

Processes and Paradox of the Self

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“The deeper layers of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat further and further into darkness. ‘Lower down’, that is to say as they approach the autonomous functional systems, they become increasingly collective until they are universalised and extinguished in the body’s materiality, i.e. in chemical substances. The body’s carbon is merely carbon, hence at bottom, the psyche is simply world.”
(C J Jung CW 9.1 par 291)

Jung’s first psychological theorising was based on his experience of complexes, which he thought of as unconscious patterning of the mind through relational experiences in early life, demonstrated unknowingly through assumptions and behaviour in adulthood. Later he came to see similarities of patterning in mythology, religion and fairy tales throughout history and proposed that archetypal patterns in the collective unconscious underlay the individual complexes of the personal unconscious. In a Jungian dictionary, this is now described as archetypal potential - the potential to take shape in the form of archetypal patterns. Some current Jungian thinkers are linking complexes with self-organising systems and seeing archetypes as generalisations from complex formation rather than as innate underlying patterns. Something of Jung’s changing thoughts about the relationship between complexes and archetypes can be seen in this debate between a ‘top down’ archetypal primacy approach and the ‘bottom up’ approach of the primacy of complexes. Cultural complexes in which specific archetypal identifications may be recognised as active within cultures and time periods provide an intermediate top down influence. However, the thinking of the dynamics of self-organising systems holds the potential for new archetypal forms to emerge rather than seeing existing archetypes as the basic forms of psychological life.

How then do we understand the concept of the self? Jung’s thinking about the self was divided between the self as the totality of psyche and the self as the centre of psyche. (Neither of these, of course, is the same as the meaning of the word self as used in the activity of a self-organising system.). In her paper in Volume 2 of this journal, Wendy Ellyat describes the Inclusional Geometry concept of a centre as a ‘dynamic relational centre of flow’. I intend to discuss a strand of psychological theorising in tune with this image. In his paper, “The Self, Did you find it or did you make it?” written in 1991, but edited and published posthumously, exploring this paradox, Louis Zinkin a Jungian analyst, proposed that “The self is always a construction, one which is not possible without language and language is not possible without culture and culture is always shared.” (Zinkin L 2008)

I will explore some of the thinking which influenced Zinkin and which has followed since Zinkin died in 1993.

From the 1940s onwards, Michael Fordham, a London based Jungian analyst, began to outline his theory of development through processes of de-integration of the self, in each meeting with new experience, followed by a re-integrative process as the self re-formed. If the experience was overwhelming, such that it brought about disintegration, this might then result in defences of, for example, splitting or dissociation in the self, as a defence against unbearable anxiety. This theory was being developed at the same period, the mid 1900’s, as Winnicott’s proposal of the true and false self. Both of these were predicated on a Primary Self, or Wholeness. In letters between Fordham and Louis Zinkin, Zinkin, who had been Fordham’s supervisee during his training, proposed that if the Primary Self could be a timeless concept, rather than a concrete reality in developmental terms, he would have no quarrel with Fordham’s theory. Michael Fordham seemed pleased with and accepted this sense of timelessness in relation to his concept. The Primary Self now could be thought to have been, that is to have existed, only after de-integrative, re-integrative processes had taken place and a self state or mode of experiencing and interpreting had come into being, with relationship at the core. A self state is not identical with Jung’s concept of the self, the centre of being, but a developmental achievement in which each self state would have a sense of stability, together with a potential for ongoing change.

In the 1980’s Daniel Stern, a psychoanalyst also working in Infant Research, described four stages of development of senses of self in infancy: the sense of an emergent self, the sense of a core self, the sense of a subjective self, the sense of a verbal self, all of which function alongside each other throughout life. Stern proposed that by 8 weeks the infant’s subjective organisation has developed to a level which he named a sense of an emergent self. He suggested that this could be as much a sense of process as of a product of those processes.

“I am suggesting that the infant can experience the process of emerging organisation as well as the result and it is this experience of emerging organisation that I call the emergent sense of self.” (Daniel, 1985 pg 45)

By the age of six months, Stern then proposed that the infant, given good enough relational and environmental opportunities, will have developed a sense of a core self. The necessary experiences are those of self- agency, self-coherence, self-affectivity, self-history.

“A sense of a core self results from the integration of these four basic self- experiences into a social subjective perspective” (idem pg 71)

Core- relatedness then would establish the physical and sensory distinctions of self and other. This would be followed by a sense of subjective self in which the beginning awareness of mind in self and other can be detected, for example through ‘sharing’ activities. This development would enable the possibility of experience of separation from the other and also union or being with another.

“When the domain of intersubjective relatedness is added, core-relatedness and intersubjective relatedness co exist and interact.” (idem p 125)

As language develops Stern proposed that this brought about another organisation which he named the verbal sense of self.

“Language then provides a new way of being related to others (who may be present or absent) by sharing personal world knowledge with them, coming together in the domain of verbal relatedness. These comings- together permit the old and persistent life issues of attachment, autonomy, separation, intimacy and so on to be re-encountered on the previously unavailable plane of relatedness through shared meaning of personal knowledge.” (idem 173)

Since meaning in language is created in the relational setting, this opens the potential for descriptive expression of experience but also for distortion of experience.

