The self, the psyche and the world: a phenomenological interpretation

Roger Brooke, Pittsburgh, USA

Abstract: This paper takes as its starting point Jung’s definition of the self as the totality of the psyche. However, because the term psyche remains conceptually unclear the concept of the self as totality, origin and goal, even centre, remains vague. With reference to Heidegger’s analysis of human being as Dasein, as well as Jung’s writings, it is argued that Jung’s concept of psyche is not a synonym for mind but is the world in which we live psychologically. An understanding of the psyche as existentially situated requires us to rethink some features of the self. For instance, the self as origin is thus not a pre-existential integrate of pure potentiality but the original gathering of existence in which, and out of which, personal identity is constituted. The ego emerges out of the self as the development and ownership of aspects of an existence that is already situated and gathered. Relations between the ego and the self are about what is known, or admitted, and its relation with what is already being lived within the gathering that is existence. The self as psyche, origin, and centre are discussed, as well as the meaning of interiority. Epistemological assumptions of object relations theory are critically discussed. The paper also includes critical discussions of recent papers on the self.

Keywords: Heidegger, interiority, object relations theory, psyche, phenomenology, self, symbols

The fact that we are again thinking about Jung’s concept of the self is immediate evidence of its enigmatic complexity. The difficulties in our understanding, or in being able to say what we mean, surely point to the nature of the beast. Recently Colman (2006) has provided a comprehensive summary of Jung’s uses, as well as critically discussed post-Jungian developments, and Solomon (2007) has provided a compelling synthesis of Jungian and psychoanalytic theories regarding the development of the self. It does not seem necessary to summarize these discussions here.

Discussions concerning the (Jungian) self inevitably lead towards that area between psychology and philosophy, or what used to be called philosophical anthropology. What is the nature of the self most originally, or fundamentally? Is it given or constituted, found or made, personal or impersonal, and in what sense is it mine or not-mine? Does the self unfold from inside me, or is it interpersonally constituted and socially constructed? (see Zinkin et al 2008). These are questions about what it is to be human and a person. They
Psychologists typically differentiate between the outer world of publicly observable facts and the inner world of the psyche, which is the private world of imagination, memory, thinking, feeling, and desire. Jung usually takes this distinction for granted, but a close look at his thinking and writing makes it clear that the inner world is not directly experienced at all and that all experience, from whatever source, takes place in the inner world. Thus Jung writes:

The problem with this view can be illustrated by the following example of a tree. A tree is not just a tree; it is a complex of living organisms, including bacteria, fungi, insects, and birds, all interacting in a delicate balance. This interdependence is what makes the tree alive and functioning. Without this delicate balance, the tree would wither and die. This example illustrates the complexity of life and the interdependence of all living things. Jung's work is a study of the psyche and its relationship to the inner world. The psyche is the inner world, and the outer world is the projection of the psyche. Jung believed that the psyche is the true reality, and that the outer world is just a projection of the psyche. This projection is not just a physical one, but a spiritual one as well. Jung believed that the psyche is the seat of the soul, and that the soul is the true reality. The outer world is just a projection of the soul, and the psyche is the true reality. This projection is not just a physical one, but a spiritual one as well. Jung believed that the psyche is the seat of the soul, and that the soul is the true reality. The outer world is just a projection of the soul, and the psyche is the true reality.
Thus the psyche is the world in which we live and find ourselves. It is not inside us; we are inside it. As Jung famously puts it:

As I see it the psyche is a world in which the ego is contained. Maybe there are fishes out there who believe that they contain the sea. We must rid ourselves of this habitual illusion of ours.

(Jung 1929, para. 75)

What Jung calls psyche thus seems identical to me to what the phenomenologists simply call the world (or lifeworld).

What we think of as mind, by contrast, is largely a post-renaissance creation. It is a res cogitans within the subject, separate from the world, predominantly rational in its pursuits. Before Descartes, mind was a mode of engagement with the world: we could engage each other with our minds, in conversation, or our bodies, in sport. Since Galileo and Descartes, mind became the interior place of experience and subjectivity, separated ontologically and forever from the world. Whenever we read Jung’s discussions of psychic life in these terms we find ourselves in a cul-de-sac.

