

JUNG, EASTERN THOUGHT AND THE BEGINNINGS OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Introduction

In this essay I wish to explore two themes. The first is Jung's concept of strata of the psyche and his explorations of the unconscious. The second is his attitude to Eastern thought and the implications of this for his work.

The fame of Sigmund Freud has led to the term unconscious gaining general currency, yet his generally pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of harmonising its output with the needs of the conscious ego, in order to provide a successful fulfillment of life, has led to little continuing interest in his structural theories. Jung's notions of the unconscious on the other hand continue to intrigue and inspire, for they point to the possibility of creative utilisation of all the forces, symbols and thoughts contained therein by a process of integration and self-realisation which Jung terms 'individuation'.

The image of wholeness, of a goal, or of an organising principle of healing became central to Jung's thinking and he was attracted to the image or symbol of the Buddha and the mandala. However, he stressed that certain basic attitudes were different, such as the Eastern notion of 'higher' consciousness, for, in the West, "*we do not go up into the unconscious, we go down.*"¹

Moreover he saw a danger of using the purity of vision stressed in eastern thought to avoid acceptance of the dark forces and strong passions present in the psyche. He was certainly not a convert to any eastern ways of thinking but looked on the richness of the psychological and spiritual traditions of these countries as a storehouse of myths and symbols that could be employed to illustrate his own theories.

The Unconscious and the basis of individuation

Jung used the term 'individuation' to denote the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'individual', that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole', becoming 'discontinuous'.²

Against the general assumption that consciousness is the whole of the psychological individual, Jung points out that in dreams and elsewhere phenomena occur that can only be explained on the hypothesis of unconscious psychic processes. This, in his eyes, makes it doubtful that the ego and its contents are in fact identical with the 'whole', for if unconscious processes exist at all, they must surely belong to the totality of the individual, even though they are not components of the conscious ego. If they were part of the ego, they would necessarily be conscious, because everything that is directly related to the ego is conscious. Consciousness can even be equated

¹ Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume II, Para. 875

² As discussed in the Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9, part 1. Page numbers in this essay refer to Vol. 9, Part 1.

with the relation between the ego and the psychic contents. But unconscious phenomena are so little related to the ego that most people do not hesitate to deny their existence outright.

However Jung, through his clinical work, came to see that these unconscious phenomena manifest themselves in an individual's behaviour so that they can be observed by one trained to do so, while the observed person remains quite unaware of the fact that he is betraying his most secret thoughts and even things he has never thought consciously.

Moreover Jung contradicts Freud's view that the unconscious consists of nothing but contents accidentally deprived of consciousness but otherwise indistinguishable from the conscious material. For he points out that the unconscious displays contents that are utterly different from conscious ones—contents so strange that nobody can understand them, neither the patient himself nor his doctor.

When these ideas inundate the conscious mind, the person goes 'crazy', which is to say that we cannot understand his ideas. Under certain conditions the unconscious is capable of taking over the role of the ego and this results in insanity and confusion, because the unconscious is not a second personality with organised and centralised functions, but in all probability a decentralized congeries of psychic processes.

We can thus see that Jung's basic position is dualistic with reference to the totality of the psyche — the contradiction between conscious and unconscious is inherent. He believes that the autonomy of the unconscious is to be found in all beings, not just the neurotic and psychotic. *"Then in a state of violent affect, one says or does things which exceed the ordinary. Not much is needed: love and hate, joy and grief, are often enough to make the ego and the unconscious change places. Very strange ideas indeed can take possession of otherwise healthy people on such occasions. Groups, communities, and even whole nations can be seized in this way by psychic epidemics"*. (p. 218)

The emotions are particularly disturbing for the ego, since, in Jung's system they are *'instinctive, involuntary reactions'* and moreover *"Affects are not 'made' or willfully produced, they simply happen"*. This is very difficult for the ego to handle since its function is being responsible and accounting for all the actions and decisions that the individual makes. Its security and sense of total identity is undermined if the emotions manifest too freely – for when they occur they usually reveal thoughts, which contradict the ego's view of itself (which, for it, constitutes the entire self).

