



**California Institute  
of Integral Studies**

**Digital Commons @ CIIS**

---

International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive

---

Summer 2020

## **Book Review: The Way of Psychosynthesis, by Petra Guggisberg Nocelli**

Catherine Ann Lombard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

---

## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Way of Psychosynthesis*

(2017; Easton, Maryland; Synthesis Insights)

by Petra Guggisberg Nocelli

Reviewed by

*Catherine Ann Lombard*

University of Twente

Enschede, the Netherlands

I am often met with a blank stare whenever I say I am a psychosynthesis psychologist. Despite it being one of the first integrative transpersonal psychologies, psychosynthesis and its Italian visionary Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974) are relatively unknown. Trying to summarize what psychosynthesis is and who Assagioli was to laypersons and psychologists alike can be daunting. Thankfully, *The Way of Psychosynthesis* succeeds in doing all this and more.

To date, few books have fully explored psychosynthesis concepts, the historical context in which it has developed and flourished, and the life of its founder. *The Way of Psychosynthesis* by Petra Guggisberg Nocelli is the first comprehensive book to tackle this enormous task. After 17 years of research, Guggisberg Nocelli confirms that the book was “born out of an attempt to answer a question often put to me by friends, patients, scholars and therapists of other orientations: What is psychosynthesis?” (p. v). To answer this question, Guggisberg Nocelli has fully examined all aspects of psychosynthesis from its origins and theory to its techniques and therapeutic applications. First published in Italian in 2011 as a product of her dissertation, the newly released English edition is a huge gift to the English-speaking world as it includes research that has been published only in Italian during the past decades, both by Assagioli and his principal collaborators. As a result, *The Way of Psychosynthesis* provides a framework to comprehend the depth and extent of Assagioli’s work.

In Part One of *The Way of Psychosynthesis*, Guggisberg Nocelli describes the life and work of Assagioli, which—most notably—is the first biography to appear in English. Part Two traces how psychosynthesis came to be an original perspective within the five forces of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology: behaviorism, psychoanalysis, the humanistic-existential psychology, transpersonal psychology and the new frontiers of *psychoenergetics*, which Assagioli defined as a synthesis of all existing universal forces, including subatomic physics alongside biological, psychic and transpersonal energies. The final Parts Three and Four closely examine Assagioli’s most significant concepts, models, and core ideas. Concepts like *subpersonalities*, *self-identification*, the *I-Self* relationship, the *superconscious*, *partial* and *complete synthesis*, personal vs. spiritual psychosynthesis, the will and human typology are all explained in detail. The book can be read in a progressive manner or, as Guggisberg Nocelli suggests, readers can “readily consult it as a manual, in its individual parts, chapters or paragraphs, according to their needs and interests at the moment” (p. vi).

Guggisberg Nocelli’s breadth of exploration of the current debates in psychology as well as the psychosynthesis literature is impressive. She also is able to systematically and clearly introduce all these ideas to the novice psychologist as well as retain the attention of the expert reader. Bearing in mind that Assagioli always insisted that psychosynthesis is a psychological practice to be experienced, reading *The Way of Psychosynthesis* is a true experience

of the intellectual foundations as well as the recent developments of thought in psychosynthesis. For example, in 1933, Assagioli first published his model of the human psyche, commonly referred to as the *egg-diagram*, which he described as “a conception of the constitution of the human being in his living concrete reality” (Assagioli, 2000, p. 14). His model provides an abstract formula for the human psyche – a working model for the structure, mechanisms, and processes triggering personal and spiritual growth. However, Guggisberg Nocelli does not shy away from pointing out the limits of the Assagioli’s model along with new developments and evolutionary changes. For example, she presents modifications proposed by John Firman, one of the founders of Psychosynthesis Palo Alto and coauthor of numerous books (e.g., Firman & Gila, 1997, 2002, 2010) as well as additions offered by Alberto Alberti, neuropsychiatrist, psychotherapist, author, and former student and collaborator of Assagioli’s (e.g., Alberti, 2008).

Readily affordable in paperback, *The Way of Psychosynthesis* is a worthy investment and, notwithstanding its 334 pages, is student-friendly. Academic teachers of transpersonal psychology, in particular, would benefit from having this valuable resource in their library.

My criticism of this otherwise well-produced book is with some of its references as well as unfortunate mistakes in its translation. Non-existent words like “theirselves” appear more than once and some syntaxes, like the sentence on page 225 that seems to indicate Maslow is still alive and defending his stance, are grammatically incorrect. As a researcher myself, I felt particularly bothered by those occasions in the text where original English-language quotes that were translated into Italian for the 2011 edition were translated back into English for this book. Many of the quotes in *The Way of Psychosynthesis*—including those of Assagioli, who often first published in English—do not match their original source, while many of the references (including book titles and page numbers) appear in Italian editions instead of their original English publications. Finally, readers and researchers alike would find a detailed index, which is now missing, extremely useful.

*The Way of Psychosynthesis* offers a unique and expansive enough overview of psychosynthesis that these flaws can be forgiven and overlooked. Without a doubt, *The Way of Psychosynthesis* is a definitive handbook for psychosynthesis practitioners. But perhaps more importantly, Guggisberg Nocelli has compiled and created a complete introduction to psychosynthesis for those unfamiliar with Assagioli’s philosophical, spiritual and psychological approach to human psychological and spiritual development.

## References

- Assagioli, R. (2000). *Psychosynthesis: A collection of basic writings*. Amherst, MA: The Synthesis Center.
- Firman, J., & Gila A. (1997). *The primal wound: A transpersonal view of trauma, addiction, and growth*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Firman, J., & Gila, A. (2002). *Psychosynthesis: A psychology of the spirit*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Firman, J., & Gila, A. (2010). *A psychotherapy of love: Psychosynthesis in practice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Alberti, A. (2008). *Psicosintesi. Una cura per l'anima*. Florence, Italy: L'Uomo.

## About the Author

**Petra Guggisberg Nocelli** is a psychotherapist, psychosynthesis practitioner, trainer and author. She is a member of the Swiss Association of Psychotherapists, the Institute of Psychosynthesis and the Italian Society for Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy. Petra holds courses and seminars for various organizations and educational programs. She lives in Switzerland, on the outskirts of Lugano with her husband and two children.

## About the Reviewer

**Catherine Ann Lombard, MA**, is a psychosynthesis psychologist, practitioner, and researcher. She received her MA in Psychosynthesis Psychology from the Institute of Psychosynthesis, London,

affiliated with Middlesex University, London. Catherine has had numerous essays and scientific articles published on psychosynthesis. Her latest book is *A Free and Wild Creature: Women, Service and Motherhood*. She lives in Umbria, Italy with her husband where they grow most of their own food, write, and live quietly in nature. You can follow her bimonthly blog at LoveAndWill.com.

### **About the Journal**

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).