If the psyche is the lifeworld, and we are always and inescapably in psychic reality, then the human being is, as the phenomenologists describe, a being-in-the-world. This irreducible and non-option world gathering spaciousness is fundamental for locating and understanding the self.

Self and psyche

In Psychological Types Jung defines the self as ‘the whole range of psychic phenomena in man, [expressing] the unity of the personality as a whole’ (Jung 1921, para. 489). The editors of the Collected Works point out that this is virtually identical with the definition of the psyche as ‘the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious’ (ibid., para. 979). They add:

The inference would seem to be that every individual, by virtue of having, or being, a psyche, is potentially the self. It is only a question of ‘realizing’ it. But the realization, if ever achieved, is the work of a life-time.

(ibid., footnote 72, p. 460n)

If the self is the totality of the psyche and the psyche is the lifeworld, then it seems we must understand the self as always and irreducibly situated in and related to the world. The self is situated within psyche’s landscape of material things, events, rituals, myths, stories, memories, phantasies, and dream images, bound together in language and time. Language brings all these aspects of the psyche/self into presence and holds them together in a more or less shared reality; time is that expanse in which meaning is carried as memory, narrative, and future possibility.

The terms psyche and self would seem to be almost interchangeable. Their expanse and dimensions are the same. The term self seems to be useful in

emphasizing that the primordial occurrence of gathering which Jung calls the psyche is potentially someone’s. It is out of that gathering now called the self that we are constituted and come into being as the persons we are.

For Jung the self as origin and ground is largely unconscious and pre-personal. It is a gathering of relations and potentials that is often lived blindly, without conscious affirmation. Self realization requires the active participation of the ego, that centre of conscious and felt sense of subjectivity. In other words, without the ego’s appropriation of the self—‘yes, this is my world and my life’—even the self remains only half alive and awake.

Self, psyche, and Mary’s dream

Here is a story and a dream that was recently mentioned in a different context (Brooke 2008). A traditional Xhosa woman, whom we shall call Mary, was born in a mud hut on the slope of the Hogsback Mountain in the area known as the Ciskei in South Africa. She had come to Grahamstown in her early twenties to look for work. She had never been to school, was illiterate, and had been looking after her younger siblings as an adult since the age of twelve. She enjoyed life in the city, with its electricity, tap water, and the extra money that she earned as a housekeeper and nanny. She married, had two children, was abandoned by her husband, but still managed to move from a shanty into her own house. She continued to maintain her family ties with those back in the mountains, and she dutifully consulted her ancestors whenever important events had to be remembered or decisions had to be made. Nevertheless, in her mid-thirties she found herself becoming anxious and troubled. Then she had a dream which preoccupied her for days. Because she knew me, and that I worked with people and their dreams, she told me her dream, in English.

I am on the farm where I was raised. The land has been in my family since before my great-grandfather. Someone is driving a tractor pulling a plough over the land where we farmed cattle and buried our ancestors. I am worried and upset. Then I go down a pathway to a small pond. I walk into the water up to my chest. It is very peaceful. I see lots of little golden fishes in the water around me, and I am so happy to see them. Some of them come to the surface, and they speak to me. They say that I must not worry or be sad, and that they will look after me. Then I get out of the water.

A feature of Jungian thought is that it opens us to a world in which we can think psychologically without reductionistically psychologizing what we encounter. We can appreciate the psychological meaning of what is happening to this lady without reducing that meaning to a matter of mind and psychodynamics. I said to her something to the effect that the dream was a gift, given to her by her ancestors because she is a good woman. She seems to fear that living in the city she is neglecting her family and ancestral ties, and that the modern world is disrespectful of the land and her traditions. However, the golden fish are the way in which her ancestors have come to her, to reassure her that she is
loved and that they will continue to take care of her. By the time I had finished, she was tearful with relief, saying that she had thought the fish might be her ancestors but she had been too shy to say so herself. She was a humble person, and she seemed to feel deeply reassured. She also agreed to my suggestion that she tell her dream to others whom she trusts, because the dream was a big dream and might help other people too.