A total self knowledge is impossible according to Jung, since the unconscious can never be fully known; we are locked in the prison of consciousness, being fed small tidbits through the bars of concepts by the mad master unconscious. The thoughts we shall think, the deed we shall do, even the fate we shall lament tomorrow, all lie unconscious in our today. *"The unknown in us which the affect uncovers was always there and sooner or later would have*

presented itself to consciousness. Hence we must always reckon with the presence of things not yet discovered". (p. 279).

For Jung the unconscious is a two faced Janus, on the one side its contents point back to a preconscious, prehistoric world of instinct, while on the other side it potentially anticipates the future — precisely because of the instinctive readiness for action of the factors that determine our fate. So for Jung, *"If we had complete knowledge of the ground plan lying dormant in an individual from the beginning, his fate would be in large measure predictable."* (p. 279).

The special feature of Jung's view, the aspect which marks off his vision of the unconscious from that of Freud's is the notion of a collective unconscious. This is not a separate unconscious apart from the individual's unconscious, nor yet is it some vague cloud of cosmic consciousness as yet unreached. Rather it is the common substratum of historical experience inherited unknowingly by each individual at birth. Thus he says, *"everything that will be, happens on the basis of what has been, and of what — consciously or unconsciously -- still exists as a memory trace. In so far as no man is born totally new, but continually repeats the stage of development last reached by the species, he contains unconsciously, as an a priori datum, the entire psychic structure developed both upwards and downwards by his ancestors in the course of the ages"*. (p. 280). Like a child, forgetting the events of yesterday, the conscious mind forgets all the experiences stored in the unconscious and perceives itself as new, fresh, struggling with unique problems.

Jung takes the ancientness of the unconscious as proven and so for him the ego's sense of newness is an unmistakable proof of the youthfulness of human consciousness which has not yet grown aware of its historical antecedents. Now, since these 'historical' factors in the structure and contents of the unconscious are inherited equally by all humans at birth, there is, according to Jung much more similarity and indeed identity between people than their conscious selves would choose to admit to. And it is this substratum that Jung sees as having parallels with the Indian and Tibetan concepts of mandalas that he employed so much in his later writings.

The conscious has to come to terms with the actual existence or autonomy of the unconscious; otherwise it will not be able to make sense of so many of the experiences that occur for it. The living reality of the dynamic continuum of existence cannot be slotted into the logical conceptual grids so loved by the ego. Jung states, *"Because of its youthfulness and vulnerability, our consciousness tends to make light of the unconscious. This is understandable enough, for a young man should not let himself be overawed by the authority of his parents, if he wants to start something on his own accord."* Historically as well as individually, our consciousness has developed out of the darkness and somnolence of primordial unconsciousness. There were psychic processes and functions long before any ego-consciousness existed.

'Thinking' existed long before man

was able to say 'I am conscious of thinking' Thus the unconscious consists of both processes and contents which have functional instinctive effect, and the

integrity of the individual, who identifies with the conscious ego, is constantly endangered by its power and unpredictability.

He suggests that the primitive 'perils of the soul' consist mainly of dangers to consciousness. Fascination, bewitchment, 'loss of soul', possession, etc. are phenomena caused by unconscious contents forcing dissociation and suppression of consciousness. Though he feels that no clear structuring principle is to be found in the unconscious, yet just because the ego-centre has arisen from it, the unconscious cannot be an entirely chaotic accumulation of instincts and images — for it is the mother of the ego, and the child always reflects the basic patterns of the mother.

However Jung, despite his years of deep introspection and his thousands of clinical cases never reached any definite knowledge. It remained a speculation, a heuristic formula; open to development, reinterpretation and even contradiction. Jolande Jacobi in the preface to the 4th edition of her work *"The Psychology of C.G. Jung"* says: *"A doctrine based on experience can never come to a standstill in completion. In Jung's psychology, accordingly, everything is dynamic, subject to change; only the most important perspectives and outlines, only the basic principles are unalterable. The rest, like the psyche itself, is subject to the Heraclitean principle that 'everything flows'. Innovations, developments, transpositions, clarifications, even drastic changes may be expected as a matter of course. For the psyche is always capable of putting forth new flowers. Time and time again it offers new and unexpected aspects, compels us to change our point of view, and arouses our admiration. The undogmatic character of Jung's ideas prevents them from forming a closed system and leaves the way open for continuous new development and differentiation."*

