

The great leap

Private Practice, Spring 2016

John Rowan reflects on the concepts of individuation and self-actualisation.

At first sight individuation and self-actualisation look rather similar. In both cases there is a journey involved, from an earlier position or state to a later one. And in both cases, the later one is more sophisticated, evolved and adequate than the earlier one. But when we come to look at individuation and self-actualisation in more detail, we find that the two are actually very different.

I would like to start with self-actualisation, because it is more highly specified and much better researched than individuation. It comes from the work of Abraham Maslow, and at first his theory was usually described as the hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy is often presented in the form of a triangle, and this is quite wrong, as I shall explain in due course. It is actually a theory of motivation, and when I came to study psychology at university, I found that it was superior to any other theory of needs, motives, drives, instincts or the like. When people are asked for the basic reasons for what they do, they always reply in terms of the Maslow motives, not in terms of sex, hunger or fear.

Now we were always warned that Maslow was not a good researcher, and that we should therefore take his theory of levels with a pinch of salt. But what started to happen was that some much better researchers came up with exactly the same series of levels as Maslow. Lawrence Kohlberg¹ did his research on moral development in many different countries around the world, which was followed by the complementary work of Carol Gilligan.² Jane Loevinger³ started her research on women and girls, thus complementing Kohlberg, who had done his on men and boys. Ken Wilber⁴ did his research in the library, collating about 80 writers from different countries and centuries, and finding the same levels all over again, plus a further set of levels going beyond Maslow and the others.

Then came the work of Don Beck and Christopher Cowan,⁵ whose ambitious attempt to look at ideologies (which they called 'value-memes') again came up with the same set of levels as Maslow. The works of Robert Kegan,⁶ William Torbert⁷ and, perhaps most of all, Susanne Cook-Greuter,⁸ seem to be highly regarded from a technical point of view, and they, too, come up with the very same set of levels. What we now have, therefore, is a well-argued and researched set of developmental levels, which it seems to me have to be taken seriously.

The great gap

The most glaring feature of this work, which I have tried to underline by using the phrase 'the great gap', is that at a certain point there comes a great leap – which many people never make. What is this leap, exactly? One way of putting this is to say that it is the move from the false self to the true self (Winnicott), from the persona to the self (Jung), from the false self to the real self (Laing), from the unreal self to the real self (Janov), from the guiding fiction to the creative self (Adler), from the self-image to the self (Perls), and so on. But all these are perhaps oversimplified and too brief for our more critical era.

In most cases, our starting point is a level of consciousness where we are happy to play a role in society and not question it very much. We see ourselves as a stockbroker or a navvy, a housewife or a model, an accountant or a shelf-stacker, a shop assistant or a lady of leisure. In other words, we define ourselves by our roles. This is the world of what Heidegger⁹ called 'Das Man' – usually translated as 'The They'. If asked the question, 'Who are you?', people at this level will answer instead the different question: 'What are you?' And this is what society wants. We get rewarded for playing our roles well, with money, honours, degrees, medals, recognition and prestige. And the highest we can go in this area is to the mature ego. Society is not interested in anything beyond this, and will not reward it.

So, if we want to go beyond this in our psychosocial development, we have to do it for ourselves, on our own account. We have to step off the escalator. We have to take responsibility for our own lives. We have to cross the great gap. And what is on the other side? Primarily, and most obviously, it is authenticity. Now, authenticity is a difficult concept. Just because it is not a 'mental ego' concept, most people have only the vaguest idea as to what it could mean. They are not satisfied with the simple statement: it is seeing through your own eyes, instead of through the eyes of others. Jenny Wade says, 'Authentic consciousness differs dramatically from earlier stages because it is free from commonly recognised forms of ego-distorted cognitive and affective perception. Traditional theorists view this stage as markedly free of the ego defenses seen prior to this level, so that persons at this level are able to experience and express themselves fully.'¹¹⁻¹³ Their increased capacities have led Maslow and the Gravesians to designate this stage the first level of another developmental order.¹⁰

They distinguish between first-tier and second-tier thinking. First-tier thinking uses what is called formal, Aristotelian, Boolean, classical or Newtonian logic. It is familiar and easily understood, and all our computers are based on it. Its fundamental tenet is 'A is A'. Second-tier thinking uses dialectical logic. Dialectical logic, which can embrace paradox and contradiction, has a different fundamental tenet: 'A is not simply A.' It can immediately be seen how important this is for therapy. If a client comes into the room and I as a therapist say to myself, 'Arthur is Arthur', that gives me no hint of what might happen later. But if a client comes into the room and I say to myself, 'Agnes is not simply Agnes', that immediately opens up vistas of future change in unspecified directions.

Of course, there is far more to self-actualisation than authenticity or dialectical thinking. Maslow¹¹ laid down 17 characteristics, and I added to these¹⁴ to make a total of 30. My own experience, when I crossed 'the great gap',¹⁵ was almost mystical in its vividness and power. The hedges looked greener, the water shinier, the streets wider, the clouds more assertive – everything shone and spoke to me of something new and fresh.

