by the musicians playing their instruments. They are the generators and creators of the sound, and the quality of music created depends on their skillfulness and cooperativeness with other performers in the orchestra. The performers themselves correspond to the sub selves or subparts of the subconscious. The conductor corresponds to the conscious mind and has the job of leading and guiding the players of the orchestra. The conductor functions in analogous ways to the conscious self, in that the conductor makes important choices for the entire orchestra and observes and evaluates the performance of the players. One of the most important functions of the conscious self is that it orchestrates the life of the person and makes choices based on the input, deliberations and experiences of both the subconscious and superconscious selves. The



superconscious is both the beauty and score of the music that can lift and transform the life of both the players and the listeners. [29](#)

## **The Value of the Triune Mind Context**

Allow me to suggest some significant benefits which can arise from this orientation to the human psyche. First and foremost, it allows for a more integrated and stable personality with less internal conflict and polarization. The conscious self is not actively ignoring or suppressing the mental and emotional currents of the subconscious or the superconscious. It allows for the disparate parts and domains of human experience to coexist and co-create in a non-suppressive unity, which subsequently releases large amounts of emotional and thought energies. The stability and freedom generated from this integration can contribute significantly to reduced levels of worry and melancholy and increased levels of clarity, insightfulness and self-regulation. With a decrease in subjective conflict there is increased potential for more stable and satisfying relationships and less need to project unresolved conflict into our human exchanges. This in turn contributes to more stable and integrative relationships in families, communities, societies and ultimately to the evolution of planetary consciousness.

## **Stages of Integration of the triune mind**

It is one thing to see and recognize the soundness of this model of understanding the human psyche. Better yet is the ability to be present to these three dimensions as a living synthesis of our core experience of consciousness. Even with an understanding of our triune mind there often exists a degree of disharmony and misrelation between the three which can impede our human capacities of co-creative intelligence, compassionate love and the vital fiery presence of life itself. Beyond the recognition phase, allow me to suggest two remaining stages of conscious embodiment of the triune mind: integration and synthesis.

### **Integration Stage**

Integration is the phase in which the subconscious, conscious and superconscious are brought into harmonious recognition, mutual respect and collaboration. It ideally includes a conscious choice to have a whole new relationship between the aspects of the triune mind based on mutual support, love, friendship, and co-creative expression. It is the process of bringing together these three aspects of self into a single system that functions in harmony rather than conflict. This phase often requires patience from the subconscious and conscious selves as the triune mind learns this new way of relating.

This process requires time, attention and practices which expand our awareness and inclusion of our subconscious and superconscious life. For instance, psychotherapies such as Voice Dialogue, Psychosynthesis and Internal Family Systems as well as meditation practices such as mindfulness and self-compassion support this integration. Some people seem to easily navigate into or to have been born into this integration phase. For most people, however, much effort is necessary and it can take years or decades of practice and discipline for passage into this stage. It has been suggested that people who are expressing this phase are called “cultural creatives” and are part of the Integral Culture. [30](#)

## Synthesis stage

For this phase most of the work of integration has been accomplished. In the synthesis stage there is an appreciable presence of creative intelligence, loving compassion and life force of pure being of the superconscious mind. These qualitative aspects of consciousness are available with minimal tension or resistance from the conscious or subconscious mind. The person's deepest life purpose or spiritual will has primacy as a vital force from the superconscious and is flowing freely through and supported by the conscious and subconscious mind. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs this stage would correspond to self-actualization or self-transcendence. People who embody the phase of synthesis may include Nelson Mandela, Annie Besant, Desmond Tutu, Peace Pilgrim, the Dalai Lama, Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra.

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## END NOTES

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