**Body, Soul and the Circle of ‘Depression’**

**Peter Wilberg**

‘Depression’ is both an everyday word and also a medical term. Like many words that have become part of general usage (‘libido’, ‘unconscious’, ‘energy’, ‘quantum leap’) they derive from specialist and supposedly scientific terminologies. Like other words that form part of our now everyday lexicon of medical ‘pathologies’, the term *depression* can be likened to a circle inscribed around some aspect of our lived experience that we have no *pre-prescribed* name for, and yet feel or suffer (*pathein*) as a sense of dis-ease. Each time a medical patient, therapy or counselling client goes to see and be heard by a professional, they bear with them an unspoken but often desperate message: “Will someone *please* see and hear *me* and not just circle, tick off and seek to treat my symptoms?” Yet as Marianne Broug writes, though the patient or client may have no pre-prescribed name for their inwardly felt dis-ease, each of the countless different approaches to medical or psychological therapy, not least in the ‘treatment’ of ‘depression’ effectively “…*prescribes a circle* around the patient, client or analysand and their symptoms, and then seeks to explain and treat the client’s suffering in terms of other things that are contained within that circle.”

*…By accounting for things in terms of other things in their circle people assume that they are explaining what things actually are. By accounting for depression in terms of the brain and its chemicals a psychiatrist assumes they have explained what depression is. By accounting for a human being in terms of cells and blood and bones a doctor assumes they have explained what a human being actually is. By accounting for suffering in terms of a failure of social relationships, a social worker assumes they have explained what suffering actually is. ,,Each believes that only their circle has the greatest validity or truth. Each one looks at the circles of the others and criticises or denounces them on the basis of their own circle. Some use their criticism of other circles to define their own. A doctor may think that delving into the Unconscious to treat Depression is as ridiculous as if one were to delve into the Unconscious to treat a broken leg. A psychologist may think that treating Depression like a broken leg is like treating a person only as a body and forgetting totally about their mind. A social worker may think that passing yellow light over a person clearly denies the necessity for interpersonal and social functioning or planning. A psychoanalyst may think a behavioural psychologist’s approach is too shallow too affect any lasting change….Sometimes the circles overlap. A psychologist may suggest that a client continue to see their psychiatrist and take medication. A social worker may work closely with a psychiatrist. A social worker may practise some of the techniques used by a psychologist. Some psychotherapists even practise what they call Eclectic Psychotherapy. These psychotherapists take whatever they think works best out of many different approaches. However large, they still draw a circle around a client.”*

A word is a circle drawn round some aspect of our lived experience. So is a poem or book, theory or methodology, scientific or religious world outlook, philosophy or praxis, institution or culture. So is a painting, even though it might be framed in a square. So is any medium of expression, whether speech or writing, poetry or painting. A concept is such a circle.

Ultimately everything at all – everything that is *actual* in our experience - can be seen as a circle, bringing to expression something that previously existed only as a potential element of our awareness. There is a fundamental and primordial dilemma or paradox connected with all the countless circles that constitute the domain of the Actual. On the one hand they ‘actualise’ a potentiality, giving it is a clear, rounded and bounded form. In doing so they create a space or ‘field’ of awareness within which *further potentialities* can be actualised, like other circles that can be drawn within the space of a circle. For a boundary, even a closed boundary is, as Heidegger remarked something that *lets into its bounds*. And the essence of space is “that which is let into its bounds.”

There is nothing wrong therefore, with the bounded circles of the Actual. Without them nothing actual could exist. Even more fundamentally, there would be no space for the actualisation of any potentialities, for space is precisely that which “lets into its bounds”. On the other hand a boundary can also *limit* - restrictin*g* the actualisation of further potentials within the space that it bounds. For the human being, the bounding wheel or cycle of birth and death, may seem to be such a confining circle of this sort. Death confronts us with a boundary, a limit to the potentials we can actualise in this life - any life. Physical existence as such *is* such a framework or circle. Our physical bodies are such circles – not only possessing a limited life-span in *time* but also seeming to bound our awareness in a more or less tight or restrictive *space* – one which can be felt as separating us from other people and the world, and restricting our awareness to the framework of the five senses.

