

# Individuation

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Jung's thinking about the Self and its dynamic of individuation separates Jungian analytical psychology from other psychoanalytical schools. He uses the concept of the Self to describe his understanding of who we are and the concept of individuation to describe the process by which we can fulfil our potential to become all that we can be.

## The Self

In the Freudian/Kleinian psychoanalytic tradition, the self is described as a by-product of ego development. By contrast, for Jung the self is present before the ego; it is primary and it is the ego that develops from it. The self retains its mystery. We can never fully know or embrace it because we are dependent upon the relatively inferior ego to perceive it. Perhaps this struggle in apprehension has led to very different understandings of the self's qualities. Jungian analytical psychology sees the self as many things including psychic structure, developmental process, transcendental postulate, affective experience and archetype. It has been depicted as the totality of body and mind, the God image, the experience of overpowering feelings, the union of opposites and a dynamic force which pilots the individual on his/her journey through life. This latter idea is quintessentially Jungian, for even though other psychoanalysts have talked about the self in a similar way, Freudian psychoanalysis still largely sees the self as a structure within the mind, similar to an object representation, and not as a teleological agency.

## Individuation

Individuation describes how this agency works. Jung saw it as the process of self realisation, the discovery and experience of meaning and purpose in life; the means by which one finds oneself and becomes who one really is. It depends upon the interplay and synthesis of opposites e.g. conscious and unconscious, personal and collective, psyche and soma, divine and human, life and death. Analysis can be seen as an individuation process. It not only fosters but accelerates individuation and creates conditions in the relationship between patient and analyst which offer the possibility for rarefied experiences and transformation of self which otherwise may not happen. This is because the analytic situation allows both participants to join in a quest for the truth; to express and experience the self in ways which are often prohibited by the compromises made in the service of social acceptance in non-analytic relationships.

The concept of individuation is the cornerstone of Jung's psychology. Here are some of the salient features of his thinking on this topic and some of the questions that arise.

## Collective and personal

Jung (1935) stressed that individuation requires the integration of both collective and personal elements. The neurotic condition is one where the collective is denied, the psychotic where the personal is denied and archetypal inflation can overwhelm the ego.

If someone is over concerned with his own personal affairs and status he is in danger of becoming too identified with his persona e.g. the school teacher who is didactic at home, or

the analyst who never stops analysing. Living such a blinkered life, focussed on short-sighted and egocentric goals, denies the value of the collective. This can lead to a neurotic narcissistic alienation from a deeper sense of oneself and one's place in society. In psychosis there is an absorption by the collective, where the fascination with the internal world and its processes can lead to a loss of interest in the external personal world of relationships and work.

As Jung (1935) puts it:

"The aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand and the suggestive power of primordial images on the other." (para. 269)

## Two halves of life

Fordham (1985) described how individuation begins in infancy, but Jung saw it predominantly as a development in the second half of life. In the first half, one is concerned with expanding the ego and "adaptation to collective norms", such as building personal social status. The second half of life is concerned with coming to terms with death, finding meaning in living and the unique part each one of us plays in the world. It is in the vicissitudes of negotiating the individuation process that Jung saw the major causes of neurosis. In the young, neurosis comes from a fear of engaging with life; in the old, it comes from clinging to an outdated youthful attitude and shrinking back from death.

## Relationship

The self is relational. Individuation is dependent upon relationships with others. Jung went so far as to say:

*"The self is relatedness... The self only exists inasmuch as you appear. Not that you are, but that you do the self. The self appears in your deeds and deeds always mean relationship."* (Jung 1935-39, p. 73)

However, in his autobiography (1961), Jung presents us with a conundrum when he also states that the goal of individuation is detachment from emotional relationships. Emotional relationships he defines as tethered because they are relationships of desire with expectations of others. He recommends that in order to attain objectivity and selfhood, one needs to withdraw the projections inherent in emotional ties to others. In this light, analysis could be seen as the playing out of emotional relationships between analyst and patient with a view to facilitating the reintroduction of projections in the resolution of the transference/countertransference. Jung implies this when he describes the transference phenomenon as, without doubt, one of the most important syndromes in the process of individuation.

## State or process?

Another area of confusion is whether Jung considered individuation to be a state, capable of being attained, or an on-going process. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (ibid, p188), he declared that finding the mandala, as an expression of the self, was for him, attaining the ultimate.

Jung (1961, p. 276) also cryptically refers to the 'completion' of his own individuation. The objectivity he experienced in a dream about his wife after her death he described as part of a "completed individuation".

However, Jung (1939, para 520) perceived self realisation as different from Eastern mystical ideas of achieving Nirvana or Samadhi (a state of perfection attained by yogis). The “universal consciousness” such mystics describe, he understood as equivalent to unconsciousness, where the unconscious has swallowed up ego-consciousness. He states that “universal consciousness” is a contradiction in terms since exclusion and discrimination are at the root of everything that lays claim to the name “consciousness”. Jung concedes that yogis can achieve a remarkable state of extension of consciousness where subject and object are almost completely identical.

However he also argues that individuation is an active on-going process and not a static state when he proclaims:

*“Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too – as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once.”* (ibid, para 288)

Individuation can be seen as a process that is never fully completed but is one that can generate experiences, which feel, momentarily, as if it has been attained.

