

Ego & the Self

The most profound influence of archetypes is in their regulation of the human life cycle. Jung maintained that as we mature we follow a natural sequence of steps which he describes in his essay 'The Stages of Life' (CW8, paras 749–95). Each stage is mediated through a new set of archetypal imperatives which seek fulfilment in both our personality and our behaviour. Since the archetypes evolved to equip us for the hunter/gatherer existence in which our species has lived out 99 per cent of its existence, the archetypal programme equips us for a life which is not always in tune with the life of contemporary urban society.

Essentially, the programme provides for the following:

- being parented,
- exploring the environment,
- distinguishing familiar figures from strange,
- learning the language or dialect of one's community,
- acquiring a knowledge of its values, rules, and beliefs,
- playing in the peer group,
- meeting the challenges of puberty and adolescence,
- being initiated into the adult group,
- accomplishing courtship and marriage,
- child-rearing,
- contributing to the economy through gathering and hunting,
- participating in religious rituals and ceremonials,
- assuming the responsibilities of advanced maturity,
- old age,
- and preparation for death.

All these stages are apparent in all human communities known to anthropology and therefore obey this psychological law: *whenever a phenomenon is found to be characteristic of all human communities, it is an expression of an archetype of the collective unconscious*. The psychic nucleus responsible for co-ordinating this lifelong sequence Jung called the Self.

In addition to the Self, Jung postulated archetypal components which play specific roles in the psychic development and social adjustment of everyone. These include the ego, persona, shadow, anima, and animus. Jung considered these to be archetypal structures which are built into the personal psyche in the form of complexes during the course of development. Each is a psychic organ operating in accordance with the biological principles of adaptation, homeostasis (self-regulation), and growth. Though we make use

of them and experience them in ways unique to ourselves, they nevertheless perform the same functions in all human beings everywhere.

‘Ultimately,’ wrote Jung, ‘every individual life is at the same time the eternal life of the species’ (CW11, para. 146). In other words, we come into the world bearing with us an archetypal endowment which enables us to adapt to reality in the same way as our remote ancestors. The sum total of this endowment is incorporated in the Self. It is out of this matrix that the other psychic structures develop; they remain under its guiding influence for the rest of life.

Lifted from *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* by Anthony Stevens, pp. 60-61

The Self

This is both architect and builder of the dynamic structure which supports our psychic existence throughout life. A capital S is used to distinguish between the ‘self’ of everyday usage (which refers to the ego or persona) and Jung’s ‘Self’ which transcends the ego and inheres the age-old capacities of the species. Its goal is wholeness, the complete realization of the blueprint for human existence within the context of the life of the individual. Individuation is the *raison d’être* of the Self.

Jung borrowed from biology and applied to human psychology the homeostatic rule of self-regulation. Homeostasis is the means by which all organic systems keep themselves in a state of balance, despite changes in the environment. In fact, homeostasis can be observed at all levels of existence – from molecules to communities, in living as well as non-living systems – and our whole planet is conceivable as one vast self-regulating system.

Because the psyche evolved in the context of the world, Jung held that the laws which prevail in the cosmos must also prevail in the psyche. He therefore felt justified in viewing the psyche as a self-regulating system which strives perpetually to maintain a balance between opposing tendencies, while, at the same time, seeking its own growth and development.

The psyche is a self-regulating system that maintains its equilibrium just as the body does. Every process that goes too far immediately and inevitably calls forth compensations, and without these there would be neither a normal metabolism nor a normal psyche. In this sense we can take the theory of compensation as a basic law of psychic behaviour. Too little on one side results in too much on the other. Similarly, the relation between conscious and unconscious is compensatory. (CW16, para. 330)

The Self is the ordering principle of the entire personality. It attempts to bring balance between our outer conscious life and our inner life of the unconscious. It compensates for our imbalances through dreams, visions, symptoms, depressions, misadventures, embarrassments, etc.

Furthermore, the Self works unceasingly to realize itself in the life of the individual. To accomplish that task of Self-expression in and through a person's life, the Self needs the help of the ego.

The Ego

Jung writes, 'By ego I understand a complex of ideas which constitutes the centre of my field of consciousness and appears to possess a high degree of continuity and identity' (CW6, para. 706).

Again, turning to the natural world, Jung shows that, while every ego is particular to the person, each ego rests on an ageless bedrock of human influence:

The body has an anatomical prehistory of millions of years, and so does our psychic system...Consciousness began its evolution from an animal-like state which seems to us unconscious, and the same process of differentiation is repeated in every child. The psyche of the child in its preconscious state is...already preformed in a recognizably individual way...equipped with all specifically human instincts, as well as with the a priori foundations of the higher functions. On this complicated base, the ego arises. (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections* p. 348)

The human infant gradually comes to awareness of the breast as the reliever of hunger-pain, of the voice and face of its parents, of its own hand. The process is like tiny islands of consciousness rising out of the sea of the unconscious, then quickly disappearing back into the water. As each awareness resurfaces over and over, it begins to hold its own against the water. Over time, these little islands come together and form a body of awareness stable enough to create an ego. The child begins to refer to him/herself as "I" and "me".