For the human being, what we circle with the word ‘depression’ is one of several natural human responses to *any* bounding ‘circle’ or *framework* of experiencing that *seems to limit our* *awareness* or *place a block on* *action* - preventing the further fulfilment or actualisation or fulfilment of our unbounded potentialities of being. The depressive process is one of ‘withdrawal’ – feeling ourselves drawn ever deeper and ‘down’ and ‘into’ ourselves - into the bounded space of awareness within which we feel ourselves confined. At the same time the depressive process is also a healing journey – a journey towards the innermost centre or core of our being. The felt *heaviness* of soul that accompanies depressive ‘withdrawal’ is our way of feeling the immense *gravitational pull* of our core. Yet the ‘black hole’ of depression that leads us inward towards this core is not the dead end it seems to be – for if we follow the journey inwards, surrendering completely to the gravitational pull of our core, we discover that that core is indeed a type of “black hole” in the astrophysical sense - a tunnel or ‘wormhole’ that can lead us out of the circle in which we feel confined and return us to the *unbounded space* surrounding it. This space is the field of *unbounded potentiality* within which all circles come to be as *actual* things and beings. If we enter this field we discover it is already full of countless other circles - that is not empty space but a fullness in which all our seemingly unfulfilled potentialities are *constantly being actualised* – if not within the boundaries of our current life-world then in other realities, other lives and life-worlds.

In the most fundamental terms, ‘circles’ are not simply the experiential life-worlds in which we dwell. They are what we *are* and what everything *is* – both as a being and as a body. For what is a body but a boundary, and what is a ‘being’ except a bounded or ‘unit’ identity – what Seth calls a “consciousness unit”? Paradoxically however, the bodily boundary that constitutes the circumference of every being or consciousness unit is nothing fixed or finite. It is both outwardly and inwardly *unbounded*, for like a circle drawn on a piece of paper it is defined not just by the seemingly bounded space it circumscribes but also by the unbounded space around it. And like the space around it, even the seemingly bounded space it circumscribes is in reality *unbounded* space of potentiality. Each such circle creates a space for the emergence of ‘smaller’ circles or consciousness units within. Each takes shape within the inner space of ‘larger’ identities or consciousness units. Each can expand or contract, overlap or merge with other circles to create new spaces or fields within which other circles can emerge. *Each* circle within the space of a larger circle is inwardly connected with every other simply by virtue of being an emergent expression of the same bounded field of potentiality. *All* circles or consciousness units are connected with one another by virtue of being expressions of the same ultimate, *unbounded* field of potentiality from which they each emerge.

The very boundary of consciousness unit is not a sealed or static boundary but a *permeable* and *dynamic* boundary linking its own inwardness and outwardness. In essence, that boundary which we represent as a ‘circle’ is a boundary between the *actuality* of any thing and the further *potentialities* that it makes *room* for and serves as *womb* for - that it can let into or let emerge within its bounds.

The boundary of *actuality* and *potentiality* is at the same time a boundary of *awareness* and *action*. For what it bounds is a space of *awareness* in which potentialities not only lie latent but come to expression through a process of actualisation – through *action*. It is this *process of actualisation* that the Greeks first called *energein*, making nonsense of all scientific and New Age notions of ‘energy’ which treat it as if it were some already actualised ‘thing’.

The Greek word for ‘potentiality’ was *dynamis*. The boundary of the circle is a ‘dynamic’ one because it is a boundary between actuality and potentiality (*dynami*s), just as it is also and between *awareness* of potentiality and its actualisation (*energeia*). This dynamic boundary of every circle is the very essence of life. It is also what constitutes the circle that is individualised consciousness – what Seth calls “consciousness of self”. That is because what we call *potentialities*, not being anything objective or actual, can have reality only *in* subjective awareness. ***Any potentiality we are aware of is a potentiality of awareness – a potential mode of experiencing*.** As such, they can only be understood as potentialities *of* awareness – possible modes of experiencing limited only by that field-boundary of awareness and action which we experience as both our *body* and as our very *self*.