Who dreams? It is surely not Mary as an ego who dreams. She did not make the dream up. As Jungians we understand that she finds herself in a dream of which she, as a person with an ego identity, is not truly the author. It would be theoretically better, and phenomenologically more accurate, to say that the self dreams, and the ego finds itself present and dreamed within that psychic gathering that we call the dreaming self. The transformative moment is that she (as a conscious ego) is open to the self's communications of loving support. We can imagine that she felt better grounded, contained, true to herself. Her sense of herself as a person—her ego consciousness—was aligned with her greater self.

We might also note that the major themes which Jung describes as features of the self are movingly evident in this dream. She has a widened consciousness; the tension between the opposites of her traditional and city lives and identifications is reconciled through the symbol of the golden fish. Psychic integration has occurred. The self has been realized, for the moment at least, and the ego has been both actively engaged in the process and accepting of its relatively humble status in the totality of her psychic life.

While we can recognize the activity of Mary's dreaming self, it is interesting to ask where we might locate it. Her self is clearly more than a set of potentials inside her. As Solomon (2007) has recently argued in careful detail, the self as origin, or foundation, is already a complex synthesis of original potentials, the given of sociocultural reality, and the internalized object relations with primary caregivers. In this sense, Zinkin (1991/2008; Zinkin et al. 2008) seems right to argue that there can be no meaningfully felt sense of self until mediated through others. On the other hand, Solomon's (op. cit.) dialectical synthesis helps break the impasse in which Zinkin and his colleagues find themselves. Thinking dialectically, what is given is always already socially interpreted, so much so that there is no given that has any meaning prior to interpretation and response in social reality. On the other hand, the social constitution of the self is not arbitrary, without existential gravity, as though anything goes. As Jung would have said, the baby is not a tabula rasa; he or she brings something to the interactions, and continues to do so throughout his or her life.

Phenomenological discipline requires us to stay with the dream and dreamer's experience on their own terms. Before doing that, by contrast, we can approach the dream through a psychoanalytic lens. Jungians will surely recognize what violence has been done if we think of this Xhosa woman's psyche as merely equivalent to mind, and of her dream as a product of psychodynamics and developmental history. At risk of caricaturing Kleinian analysis, here is one

psychodynamic formulation. The nourishing earth that is ploughed represents the breast being assaulted with envious attacks for more milk/produce. In her anxiety the dreamer is reassured by her good internal objects that her destructiveness is not omnipotent and that her internal world is lovable and intact. The dream represents a resolution into the depressive position.

In my view, even if there are features of depressive anxiety and resolution in this dream, the formulation is gravely inadequate. The inadequacy that concerns me is not at the level of this or that psychodynamic interpretation but in the anthropological perspective which assumes psyche is a matter of mind within which psychodynamics determine our experience, dreams, and lives. From this object relations perspective, there are no real ancestors, nor an earth to which we are bound and indebted, nor political and historical reality, nor cultural obligations (see also Maiello 2008, pp. 254–55.) The psychological world in which Mary lives her life is abandoned. European colonialism continues as a Faustian epistemology, before which the gods and ancestors flee homeless. In object relations theory, it is in the mind where we live our lives, like monads floating through empty space. I shall return to object relations theory later.

What the existential phenomenologists have expressed so well for us, and what Jung saw, is that the dreamer's psyche is out there, in the Hogsback Mountains, and in Grahamstown. This is not a matter of projection. Her psyche is that open clearing within which the mountains and city call for her attention and response. In that psychic landscape, out there as her world, we also find her children, employer, apartheid South Africa, friends, financial concerns, her own house with its happy pink walls and vegetable garden, the myths, legends, and stories of her culture, and, of course, a pond, golden fish, and ancestors. Her psyche is that clearing in which all this is revealed and held by the person, Mary.

