

May 20, 2008

Dear Joel and All,

What I find difficult to swallow about Perry's work is that he seems to have a very naive trust in the unconscious to always find a way through. It is the worst side of Jungian psychology, in my view, in that it falsely romanticises and idealises the unconscious, always assuming that it will set things right. I find this in far too much Jungian writing, and I always find it objectionable and unacceptable. The unconscious is reified as a God, and to trust in God is seen as the way forward. I take this to be the result of misplaced religious projections, and possibly some Jungians want to make a religion out of psychology, rather than view it as psychology within its own due limits.

I don't find this same imbalance in Jung. On the contrary, he is always saying that the ego has to take responsibility, and cannot trust to the unconscious with a kind of blind faith. Therefore: where do some analysts and therapists get their blind trust in the unconscious from? Certainly, it's not from Jung himself. It's as if a kind of Rousseauian fantasy operates in some Jungians – the notion that, if left to its own devices, the unconscious will lead to a social utopia or panacea. I find it dangerously one-sided and disturbed, a kind of false philosophy.

One would have thought that the "realism" that ought to develop within clinical contexts would temper or rule out such idealisations, and yet they seem to continue to thrive in some Jungian quarters, especially in the popular Jungian material that is sold into the mass market. On my desk now is a Jungian book of this kind, and on the back cover it asks readers to trust in the unconscious to find the way through. Perhaps this is a formula for commercial success, but also for human disaster.

Best wishes,  
David

May 21, 2008

Dear David,

What you say is generally true. There must always be a balance between ego and Self. In fact, Jung starts his chapter in Aion (CW 9ii, p. 23) on the Self with a series of warnings. If the ego "lacks any critical approach to the unconscious ... it is easily overpowered and becomes identical with the contents that have been assimilated." He goes on from there. He calls it a "psychic catastrophe when the ego is assimilated by the self." p. 24.

I have been dissatisfied with the way that post-Jungians of all stripes have characterized Jung's psychology. Those that want to "move beyond" Jung oftentimes seem to not even understand him – or worse, consciously present a cartoonish characterization of his views to show Jung's "flaws" and thereby demonstrate their own relevance. At the other end of the spectrum, as you point out, there is a sort of naive, starry-eyed faith in the unconscious. Psychology acquires the trappings of cult.

Those that are dedicated to Jung are slammed as "fundamentalists" by people whose own fundamentals are sorely lacking; yet, at the other end of the spectrum those who are dedicated to Jung but maintaining their own, independent and critical engagement with the central datum – the unconscious – can be criticized by Jungian fundamentalists (and, yes, they do exist) for not adhering to the words of the man. The middle is always the hardest place to hold.

I am completing a work on Jung and individuation where I researched every index entry to individuation in the Collected Works, Memories, Dreams, and Jung's various seminars to really rediscover what Jung had to say. Doing that was a great exercise because I discovered a lot which I did not know. I also saw much that debunks some of the cartoonish perspectives at both ends of the Jungian spectrum.

Best wishes,  
Dan Anderson

May 22, 2008

Dear Dan and All,

I appreciate your insights here, which are most welcome. It is certainly true that those of us who style ourselves as "post-Jungians" are forever looking for ways to improve on the Jungian opus, and better it. Sometimes these new ways are mistaken or erroneous – false leads, blind alleys. In the late 1970s, I was keen to construct myself as post-Jungian, and in so doing I tended to set Jung up as a "cartoon figure" as you aptly call it. The community with whom I was working at the time encouraged this kind of grandiose thinking – the notion that what comes "after" Jung must necessarily be better than Jung.

The question is: how do we "move beyond" Jung without messing up the work, or throwing out the baby with bathwater? The 'post-Jungians' I was working with had decided that Jung was too bogged down with the ego, and that we should let the unconscious run loose. This is so often what we get in Perry, for instance. We also find it, in a different form, in RD Laing. That was a very "70s" position to adopt, and while I now understand what it was trying to do – ie. free individuation from a restrictive heroic/masculinist model – it was mistaken, in my present view, and missed the mark. In the 1980s I re-read Jung's works, and realised that he was not saying what some of the "post-Jungians" insisted he was saying. He was not all ego and no unconscious; there was a balance at every point, and it was absolutely wrong to create a cartoon caricature of this complex work.

In your first sentence, you say it is important to strike a balance between ego and Self. However, I would take slight issue with this opening statement. You see, there is no Self until the ego and unconscious get into some kind of creative relationship. The Self is not always there – it has to be born, realised. I would rephrase your statement and say "balance between ego and unconscious" – then, when such a dialogue is set going, we might, if we are lucky, catch glimpses of the Self, which in a sense only comes into being once ego and unconscious start talking to each other. You might disagree, and if so, I'd be pleased to hear it.

Prior to that the unconscious is a vast and potentially unruly and disruptive sea, which can easily engulf the ego. This is why I worry so much about false Jungianism and the popular writings inspired by Jung – they all tend to assume that the inner world is benign and friendly, because it is (they claim) organised and empowered by the

Self. But I have seen many cases where there is no Self – yet. Rather, only the stormy and disruptive sea, and the ego has to protect itself from it. Ego cannot simply assume the Self is always "there" to act as creative presence and healing factor. Perhaps I am too pessimistic, but close contact with people with schizophrenia has led me to believe that the idea that we can "trust in the Self" is a good theory, but in practice, it just ain't necessarily so.