We all thought in the 1970s that self-actualisation was an immense achievement, perhaps the ultimate state of consciousness, and therefore it would be hubris indeed to claim to be self-actualised. In fact, I once heard someone say, 'Anyone who claims to be authentic, can't possibly be authentic.' But, if, in truth, self-actualisation is just a step on the way, not a final goal, it need not be a dubious statement at all. It produces an authentic person, who sees through their own eyes, no longer through the eyes of other people. Wilber⁴ calls this the 'centaur self', in his masterly vision of this transition, not because there is any reference to classical mythology, but simply to establish that this is the stage where we begin to recognise that body and mind are one, rather than two separate things. This is a very worthwhile aim, and much of the humanistic spectrum of approaches is devoted to its achievement. But it is quite a modest and achievable aim: we can all realise the centaur self.

What Wilber also does, however, is to specify what the next step is along the path of self-development. It is the 'subtle self', where we realise that we are spiritual beings, and start to have experiences of a spiritual nature, such as meetings with archetypes, polytheistic deities, fairies, angels, nature spirits and so forth. This is the arena where we find transpersonal therapy.¹⁶ Jung was very interested in this area, and at times even obsessed by it, but he never made clear its connection with individuation, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Individuation

Having clarified this, then, let us go on to examine the process of individuation. This has, so far as I can discover, not been researched in the same way that the Maslow work has. And Jung himself is not at all clear about it. I approached his chapter titled 'Individuation'¹⁷ with great hope of a clear definition, but in it there was no such thing to be found. Instead, I had to go to the work of others for any real clarification. A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis is helpful here. It says: 'The process of individuation is a circumambulation of the self as the centre of the personality which thereby becomes unified. In other words, the person becomes conscious in what respects he or she is both a unique human being and, at the same time, no more than a common man or woman.'¹⁸

But this is only a start. June Singer is more helpful, when she says: 'The goal of treatment, which is rarely understood at the beginning, and then only in an intellectual way, is the shift of psychic balance from the area of consciousness with the ego as its centre, to the totality of the conscious and unconscious psyche. This "totality" has its own centre, which Jung has called the "self", in contradistinction to the "ego".'¹⁹ The problem is, however, that the self, with or without a capital letter, is a deeply confusing idea in Jung. People like Edward Edinger do not help when they say things like: 'We might give a geometrical formula for the individuation process this way: it starts as a circle, which must be turned into a square, which must be transformed again into a circle.'²⁰

If we say, then, that the journey of individuation is from the ego to the self, what does this mean, exactly? Singer puts it succinctly, when she says: 'The individuation process, in the Jungian sense, means the conscious realisation and integration of all the possibilities immanent in the person.'¹⁹ But I think this is too ambitious: how could we ever know whether all the possibilities were realised and integrated?

If we now compare the place we have reached so far in Jung on individuation with the earlier statements of Wilber on self-actualisation, it seems clear that we are talking about Wilber's centaur stage, rather than his subtle stage. And this is puzzling, because Jung is well known for being very interested in the subtle realm, which, after all, is the realm of dreams, symbols, images, archetypes and so forth, which he wrote about so often and so well.

It seems to me that Jung is confused about individuation, because of his reluctance to embrace the idea of the subtle as a new stage of development, beyond the centaur, or normal integration. He brandished the term 'Self' as if it were some kind of answer, but he never distinguished between the centaur self, the subtle self and the 'causal self', even though he was interested in all of them. (Incidentally, it seems to me that the same is true of psychosynthesis, but this is not the place for that argument.) In my own understanding and experience, the main distinguishing feature of the centaur stage is the wholehearted adoption of dialectical thinking, and the embrace of paradox and contradiction. This is, it seems to me, the right logic for dealing with people, just as formal logic is right for dealing with things.

But the subtle stage is quite different. Here we own up to being spiritual beings, willing to admit to being interested in gods and goddesses, angels, fairies and nature spirits, and in all the other concrete expressions of the divine. And here we encounter a different logic again. At the subtle level, you cannot ask the question, 'Is it true?' Instead, you have to start asking the question, 'What effect did that have on you?' This applies to seeing angels, being abducted by aliens, experiencing past lives, and so forth. 'What effect did that have on you?' is the new question, taking the place of 'is it true or false?', or 'what is the evidence?'

So, if I had to define what the Self really means in Jung, I would have to say 'the subtle self' – but I know that would be wrong. I really believe he did not actually know what he meant, and sort of revelled in the mystery of it all. If I had to settle on one definition of the Self, I would go for Singer's version: 'Individuation leads through the confrontation of the opposites until a gradual integration of the personality comes about, a oneness with oneself, with one's world, and with the divine presence as it makes itself known to us.'¹⁹ That seems about as far as we can go, and I have to leave it at that. But I'm still not satisfied that I really know what individuation is, or how and when it finishes.

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