

Ego, self, and mental health

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There is at present no agreement about the nature of mental health. Perhaps there never will be, but even so it must inevitably be a state in which processes in the psyche are satisfactorily regulated. Both the ego and the self as theoretical entities define ways in which distinguishable psychic structures and functions are subjected to such regulation, and this occasion provides an opportunity to review some tentative formulations of their interaction. Especially so since this subject has been of increasing interest to analytical psychologists.

The concept of the ego is related not only to consciousness and so to perception, but also to the organization of psychic contents; it is a perceptual system which has affective roots in the unconscious. It was defined by Jung as the centre of consciousness (i.e. of conscious systems) and in so doing he emphasized the relative independence which the ego could achieve. The organized state to which it usually refers is indicated in the *Collected Works* by the use of the term 'conscious mind'. Consciousness is not, however, the only attribute of the ego, which is the agent of repression as well, and can also be combined with the idea of defensive systems (Jung, 1959*a*, p. 288)† which ward off external and internal dangers. Parts of it can be repressed whilst other parts are essentially unconscious; thus Jung's formulations recognize an unconscious ego though for a number of reasons he gave it a different name—the shadow.‡ In this he fol-

lows his general contention that unconscious contents can best be expressed in metaphorical terms. The relation between the ego and its shadow is important for the stability of the whole psychic organism in that if the two become separated the ego is seriously weakened; likewise if the ego is not sufficiently differentiated from the shadow it cannot perform its characteristic integrative function as the organizer of those psychic systems having consciousness as their main characteristic. The shadow extends far into the unconscious and since it has an archetypal foundation, the ego must be part of and interrelated directly or indirectly to all the other psychic systems. In its genesis the ego is conceived to emerge from the collective unconscious, and it is evident that since the archetypal structures of which the collective unconscious is composed are conceived to be innate, part of the ego itself may well be inherited. The other consideration needing mention here is that the perceptual and integrative functions of the ego become, if not in infancy yet relatively soon, differentiated from the essentially unconscious archetypal structures. Both the ego and the archetypes are therefore systems representing parts of the psyche as a whole and subject to the purposive aims of the organism acting as a whole.

In early infancy the psyche is at first assumed to be relatively homogeneous, since little structure is perceptible, but gradually it becomes differentiated in various ways. For instance, the distinction between the external and internal worlds is only gradually built up; it is the developed ego which discriminates between the two and exerts a controlling, mediating and modifying influence over each. Because, however, of essential differences between the ego and the archetypes, the part of the ego

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† The passage is more explicit in the original version published in *The Integration of the Personality* (1940, p. 27).

‡ This is, I believe, a legitimate interpretation of Jung's views, but to establish it would need a separate paper.

which gives rise to consciousness cannot integrate the archetypes into itself any more than it can integrate the external world. It is held that the two functional systems, the conscious ego and the archetypes, as parts of a total organism, relate to each other in a compensating manner which has been interestingly compared to the homeostatic systems of the body (cf. Storr, 1955).

The consideration that the ego cannot assimilate the archetypes gives rise to the reflexion: are the archetypes themselves organized in themselves and in relation to each other, and if so how? Part of the answer to this question is not difficult: in as much as they conform to instinctual patterns they must be largely self-regulating, yet the archetypes are more than instincts and appear to be at the roots of acausal, unpredictable but none the less meaningful connexions (Jung, 1960*a*), their activity is not just instinctual in the modern sense. Turning to the possible ways the archetypes may be related to each other, we at once think of the possibility of a hierarchy subservient to a central organizing system.

Many years ago Jung concluded from empirical observation that such a central system could be inferred and he called it the self; it is interesting that he was, in 1958 (1958*a*, p. 176), prepared to consider that its organic substrate might be located in the brain stem.* At first he defined the self as the integrate of the ego and the archetypes. This definition may be expressed as an equation:

$$\text{self} = \text{ego} + \text{archetypes.} \dagger$$

The basis for his formulations lay in clinical observation but was confirmed by extensive

* Compare the theories of neurophysiologists concerning the function of the reticular formation.

† This equation could be expanded as follows: $\text{self} = (\text{ego} + \text{shadow archetype}) + (n-1) \text{ archetypes}$, where n is the total number of archetypes. For present purposes, however, the approximate formula is all that is required.

studies in comparative religion and folklore; recently Layard (1959) has been able to use this theory in his studies of the structure of savage societies in Malekula. The clinical evidence is based on the observation of dream imagery and on the images revealed in active imagination (Jung, 1960*b*). The procedure was phenomenological and comparative—not analytic. Jung studied the behaviour of images in many dream series to isolate those which he conceived refer to a psychic totality with a centre. The best-documented image is the mandala, but in *Aion* (1959*b*) he gives a list of others which he recognizes as able to function as images of the self.

In order to follow the literature which is confusing to some readers, it is necessary to grasp that Jung frequently combines metaphor and abstract concept, for reasons which cannot be gone into here at any length. But it can be said that metaphorical statements have advantages over abstract statements in that they refer directly to experience of 'unconscious' and preconscious imagery. An abstract formulation being divested of affect ceases to be phenomenological and so represents a disjunction in terms of wholeness. The abstract statement is designed to divest experience of its imagery and has the aim of orientating observers, defining research areas, and making a jumping-off ground for them.