Every act of every being - from the simplest of movements by single-celled organism to the composition of a symphony is therefore also essentially an *expressive* act – an event of actualisation which gives birth to a new mode of experiencing. In doing so, however, it leaves countless *other* possible modes of experiencing still unactualised or potential. It is each unit identity’s highly individualised consciousness of this *fundamental dilemma* that makes it conscious of itself *as* boundary of actuality and potentiality – as a circle, as body and as a ‘self’. All circles or unit identities, from the ‘lowest’, seemingly insentient particle matter to the ‘highest’ consciousnesses conceivable, can be justifiably called “consciousness units” for this reason. For whether in a highly differentiated or merely rudimentary way, each is imbued with a consciousness of “self” – that dynamic boundary between their own actuality and their own unbounded potentialities, all of which are potentialities of awareness.

All creativity is expressive of the creator’s ‘self’ only because it is an expression of the fundamental paradox or dilemma that *is* the essence of all life, creativity and “consciousness of self”. The paradox lies in the creator’s consciousness that in seeking to *express* and *experience* new modes of awareness, every mode of *expression* chosen and actualised will leave other *potential* modes of expression and experience *unactualised.* That is why when we look at a great painting or listen to a great piece of music we do not simply see or hear the composer ‘expressing themselves’. For the ‘self’ that they express is nothing but their own individualised experience of the creative ‘struggle’ - the *paradox* that lies at the heart of the creative *process.* And what makes a work of art ‘great’ is one that does more than simply express just the creator’s actual ‘self’ or ‘experience’. Instead, it succeeds in hinting at and communicating all the still *unactualised* and *unexpressed* depths of their awareness, and all the still *unactualised* and *unexpressed* richness of their creativity.

The creator *is* only creative, because, like someone going through the depressive process, he or she is faced with a primary dilemma or conflict between a *seemingly* limited and limiting ‘circle’ or framework of expression – for example a particular familial, social and cultural community, a particular language, genre or terminology, a particular artistic medium or scientific methodology, or a limited range of tools and instruments – and the unbounded potentialities of awareness they sense within themselves. This fundamental creative dilemma, named in occult terminology as ‘The Law of Limitation’, and represented also as a circle – ‘The Ring Pass Not’ - can be denied only at the *expense* of creative expression, life and consciousness of self. But where is the culture or religion that has not used the *circle* – whether in the form of the ‘Wheel of Life’ or ‘Ring of Power’, *chakra* or *mandala* - to represent this creative dilemma - the deepest mystery of Life and Creation? The circle *rings out* from every culture, past and present, heard even as a sacred sound shaped in its likeness – the primordial sound of the letter ‘O’.

The German word *gering* (‘narrow’, ‘limited’, ‘of small proportions’) is an intensifier of *Ring*. But how narrow, limiting or confining a ring or circle is depends entirely on how much space we let into its bounds, and how much space we experience around it. That applies particularly to our own minds and bodies. For the modern mind concepts are just words or terms of reference - supposed, like silvered spheres, to merely reflect a world of things around them. As circles or spheres, they are not felt as having any hidden *inwardness* of potential meaning let alone an unbounded inwardness. For this is an inwardness that only opens up when we begin to question their accepted use and meaning. The modern mind is a *disembodied* mind, quite unaware that the only space in which we can directly sense the deeper inner meaning or sense of *words* is the same space as that of our own inwardly sensed *body*. That is why it can only use language to label and ‘run rings’ round our own and other people’s experience, confining it in circles of concepts whose own inwardness remains unquestioned and unexplored.