When this process of expanding awareness about oneself continues during adulthood, the ego becomes textured and flexible. These qualities characterize an ego that is strong in a healthy way. Durable and secure, such an ego can navigate the vagaries of career and relationships in an authentic way. It also has the capacity to relate to the powerful energies of the inner world.

Jung points out that the ego has a role beyond functioning in the outer world: ‘the psyche is transformed or developed by the relationship of the ego to the contents of the unconscious’ (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 209).

Ego and the Self

The ego complex emerges out of the Self in the course of early childhood development, much like the moon is thought to have separated from the earth when the latter was in its early molten state. It remains linked to the Self by what Jung’s followers have called the ego–Self axis, and it is on this axis that the stability of the personality depends.

The diagram of the ego–Self axis below was lifted from Edward Edinger’s book, *Ego and Archetype*. He explains the stages this way:

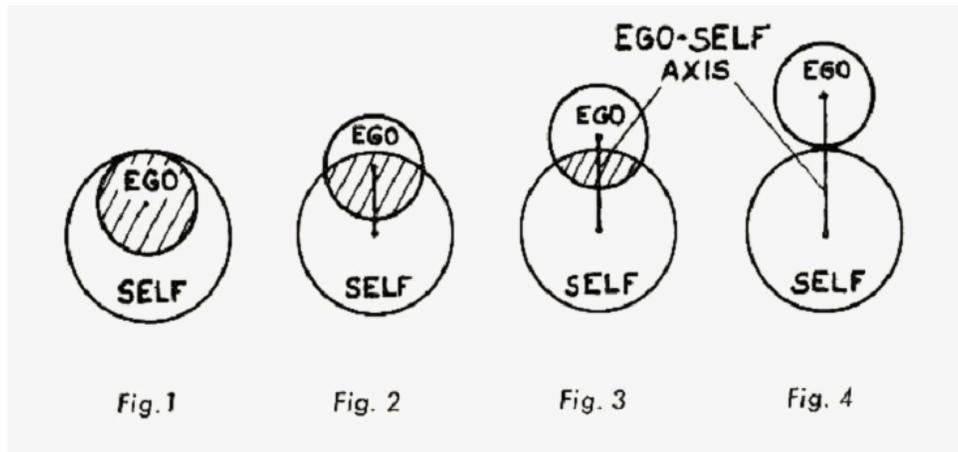


Figure 1: Nothing exists but the Self-mandala. The ego germ is present only as a potentiality. Ego and Self are one, which means there is no ego. This is the total state of primary ego–Self identity.

Figure 2: An emerging ego is beginning to separate from the Self but it still has its center and greater area in primary identity with the Self.

Figure 3: This shows a more advanced stage of development. However, a residual ego–Self identity still remains. The ego–Self axis, which in the first two diagrams was completely unconscious and therefore indistinguishable from ego–Self identity, has now become partly conscious.

Figure 4: Here is a total separation of ego and Self and a complete consciousness of the ego-Self axis. This may not exist in actuality, and certainly not in a sustained manner. (p. 6)

As the diagrams show, the ego is initially merged with the Self. In early childhood, it begins to separate itself out from the Self. In truth, this process of the ego differentiating itself more and more from identification with the Self continues throughout a lifetime.

Although we experience the ego as the continuing centre of our existence it is, in fact, merely the Self's executive. 'For indeed our consciousness does not create itself – it wells up from unknown depths. In childhood it awakens gradually, and all through life it wakes each morning out of the depths of sleep from an unconscious condition. It is like a child that is born daily out of the primordial womb of the unconscious' (CW11, para. 935).

Again and again Jung stresses the dependency of ego-consciousness on the continuing vitality of the Self. '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 supra-ordinate to it. The Self, like the unconscious, is an a priori existent out of which the ego evolves' (CW11, para. 391).

In short, these two great psychic powers need each other. Without the ego's analyzing powers and its capacity to facilitate independent living, the Self remains without a presence in the everyday world. With the aid of the ego, the Self's valuable tendencies to foster life lived at greater depth and at a greater level of integration become available to a person. The Self provides the more holistic view and is therefore supreme. It is the function of the ego to challenge or fulfill the demands of that supremacy.

In the first half of life it is essential to develop a strong and effective ego if one is to deal competently with the tasks of this stage – separating off from the parents, establishing oneself in a job or profession, marrying, providing a home for one's family, etc. Only in the second half of life does it become possible for the ego to recognize its subordinate status in relation to the Self – an indispensable stage in the progress of individuation. Then the ego begins to confront the Self and the Self the ego. This usually occurs in mid-life.