From this position it is important to understand that none of the images listed by Jung are the equivalent of the abstract concept—self. This is so because if the self be the whole there is nothing with which to observe its manifestations. In a recent paper Plaut (1959) is puzzled by this and follows Neumann in asking (p. 49): 'Who does the experiencing of this pre-ego condition[?]' This question is irrelevant if the principles just enunciated be grasped. The images are the best possible representation of a wholeness which can only be observed if a part of the ego be split off. It is therefore better to refer as Jung sometimes does to the archetypal image of the self when referring to phenomena, and to the self when an abstract idea is being considered.

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Many of Jung's statements are advisedly partly metaphorical and partly abstract thinking, but it is usually possible to disentangle the two without difficulty when necessary to do so. Nevertheless, in referring to the relation between the ego and the self he creates a quandary which has led, as we shall see, to a paradox now capable of solution. In discussing the relation of ego to self in a passage that has stimulated several writers including myself (Fordham, 1957, 1958) and Edinger (1960), Jung says (1958*b*, p. 259): 'The term "self" seemed to me a suitable one for [the] unconscious substrate, whose actual exponent in consciousness is the ego. The ego stands to the self as the moved to the mover, or as object to subject, because the determining factors which radiate out from the self surround the ego on all sides and are therefore supraordinate to it. The self, like the unconscious [archetypes], is an *a priori* existent out of which the ego evolves. It is, so to speak, an unconscious prefiguration of the ego.'

Here the metaphor of a 'moved and mover' is carried forward into abstract thinking ('the self... is an *a priori* existent out of which the ego evolves'). There is, however, an evident theoretical difficulty when he treats the self and ego as separate entities and further when the self and the unconscious are both considered as if they could be separated from each other and compared. The apparently theoretical statement is a disguised metaphor.

If the ego is defined as part of the self it cannot be a separate entity as Jung implies. Neumann in a theoretical paper (1955) has gone further and defined a 'self-ego axis'. He has abstracted Jung's metaphor and treated the self and ego as two separated entities, as Jung inferred in the quotation cited above. To apply the equation, this means: self \neq ego + unconscious, and implies that self = unconscious. It follows that either the definition of the self must be changed or else the statement needs to be taken out of the theoretical field and regarded as a metaphor. Edinger (1960) recognizes the difficulty and tries to resolve it by calling it a paradox, but

this only indicates that there is a need to take a further step and develop the theory of the whole and its parts.

The 'paradox' may be removed by considering the self not so much as a total integrate, i.e. conscious and unconscious, but as an ordered number of systems that result from division of the integrate into part systems all subject to the functioning of the organism as a whole. Thus in infancy there is assumed to be a total integrate which may be considered the original state of the self. This disintegrates in instinctual experience conceived as a release mechanism (cf. Fordham, 1957). The result is intense perceptual stimulation and as one result the ego starts to separate out and develop. At the end of any particular instinctual experience the organism integrates again and in this way the experiences become built into the whole organism. It may be remarked here that the schemata postulated by Piaget, regarded as ego fragments which gradually integrate in the way he describes, are derived from observations all made when instinctual impulses are not in operation. There are therefore two conditions for ego growth. The archetypes, being the instincts and their unconscious fantasy representations, are conceived also to separate out from the integrated whole in the instinctual experience. They also integrate again afterwards.

By processes of this kind it is conceived that the self becomes differentiated out into separate structures with specific functions. These become delegated and develop through the interaction of the organism with the environment; clearly highly complex processes are set in motion by these means. However, all the developing systems are still part of the whole and they all remain subordinate to the central ordering system, or self, connected intimately with all its parts. Self images described by Jung symbolize the central integrative system. The essential principle in this theory is analogous to our knowledge of the way separate organs of the body differentiate out of the zygote and are all subordinate to control systems of which the central nervous

system and the endocrine glands are the most important.

Whether used as a metaphor or a theory, the formula ego-self axis raises an important issue: what is the relation between the kind of organization which the ego can achieve and that which the supra-ordinate integrative system performs? It would appear that through understanding this problem we may be led nearer to grasping the nature of mental health.

The question has been taken up by various writers. Jung himself (1955, p. 117) contends, apparently building on the passage quoted above, that the ego can indeed reflect if not take over all the patterns contained in the self but that it is ultimately subordinate to the self. This argument has not, however, been worked out in sufficient detail, but it appears to mean that the development of the ego and the extension of its control over the other psychic systems represents an achievement with almost unlimited possibilities. This formulation would clearly fall in line with those concepts of mental health that involve not only adaptation to the norm but a creative interaction between on the one hand the ego and the environment and on the other the ego and the inner world. These dynamic processes lead to recurrent modifications in each, especially as the personality as a whole is conceived to continue emergent development throughout

life and thus the twin processes, de-integration and integration, must recur periodically. As the ego gets more development it becomes more and more difficult for it to avoid being split in the de-integrative processes. The feeling associated with it is the threat of chaos or death.

To conclude, any concept of mental health must include the consideration of variables and emergent possibilities in a periodically unstable system. What is healthy, and what not, will depend upon the dynamic de-integration of the self into the component structures of the ego and archetypes and the integration of them into the whole organism. The two basic processes lead to the development of an ego whose growth must involve periodic experiences of disorder felt as dangerous or even chaotic. These states, however, need to be safely negotiated and can be rendered creative if they function healthily. Only the periods of integration can be relatively stable and, it might be added, adapted, in the sense that the organism fits into the environment. The states arising from de-integration are often unadapted in the first place, since they arise when a new development is required under the stress of internal or external dynamisms. Therefore mental health must be considered in relation to externally unadapted as well as states adapted to social requirements.

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