### **The prevalence of individuation**

How widespread is individuation? Is it universal and commonplace or aristocratic – a vocation for the elite? Of course this depends upon what we mean by it. Jung calls individuation an unconscious natural spontaneous process but also a relatively rare one, something:

*“only experienced by those who have gone through the wearisome but indispensable business of coming to terms with the unconscious components of the personality.”* (1954, para 430)

He also stated that it is a border-line phenomenon which needs special conditions in order to become conscious (1935, para 431). This is a different type of individuation from that described by Fordham.

Michael Fordham, perhaps more than any other post-Jungian, has contributed to our understanding of individuation as a process that starts in infancy and not just in the latter half of life. Fordham’s field theory of the self, which describes how the self as a primary integrate develops through the process of deintegration and reintegration throughout the whole of life, is very useful for our comprehension of the normal process of maturation. He claims that this basic underlying process of individuation is identical in childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Fordham, 1985).

However, Jung was also talking about something other than the normal day to day development of ego and self. He adumbrates:

*“There is no linear evolution; there is only circumambulation of the self. Uniform development exists, at most, only at the beginning; later everything points towards the centre.”* (Jung 1961, p. 188)

This is an important distinction. Individuation requires the development of ego, but it is not synonymous with it. Although the process of deintegration and reintegration occurs throughout life, Jung argued that there is a functional difference in the underlying process of individuation in later life as opposed to childhood. He was trying to emphasise the

difference between early development, which is mainly concerned with the establishment of ego, and later individuation which involves a surrendering of the ego's dominion. Jung complained that people's understanding of the individuation process often confuses the coming of the ego into consciousness with the subsequent identification of the ego with the Self:

*"Individuation is then nothing but ego-centredness and autoeroticism."* (Jung 1954, para 432)

Individuation requires the ego to enter into service of the Self to facilitate its expression and realisation.

Jung has been criticised for an over-optimistic view of the self and of individuation. Some have protested that Jung's view is too wholesome and positive, not recognising the self's failings.

### **Anti-individuation**

Our clinical work reminds us that the Self is not always experienced as benign and positive. It can be self-regulating and yet the experience of it can also be very destructive. The ego needs to be sufficiently strong to withstand the coming into awareness of aspects of the unconscious, which is the greater part of the self. Ego strength is dependent upon how successful mother and baby have been in creating a facilitating environment to manage anxieties, surrender omnipotent fantasies, form symbols, establish, mourn and repair object relationships.

We can find ourselves with those whose ego has been unable to successfully manage this emergence of the self. In these cases, individuation has become distorted or stuck. If there is an environmental or constitutional deficit, the primary self may feel under attack from outside and within. Defences of the self may be mobilised which can lead to narcissistic false self organisation. Here we are confronted with anti-individuation forces. Instead of the formation and nurturing of relationships, the lifeblood of individuation, we see a psychic retreat into infantile omnipotence. It is then necessary for the analytic work to be focussed on creating conditions whereby the ego can be supported and facilitated in its development.

### **Self and ego**

It can be useful, in clinical practice, to think of the work as symbolic of the struggle between the Self and ego and to see the task as engaging with this individuation/anti-individuation battle of opposites. The ego, of both analyst and patient, acts as if it wants to remain in control, to expand and promote itself at the expense of other aspects of the personality. It has a quality which seems manufactured or man made. The Self, by contrast feels like a force of nature, it seems to have a wider view, a perspective that the ego can't understand and is in the service of a greater truth.

The Self, in its quest for consciousness, requires the surrendering of ego inflation – the narcissistic delusion that the ego is the self. Although purposive, the Self can be experienced as violent and destructive if the ego is unable to facilitate its expression. This may result in an individuation crisis for both analyst and patient.

## Self and God

Jung (1942a) saw the ego in service to the Self – its representative on earth. The Self he called the Greater Personality, ultimately unknowable, linked to a universal sense of cosmic unity – not surprisingly he related to it as the image of God within us. He went further and described self realisation, as seen in religious or metaphysical terms, as amounting to God's incarnation. Jung saw God, in psychological terms, as an archetype in that there has to be something in the psyche which resonates with the manifold images of God throughout history. However, he qualifies himself by saying:

*"Psychology...is not in a position to make metaphysical statements. It can only establish that the symbolism of psychic wholeness coincides with the God-image, but it can never prove that the God-image is God himself, or that the self takes the place of God."*

(Jung, 1951: para. 308)

Jung (1931) contends that we often mistake the ego for the Self because of that bias which makes us all live from the ego, a bias which comes from overvaluation of the conscious mind. The ego has to suffer to allow the Self to express itself. Jung sees the hero myth at work in nearly all individuation processes. He admits that:

*"Individuation is an heroic and often tragic task, the most difficult of all, it involves suffering, a passion of the ego: the ordinary empirical man we once were is burdened with the fate of losing himself in a greater dimension and being robbed of his fancied freedom of will. He suffers, so to speak, from the violence done to him by the self."*

(1942a, para. 233)

He adds:

*"Human nature has an invincible dread of becoming more conscious of itself. What nevertheless drives us to it is the self which demands sacrifice by sacrificing itself to us."*

(Jung 1942, para. 400)

Individuation could therefore be understood as the drive of the Self to consciousness.

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