The essential movement that constitutes the depressive process - letting ourselves be drawn inwards to and ultimately *through* the ‘black hole’ at our core – is one way of freeing our awareness from this sort of mental labelling and confinement, but only to the extent that we experience this movement as occurring not just in our minds but as a movement that takes us ever deeper down into the sensed inner spaces of awareness within our *bodies*. The alternative movement and necessary *balance* to the depressive process - letting ourselves be passively *being drawn in* toward the core of our inwardly sensed body - is for us to actively breathe or *draw in* awareness from its sensory circumference. For this we need to learn to feel the spaces we are aware of *around* *our bodies* as spaces that are no less spaces *of* awareness, as the mental or emotional spaces we feel ourselves to inhabit *within our bodies*. Unable to do so, unable to *be* our own sensed *bodily* surface or circumference, we experience the spaces of awareness both around and within it as empty spaces full of potential threats. The inner truth that *actuality trembles with potentiality* is transformed into trembling *anxiety* or breath-stopping *panic*. The inner truth that our awareness is both outwardly and inwardly unbounded is either experienced as ‘agoraphobia’ or not-experienced and felt as ‘claustrophobia’.

The problem is not merely that psychiatrists and psychologists seem capable only of circumscribing and seeking to explain their patients’ symptoms within the circle of their own diagnostic frameworks. The even deeper and broader problem is that like others who claim to possess ‘scientific’ explanations of phenomena, they are blind to their own framework of thought – they simply do not see how trapped they are in their own circles, how they could expand their circles to embrace or merge with others. Nor are they in any way conscious of the circles that they themselves *are.*

*Physics as physics can make no assertions about physics. All the assertions of physics operate after the manner of physics. Physics is not itself the object of possible physical experiment.*

Martin Heidegger

The same applies to psychology, medicine, genetics and all other specialist sciences. That is why current ‘science’, according to Heidegger is “…to a quite unimaginable degree, through and through dogmatic; dealing with un-thought-through conceptions and preconceptions.” And why “It is of the highest importance that there be thinking physicians, who are not of a mind to leave the field for the scientific technologists.” He takes genetic medicine as an example:

*The significance, indeed the necessity of the genetic approach is clear to everyone. It seems self-evident. But it suffers from a deficit which is all too easily and therefore all too often overlooked. To be in a position to explain an illness genetically, we need first of all to explain what the illness in itself is. It can be that a true understanding of the essence of an illness…prohibits all causal-genetic explanation….Those who wish to stick rigidly to genetic explanation, without first of all clarifying the essence of that which they wish to explain, can be compared to people who wish to reach a goal, without first of all bringing this goal in view. All explanation reaches only so far as the explication of that which is to be explained.*

Here I have not attempted to offer a new explanation of the ‘causes’ of depression or anxiety, let alone delineate a new treatment or ‘cure’, but rather suggested a new understanding of what ‘depression’ and ‘anxiety’ essentially *are*. I believe that such understandings – and only such understandings – have an innately healing value, not by putting human beings in circles, but by helping them to *be* the circles that they *are*. Such understandings are called ‘phenomenological’. That is because they rest on the understanding that all so-called ‘objective’ phenomena emerge and take shape within fields of awareness that we perceive or feel only as empty space. In this respect, all phenomena are comparable to circles - not circles that *we* draw on a sheet of blank paper, but rather circles which are akin to the phenomenon of corn circles appearing in a field. Not circles that appear because some being, human or extra-terrestrial, has created them in a cornfield, but because they are the actualisation of potentialities latent within *awareness* *fields*. Circles that possess consciousness of ‘self’ because as phenomena they are a *self-*manifestation of those fields. ‘Phenomenology’ too, of course, is a word and a specialist philosophical term. In this sense, it is also draws a conceptual circle around certain approaches to philosophy, psychology and science as such. The difference – and it is a big one – is only this. *Phenomenology is a circle conscious of itself.*