I have quoted this at length because I feel, it illustrates a key notion in Jung's approach, one which has many antecedents in western thought, and which pervades psycho-therapeutic thinking at this time. It is the notion of knowledge as a ceaselessly unfolding revelation, the product of the continuing dialogue between the mind and its relative situation, whether that be inner thoughts or outer events. Although Jacobi alludes to certain enduring principles in Jung's thought this is more the wish of a convert for structural continuity, than the open honesty of the committed explorer who could say: 'A doctrine based on experience can never come to a standstill in completion.' For the principles have been thrown up by a sifting of experiences, and as the flow of experiences is unpredictable it would be naive to believe that nothing would arise that would contradict the principles. Openness and security do not go hand in hand – unless of course one can take the absolute security of complete openness, the invulnerability of no position. But then one has no system to proclaim...

Truth remains relative and the best the individual can hope for is to utilize the truths that seem most appropriate to his own individual situation. That is, the focus remains the relative dualistic world of the ego consciousness, and all that may be gleaned from the unconscious is of use primarily in helping the

ego in its difficult task of self-balance in the midst of the chaos of inner and outer ups and downs.

In this he was in agreement with Freud and yet still he yearned to find a means to utilize the insights of the unconscious. For in contrast with Freud's gloomy view of the unconscious as an unruly power source which has to be controlled very tightly to prevent the conscious ego being overwhelmed, Jung believed that the unconscious influences that consciousness so easily succumbs to, are often truer and wiser than our conscious thinking.

Rather than opposing or firmly channeling in the manner of Freud, Jung sought means by which one could be more open to the helpful influence of the unconscious. For normally the unconscious collaborates with the conscious without friction or disturbance so that one is not even aware of its existence. But, Jung feels, when an individual or a social group deviates too far from their instinctual foundations, they then experience the full impact of unconscious forces. And indeed he goes so far as to claim on p. 282 that, *"The collaboration of the unconscious is intelligent and purposive, and even when it acts in opposition to consciousness, its expression is still compensatory in an intelligent way, as if it were trying to restore the lost balance."*

Eastern ideas – from unconscious to transpersonal

In this second section I will try to clarify Jung's real intention with regard to the introduction of eastern concepts and metaphors, particularly his use of mandala symbolism. In going through his writings on these topics I have found that he seems to have some inner vision of the potentiality of the unconscious, yet he expresses it in the vaguest of terms. He claims that: *"It is unprofitable to speculate about things we cannot know. I therefore refrain from making assertions that go beyond the bounds of science."*³ Yet he uses such a literary prose and such romantic metaphors that it is difficult to find the substance in his lyrical descriptions.

The unconscious in his usage is not just a deep abyss of potential disturbance, but is also the source of the highest aims of man. He rejects the notion that some other higher consciousness needs to be posited. Thus he says: *"There are dreams and visions of such an impressive character that some people refuse to admit that they could have originated in an unconscious psyche. They prefer to assume that such phenomena derive from a part of 'super-consciousness'. Such people make a distinction between a quasi-physiological or instinctive unconscious and a psychic sphere or layer 'above' consciousness, which they style the 'super-consciousness'. As a matter of fact, this psyche, which in Indian philosophy is called the 'higher' consciousness, corresponds to what we in the West call the 'unconscious'".*

³ From: The Meaning of Individuation, in *The Integration of the Personality* London; Kegan Paul 1910. All unidentified quotes are from this book.

He then goes on to make a statement which he presents as a continuity of the above line of thinking, but is in fact a contradiction of it: *“Certain dreams, visions, and mystical experiences do, however, suggest the existence of a consciousness in the unconscious. But, if we assume a consciousness in the unconscious, we are at once faced with the difficulty that no consciousness can exist without a subject, that is, an ego to which the contents are related. Consciousness needs a centre, an ego to which something is conscious. We know of no other kind of consciousness, nor can we imagine a consciousness without an ego. There can be no consciousness when there is no one to say ‘I am conscious.’”* Now, what in Indian philosophy is called the ‘higher’ consciousness is in fact free of the limitation of a self who possesses it. It is open, unlimited, a ‘pure’ consciousness in the sense of being true to itself and not having to serve the dictates of some possessor.