I will run this new thread under the heading Individuation, as the earlier subject no longer embraces what we are discussing.

Best wishes,  
David

May 23, 2008

Dear David and all,

Thank you for your thoughts. Well, it is a very fundamental misapprehension of Jung to think that his psychology prescribes a naive trust in the unconscious. Jung would be the last person on earth, I warrant, to suggest this. Chapter 6 of *Memories, Dreams, "Confrontation with the Unconscious,"* is worth rereading in this regard. For a period of 6 years Jung was in a grim struggle for his sanity; the unconscious almost crushed him. Prior to that he served at the Burghoelzli Hospital where the ravages of the unconscious raged all around him. This is why, I believe, Jung starts his chapter of the Self in *Aion* with a series of warnings. He doesn't want anyone to underestimate the unconscious' power and danger.

Now, the relation between the "unconscious" and the "Self" raises some complex theoretical – and practical – questions. You are absolutely right to say that the first encounter with the unconscious is more often than not stormy. Initially, it is a "massa confusa" as the alchemists aptly put it. You say that it is only following this initial encounter with the unconscious that the Self is born, and that even then we are lucky to catch glimpses of it.

Your perception of the reality is very accurate, but I would make a distinction between SYMBOLS of the Self, and the Self ITSELF. By definition, the Self "is the concept which expresses the totality of

conscious and unconscious." Zarathustra Seminars, p. 124. So the unconscious (both personal and collective) is contained within the Self, along with the ego. The Self is always present, even at the beginning in the "massa confusa" we see in dreams, emotions, adaptation. This is reflected in the alchemist's dictum that the philosopher's stone is present even at the beginning of the work. The "massa confusa" is a form of the totality, "yet a substance endowed with every quality in which the splendour of the hidden deity can be revealed." 14 CW p. 307.

Though the initial massa confusa of the unconscious IS the Self, it is the Self in a state which Jung likens to "shapeless, embryonic tissue." 14 CW p. 385. It is raw nature, the elements of which are in conflict, and brings to mind another alchemical dictum: "that which nature leaves imperfect, the work makes perfect." In other words, through analysis, the chaos of the Self/unconscious settles down. There is less internal conflict. Psychic balance begins. After working in this phase numinous SYMBOLS of the Self may emerge. This is what I believe you refer to when you say we may catch glimpses of the Self. While the Self in its essence is beyond comprehension (it must be since it embraces the totality of the unconscious), it nevertheless (paradoxically) may temporarily reveal itself in distinct, numinous and powerful symbols. These "glimpses" can, in fact, be very transformative.

In a way, this distinction between Self and unconscious is unimportant. But it can have practical implications. Since the Self lies at the heart of individuation and Jungian psychology, I think it is important to recognize its presence right from the beginning for several reasons. There are Jungian analysts who take an attitude of patiently biding their time with an analysand until a big symbol pops up. Of course, clients immediately pick up on that. The result is a sort of "provisional (analytic) life:" a waiting around for symbolic fireworks to explode. This is very unhealthy in my opinion. But if the analyst understands that the Self is there from the beginning – hidden in the chaos – the analysand will also pick up on this. And this gives meaning, and hope, to analysis right from the beginning.

Second – and very importantly – there are those people who simply tend to have fewer big, symbolic dreams than others, no matter how long they conscientiously work in analysis. There are people who sit around in the evening doing crossword puzzles, and go to

sleep and dream about doing a crossword puzzle. Some people just have common dreams about common things. And what of them? Are they second class citizens because of this? If the analyst ties his view of the Self to dreams symbols which are familiar to us (the Wise Old Man or Woman, the golden snake, the numinous crystal) he or she will miss the fact that for this person the Self is likely imbedded in the fabric of life's day-to-day events. There is something very profound and religious about this. But if the analyst misses this, I am afraid there is a good chance the analysand will too. So, while at one level it makes zero difference whether we say "Self" or "unconscious," at another level it can make a difference if the analyst feels that there is nothing redemptive or valuable in even the unconscious chaos, or its opposite, the (seemingly) all too common.

Recognizing the Self in the initial massa confusa is also important to fend off undue idealization of the Self. If we only associate the Self with beautiful symbols – a shining cross, or golden lotus – then we are more likely to fall into the error that the Self is this wonderful, benign thing guiding the analytic process. Remember again the alchemical dictum: "what NATURE LEAVES IMPERFECT the work makes perfect." That is, the Self, left alone, or ignored, can tend to chaos and conflict. It is the ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL (read: ego) which has a transformative effect on the Self and the psyche – which is not to say that the Self will ever be tamed or suffering eliminated; it won't. But by recognizing the very real presence of the Self in the initial chaos, we both take it down from its romantic pedestal and elevate the individual's importance in the analytic work.

Best wishes,  
Dan