

The Individuation Process

The individuation process is a term created by the famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung to describe the process of becoming aware of oneself, of one's make-up, and the way to discover one's true, inner self. Although the structure is basic and simple, the contents require a much deeper understanding.

For as long as mankind has existed, there were always people who asked themselves that most intriguing question: "Who am I". There is no simple answer, but Jung's individuation process provides us with some clear guidelines. First you need to understand a couple of terms, frequently used in psychology.

The ego. We are all familiar with the ego, or are we? What is the ego? When we say "I" or "me", what are we pointing to? The ego is the center of consciousness, but it is not what you are, as most people think. It is rather a function that allows you to distinguish yourself from others. It is a structure that orders your psychological qualities, so you can make sense of yourself and your actions. It gives you a sense of uniqueness, but know that we all have that in common.

What we also have in common is a conscious and an unconscious. With the conscious we are able to experience everyday life. The unconscious is a part of ourselves that kind of remains in the background, but is in no way inactive or inert. The unconscious is composed of hidden aspects of ourselves that continue to work on the conscious and thus on our everyday life, although we are not mostly not aware of it. The unconscious tries to bring man back into balance. In life we are not always able to do or be what we would like. Thus, the unconscious will influence our behavior and actions in a way that will compensate. These unconscious tendencies can be stronger than our conscious, and can even go against our will. Thus we tell things in a flare of anger, of which we will be very sorry afterwards.

Jung divided the unconscious in two parts: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious only belongs to yourself. It is the collection of subliminal perceptions, repressed or forgotten memories, wishes, and emotions in an individual. The memories of the personal unconscious can be evoked, although they cannot be totally controlled by will. Sometimes an accidental association will bring them to light. Sometimes they appear in dreams and fantasies. Hypnosis can also reveal them.

Another important term is the Self. The Self is often confused with the ego. As the ego is only a temporal structure that gives us an identity in this life, the Self is from a higher order than the ego. The Self is that what we are in essence. In psychological terms, it encompasses the conscious, the unconscious, and the ego. The Self is the central archetype in the collective unconscious, like the Sun is the center of the solar system. The Self is the archetype of order, organization and unity. It unifies the personality. The Self is our goal of life, because it is the most complete expression of the highest unity that we call individuality.

The Collective Unconscious

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Individuation

Individuation means that one becomes a person, an individual, a totally integrated personality. It is a process of self realization during which one integrates those contents of the psyche that have the ability to become conscious. It is a search for totality. It is an experience that could be formulated as the discovery of the divine in yourself, or the discovery of the totality of your Self. This does not always happen without pain, but it is necessary to accept many things that normally we would shy away from. Once a person has accepted the contents of his unconsciousness and has reached the goal of the individuation process, he is conscious of his relationships with everything that lives, with the entire cosmos.

Individuation is a natural, inherent process in man. It cannot be stimulated by something external, but it grows from the inside. Just as the body can become deformed or sick by lack of nutrition or movement, the personality can be deformed by lack of experience or education. Jung stresses that our modern world does not give enough opportunity to experience the archetype of the Shadow. When a child expresses his animal instincts, generally it is punished by its parents. Punishment does not lead to the extinction of the Shadow (repressed tendencies, more about this later on), which is impossible, but it leads to the suppression of this archetype. The Shadow retreats to an unconscious state, primitive and undifferentiated. Then, when the Shadow breaks through the repressive barrier, and this does happen once in a while, it manifests itself in a sinister, pathological way.

Transcendence

The first step of integration is individuation of all aspects of the personality, which is called the individuation process.

There is a second phase that Jung called the transcendental function. This function has the capacity to unify the opposite tendencies of the personality. The goal of transcendence is the realization of all aspects of the personality as they were originally concealed in the one's center, and the development of the potential unity. The transcendence is the means to realize the unity of the archetype of the Self.

The Process of Individuation

The individuation process begins with becoming conscious of the Persona, the mask we take on in our every day life. After this we become conscious of the Shadow, the repressed characteristics of the ego. Then we become conscious of the Anima, the inner woman in each man, or the Animus, the inner man in each woman. Then the image of the old wise man, or the old wise mother appears, after which the experience of the Self happens.

These phases are not necessarily chronological in order or separated from each other. They can overlap each other or run parallel.

The Persona

The Persona is a complicated system for connecting the individual consciousness with society. One could call it a mask that makes an impression on other people, but also hides the true nature of the person. It partly results from the demands of a society that one has to play the role that has been ascribed to him. In your profession you need to fulfill the demands of that profession as well as possible. A society demands this as a sort of security measure. From a shoemaker is expected that he repairs shoes to the best of his abilities, not that he is a poet. It is not even wanted that he is a poet, because then society thinks that he is not totally reliable as a shoemaker. In academic circles, a similar person would be regarded as a dilettante, in politics he would be considered as unreliable, in the religious area he would become a free-thinker. As soon as one deviates from his role, he becomes a suspicious person, despite the fact that he might still be an excellent worker in his profession. Therefore, if one wants to make it in society, one can only devote himself to one single thing. Of course, few people are able to do this, as we all have more than one interest. To accommodate to the wishes of society, we create a mask, a Persona. What is behind that mask we call 'privacy'.

This split in our behavior is not without consequences. If we neglect the development of the Persona, then people might find us insulting or they make our lives difficult, because they expect us to behave in the way society demands. At the other side, there is danger of identifying too much with the role that one is trying to fulfill.