Seth describes the essence of all ‘illness’ as impeded or blocked *action*. By this I understand actualities of any sort that serve to block the further *actualisation* of further potentials in an individual’s life-world. This leads to a conflicting impulses in the individual, whose *consciousness of self* may find itself split and torn between *conformist identification* with actualities of their life-world and *destructive attacks* on them – or alternatively may *alternate* between the two. Blocked action may also find *somatic* embodiment – for example in a cancerous multiplication of cells that serves as the fleshly metaphor of an unactualised multiplicity of still undifferentiated potentials. Cancer, as Seth suggest, can be seen as biological symbol of the social psychosis we call capitalism - where belief in unlimited economic ‘growth’ for its own sake results in a massive overproduction of identical commodities, comparable to identical cells. Then there are individuals who seek to express their sensed potentialities of being through the so-called ‘manic defence’ - attempting to act out a delusion of limitless possibility in *denial* of actual limitations of their life-world – or the so-called ‘schizoid’ defence in which the *embodiment* of an individuals inner potentials is replaced by intellectual fantasies. Only when these possibilities or fantasies are revealed as illusory does the ‘bipolar’ or ‘schizoid’ individual re-enter the depressive process - but in a way that may never be followed through and completed. For were it to be so, the individual would discover that the realm of *unbounded potentiality* into which it leads is at the same time a realm of *unbounded actuality* in which all potentialities are constantly *being* actualised – albeit *not* in a way possible within the limitations of a single life-world or dimension of reality.

The point is not to break out of the cycles or circles of depression that seem to confine us, to break them down or let them break us down. Following the depressive process or cycle means breaking *in* to ‘the circle of depression’ – letting ourselves more fully *into* the space of awareness it bounds. That space is essentially the sensed inner space of our own body. Only by maintaining a felt sense of the larger circle and space of awareness that constitutes our *body as a whole* can we recognise all the thoughts and emotions, sensations and impulses we feel within it as circles within circles – something that we actually sense only though a *localised region or part of our body*. If we constantly remind ourselves that ‘I am this body a whole’ - and not just this region or part - we are at the same time reminding ourselves that ‘I am this *self* as a whole’ and not just the part of it that finds expression in any particular thoughts and emotions, sensations and impulses – however intense. In this way we regain a sense of our body as a containing boundary or womb space of awareness that offers us a safe place both to feel and to be – allowing us to feel even our most infantile emotions and *bear* them within that womb, whilst at the same time fully *bodying* our most mature and *rounded* self, our whole self or soul.

Throughout the ages the *soul* and the soul world been pictured as a ring of circles within circles, or spheres within spheres. *Bodyhood* is simply the felt boundary of those circles or spheres of awareness. How we feel the psychological ‘spaces’ we are - the qualities and ‘confines’ of our own souls – is inseparable from how we feel the confines and ‘spaces’, outer and inner, of our own bodies. The depressive process, like meditation, is a movement that can takes us back to an *embodied awareness* of the soul spaces in which alone we dwell and feel ourselves as beings.

Modern man must first and above all find his way back into the full breadth of the space proper to his essence.

Where is the boundary of the body?…The boundary…is the horizon of being in which I dwell. That is why the boundary of my bodying shifts constantly with the varying range and expanse of my being.

Every feeling is an embodiment attuned in this or that way, a mood that embodies in this or that way.

Martin Heidegger

An encircling mood or disposition, of whatever ‘depressive’ or ‘anxious’ quality, can either be felt to “confine man in his corporeality as in a prison” or can “carry him though corporeality as one of the paths leading out of it.” This depends entirely on how fully we are able to feel that mood or disposition in a bodily way, and do so with our body as a whole – our whole self or soul.

© Peter Wilberg 2004

**Bibliography:**

Broug, Marianne (unpublished)

Heidegger, Martin *The Principle of Reason*

Heidegger, Martin *The Question Concerning Technology*

Levin, David Michael *The Body’s Recollection of Being*

Roberts, Jane *The Seth Material*

Wilberg, Peter *Head, Heart and Hara*

Wilberg, Peter *Intoduction to Inner Bodywork* (see [www.thenewtherapy.org](http://www.thenewtherapy.org) )

Wilberg, Peter *Introduction to The New Yoga* (unpublished)

Wilberg, Peter *The Little Black Book of Negative Thinking*

(see [www.meaningof](http://www.meaningof) depression.com)