The basic misunderstanding arises from Jung having followed the line of personal introspection and clinical examination only. His introspection was concerned with pursuing his dreams, intuition, etc., in the hope of understanding the process of the unconscious. But he was unable to gain any experience of ‘unconscious’ free of content. For him it was a formless receptacle and it was the contents which were of value. Whereas the Indian perspective is quite the reverse with the ultimate attainment being the freeing of the mind from its intoxication with its own content, both conscious and unconscious, so that it can realize integration in the natural dimension of open awareness. This being a constant state of pure cognition that is unaffected by the arising and passing of thoughts and other psychic phenomena, no matter what their form. Jung’s concern for content leads him to see ‘higher’ consciousness as just some form of superior thoughts that thrive better in the unrestricted space of the unconscious. In the writing of the last twenty years of his life, Jung focused on the psychology of religion and developed his concept of self-realization. But even here it was self-realisation by becoming familiar with the contents of the unconscious rather than with merging into it as a state of being.

In a sense the full development of the metaphysical aspects of his view of personality were inhibited by his continuing allegiance to notions of biological causality. At root he accepted the Carthusian split of mind and body and was never able to subsume the body into a mode of mental experience, as is typical in Indian systems of thought. Thus even his famous view that in the unconscious of every man there is hidden a feminine personality, the anima, and in that of every woman a masculine personality, the animus, has a biological basis. For he says: *‘It is a well known fact that sex is determined by a majority of male or female genes, as the case may be. But the minority of genes belonging to the other sex does not simply disappear. A man therefore has in him a feminine side, an unconscious feminine figure, a fact of which he is generally quite unaware.’* The tendency to anima and animus resides in the collective unconscious, the ‘historical’ unconscious, and there they manifest and abide once determined by biological facts. Jung sees the psyche arranged strata descending from ego consciousness to collective unconsciousness, much as a geologist might analyse a cross-section through a land mass. The archetypal personalities, the hero, the wise old man and all

the other figures that he identifies from mythology, are the products of the unconscious spontaneously personifying certain affectively toned contents in dreams. Normally they dwell in the collective unconscious, the deepest stratum of the psyche, the level prior to any process of individuation. And this for Jung explains a good deal of their strangeness, for they bring into our ephemeral consciousness an unknown psychic life belonging to a remote past. And he says, "*It is the mind of our unknown ancestors, their way of thinking and feeling, their way of experiencing life and the world, gods and men. The existence of these archaic strata is presumably the source of man's belief in reincarnation and in memories of "previous existences"*".

Jung perceived eastern thought, both Indian and Chinese, through the tinted spectacles of his own theories. They led him to no fresh insights for he was looking on them merely as a vast storehouse of symbols, myths and concepts to prove and expand his own theory. For him the psyche was in a continuous process of evolution, each age, even each person, adding drop by drop some details to its vast store of accretions. The metaphor is basically mechanical and Newtonian, though with enough generally balanced interaction of parts for it to be claimed to be 'dynamic'. Whereas the main trends on both Indian and Chinese thought accepts, either as axiomatic or as proven by meditation experience, that there is an underlying and all-pervading true nature into which, and as which, all things can be integrated. This is very far from Jung's view of the 'problem of individuation'.

Thus, "*One is inclined to think that ego-consciousness is capable of assimilating the unconscious, at least one hopes that such a solution is possible. But unfortunately the unconscious really is unconscious; in other words, it is unknown. And how can you assimilate something unknown?*" So he wishes that the unknown become known, that the ego expand its territory to cover the whole of creation, that man becomes master of his fate. But of course the ego which he would set up as ruler comes to an end at death; having uncovered all the mysteries of the unconscious, it will still not have extended the true range of its existence — there will just be more of the same, and all quite ephemeral.