Mary, a 40 years old business woman, dreamed of a small 2 to 3 years old boy dressed in red dungarees, lively and actively present. Then to her shock, from the corner of her eye, she noticed nearby the shadowy still body of a small girl, seemingly lifeless. If this dream spoke of a deep split in her being, then it was not surprising that, in her life, this woman had followed what, at that time, were mainly masculine activities. The active little boy and the totally passive little girl could be seen as parts of the whole, into which her sense of self could be seen as having split. Rather than there being a dialogue between her receptive and penetrative desires, between her femininity and masculinity, there was a gap with a barrier behind which ‘the little girl’ lay discarded, a shameful part of her self

In Mary’s life, as a two year old child, and in a very short space of time, she had experienced: her older brother starting school, so having a life of his own, a younger brother being born, so changing her relationship with her mother, and her father being away from home for a period of three years. Perhaps these might give some background understanding of her dream, in which feelings of rejection were symbolised by a female child and feelings of desirability by a male child, possibly leading to the potential for a split in self identification between the unwanted feminine and the wanted masculine aspects of herself. Cultural complexes, in this case linked with male and female roles, could be seen as having played a part, in both the early splitting and then in the symbolic understanding of the dream.

If Mary had had to make sense of her experiences at the age of two then it is not difficult to imagine that she might relate a feeling of being desired to her baby brother, and a sense of importance to her older brother. Given the absence of her father and her mother’s involvement with the baby she might have felt overwhelmed and alone in her reactions and so been led to create a passive rejected ‘little girl’ and an active wanted ‘little boy’ within her self. From Stern’s senses of self, she would have been in the developmental stages of subjective self and verbal self domains, where symbolism has begun. Her sense of a core- self may have developed in a healthy manner and still be functioning well through out these experiences but the beginnings of sharing and revisiting the persistent life issues of separation and intimacy might have been very limited. Her resolution of her dilemma could be seen to have been that her masculine elements would be wanted, not least by herself, and her feminine elements rejected.

Donald Kalsched, a Jungian analyst in New York, took this thinking further in discussion of his work with patients who, having experienced trauma in childhood, then re- traumatise themselves thus preventing authentic relationship. He reviewed other theoreticians from the analytical tradition and saw Fordham’s ideas on defences of the self, which prevent integration of new experience, as linked with his thinking about what he described as the self-care system. This sounds benign, but within the self care system he included the potential split between the Protector and the Persecutor. Self care might involve inner persecution of the metaphorical child, wanting love but fearing hatred and hurt, so that any vulnerability, any reaching out, would be killed before it was born. A de-integration would become a disintegration and the resulting defensive systems would block the potential for the development of a new re-integrated state. Paradoxically, unconscious complexes acting to preserve life could at the same time kill future authenticity of being and hide, if not prevent, the relational contact necessary for participation in life of aspects of the self.

Following her dream, Mary began to experience a re- engagement in life of ‘the little girl’, the feminine, reaching an expression of a desire in ‘the little girl’ to wear the red dungarees: and for the masculine and feminine to become present and in dialogue with each other. She became more aware of the destructive persecutor aspect of herself which strove to block her authentic experience. Both penetration and receptivity are important and necessary aspects of relationship, both intra and interpsychic, both aspects of engagement with life, and both expressions of the self in the world. Challenging the cultural archetypes prevalent in her earlier experience opened the potential for re-organisation, reducing the power of the archetypal attractors of her self structure.

More recently, neuro- scientists, using the modern tools of investigation, have considered their findings in relation to brain activity, imagery and subjective experience. Antonio Damasio proposed a model of a proto-self, a coherent collection of neural patterns of which we are not aware: a core self, following the development of core consciousness and offering ‘a transient reference to the organism in which events are happening: followed by an autobiographical self, dependent upon both core consciousness and the development of an ‘organised record of past experiences of the organism’. Damasio offered a process model of the sense of self which would seem to have overlap with both Fordham’s developmental model and Stern’s senses of self model, both emphasising repetitive processes and the potential for disintegration, dissociation and splitting within these processes.

“Our sense of self is a state of the organism, the result of certain components operating in a certain manner, and interacting in a certain way, within certain parameters. It is another construction, a vulnerable pattern of integrated operations whose consequence is to generate the mental representation of a living individual being. The entire biological edifice, from cells, tissues, and organs to systems and images, is held alive by the constant execution of construction plans, always on the brink of partial or complete collapse should the process of rebuilding and renewal break down. The construction plans are all woven around the need to stay away from the brink.” (Damasio pg 145)

This psychological picture of the micro processes and paradox of the self mirrors the macro picture of the overall human and ecological worlds. It emphasises the iterative dynamics of interactions, with momentary experiences of wholeness as the stability of one or another attractor is revisited and archetypal forms reinforce and are reinforced in habitual living patterns. Now that we are experiencing life forms as on the brink and becoming more aware of the necessity to redesign our ‘construction plans’, perhaps the discomfort or disturbance felt in our senses of self could be of value in leading to the emergence of new archetypal forms.

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