The eastern claim for the existence of a 'universal consciousness' he holds to be false, for with regard to the yogis who are said to attain it, "*the fact remains that in their case the unconscious has swallowed up ego-consciousness.*" Thus they drown in illusion rather than experience any absolute nature. I want to quote him at length here for I feel that what he says clarifies his attitude to eastern thought and obviates any need to explore his use of mandalas, which I see him as prostituting to his own ends. These yogis, "*do not realize that a "universal consciousness" is a contradiction in terms, since exclusion, selection, and discrimination are the root and essence of everything that lays claim to the name "consciousness"*". 'Universal consciousness' is logically identical with unconsciousness. It is nevertheless true that a correct application of the methods described in the Pali Canon or in the Yogasutra induces a remarkable extension of consciousness. But, with increasing extension, the contents of consciousness lose in clarity of detail. In the end, consciousness becomes all-embracing, but nebulous; an infinite number of

things merge into an indefinite whole, a state in which subject and object are almost completely identical. This is all very beautiful, but scarcely to be recommended anywhere north of the Tropic of Cancer.

“For this reason we must look for a different solution. We believe in ego-consciousness and in what we call reality. The realities of a northern climate are somehow so convincing that we feel very much better off when we do not forget them. For us it makes sense to concern ourselves with reality. Our European ego-consciousness is therefore inclined to swallow up the unconscious, and if this should not prove feasible, we try to suppress it. But if we understand anything of the unconscious, we know that it cannot be swallowed. We also know that it is dangerous to suppress it, because the unconscious is life and this life turns against us if suppressed, as happens in neurosis.”

Influence on transpersonal psychology

Thus Jung locates himself clearly in the non-absolutist, anti-metaphysical pragmatist fold which accepts present dualistic perception and rules out both alternative visions of reality and radically different ways of handling what is here. For him there is no way out but to accept the ego as the director of the drama - even though he admits that the play continues quite well when the management goes on holiday.

Yet he did believe that fundamentally the psyche was a whole in the sense that it could only be fulfilled if both aspects, conscious and unconscious were accepted and given validity. And so, *“If they must contend, let it at least be a fair fight with equal rights on both sides”*. Consciousness must defend its reason and protect itself while permitting the chaotic life of the unconscious as much space as possible — and this means an ongoing process of simultaneous open conflict and open collaboration. From this process, indeed as the acceptance of the need for this process, there develops the true individual, the person capable of changing all the multifarious aspects of his/her birthright, open-eyed, fearless, yet with feet firmly planted on the ground of relative, day to day needs.

This notion has been adopted by and large by the present day movements in transpersonal psychology which sees the goal as ‘being here’ rather than ‘getting there’. The ‘here’ of course being a full awareness of what is occurring, of what is actually happening for the individual and this is a state far removed from the distracted, emotionally fraught state which is the ongoing present moment for most people. Transpersonal goes not outside to something else but to a refined awareness of what is actually occurring — and this frees the individual from the burden of the false identities he or she has been loaded with in the course of their life.

As to the actual process of harmonising conscious and unconscious data, Jung felt it to be something beyond precise definition in formulae: *“It is an irrational life-process which expresses itself in definite symbols.”* For it is in symbols that the union of conscious and unconscious contents is

consummated. He called this union of opposites the 'transcendent function' for out of it new situations and new conscious attitudes evolve. He spelt out the goal of individualisation as the supreme work of man, that is, the process of finding oneself, in a full and complete form, by exploring the material available on all the different levels of one's psyche. This 'individuality' embraces our innermost, final, and incomparable uniqueness — one becomes oneself, clear and confident of one's identity and being. This for him was 'self-realisation'.

Conclusion

I hope here to have drawn attention to the fundamental difference between Jung's thought and the basic principles common to most systems of Indian thought. In setting out the principles of his notion of psychic strata I hope I have made clear his commitment to the primacy of ego-consciousness and his belief that man fulfills himself by becoming truly human and individual rather than by entering a non-conceptual state — a state which he would deny possesses consciousness. His great contribution was to indicate a mode of spirituality and self-fulfillment which keeps man in touch with all the aspects of his life, so that the riches of the deep could be brought forth in a practical, down-to-earth form for the benefit of both the individual and society. And this is a vision which has continued to inspire the transpersonal psychology movements.

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