This open clearing is more than a mere spaciousness. Animals, too, are spatially engaged with an Umwelt, an ahistorical, natural environment, with narrowly circumscribed meanings. By contrast, the human psyche is a spaciousness which is most fundamentally historical. The world that is gathered and lived as psyche only has meaning within its temporal horizons. Every single image or thing in our experience is the emergent gathering of an historical world. That is what Heidegger means when he says that a 'thing things' (Heidegger 1971). A thing, whether materially real or imagined, is a verb as much as a noun; it does something as much as it is something. What a thing does, whether perceived in the material world or 'only' in a dream, is to gather that network of relationships with other beings (things, people, animals, places, mythic figures, ideas, songs, rituals, the Divine—anything) that together constitute my world.

The tractor brings into presence the farmer, technology, and the industrial world, some of many stories of South Africa. The tractor ploughing a field in the Hogsback Mountains is the place of Mary's cultural and spiritual conflict, just as she feels torn between Hogsback and Grahamstown. These psychic tensions are painful and guilt ridden, until she finds a pathway down to a pond, where
her ancestors come to her in the form of golden fishes. All the images in the dream cohere in that open realm that is this Xhosa woman, Mary. None of this gathering makes sense unless embedded in human temporality, specifically those historical and narrative horizons that constitute these relationships and their meanings in precisely Mary’s way.

Psyche’s temporal horizon means that the dream, like all experience, tells a story, in a setting that has a history with cultural, political, and personal developmental dimensions, a present that is conflicted, and that is uncertain but possibly blessed. Every image in her dream has its meaning within these wider cultural and historical narratives. The mountains are where her ancestors really are buried. Hogshank contains the myths and stories of her family history; it holds them in its ravines, caves, waterfalls, fields, and peaks. Grahamstown is a place that gathers a different history, a story of British colonialism and, later, of apartheid South Africa. It is also a story of technology, money, and educational opportunities for her children. The pond is a dream place only, an imreal place in the mountains, which gathers together, as no material place quite so perfectly can, precisely the aesthetic moment and meaning the dreaming self requires. As the pond ‘things’, it gathers her world as that network of relations in which this woman is about to be transformed. The golden fish bring into her presence, out of the opaque yet life-giving depths of the pond, the spirits of her ancestors.

All this is made possible because of the crisis in which Mary finds herself (interestingly in mid-life). In this sense, the dream is Mary’s own dream; it is her self’s awakening into image and remembered dream, to be taken up and affirmed by the executive decisions and ego functions of her daily life. The dream contains both blessing and ethical appeal. With its archetypal quality, it is also more than Mary’s personal dream. It has collective significance, given to Mary as a gift, but speaking to her wider community. At some level it is a dream that is given for all of us. The dream itself is a pool from which, if we wade into it with an open heart, we too may hear its reassuring meanings and gentle spiritual calling.

Things and symbols

I imagine many readers would want to say, with Jung, that the images in her dream are symbols. The fish symbolize her ancestors, for instance, the fields symbolize the great mother, the pond symbolizes the spiritual waters of transformation. Perhaps the man on the tractor symbolizes a negative animus, threatening Mary’s connections with the Great Mother archetype and her repressed self. The ancestors themselves might be symbols of the archetypal figures and complexes.

The problem with this move lies not so much at the level of manifest content. As a phenomenologist, Jung consistently endeavoured to remain faithful to the meanings that were revealed within the phenomena themselves. By calling these phenomena symbols, Jung is pointing to the profound meaningfulness and transformative possibilities that their presence carries. In this way, Jung is trying to rescue meaning, symbolic resonance, and the experience of mystery from psychoanalytic reductionism, on one hand, and from scientific empiricism on the other. The problem, for the phenomenologist, lies once again in the conceptual drift towards those epistemological assumptions which frame our understanding of symbols. The drift is towards the Galilean/Cartesian assumption that the fish is merely a biological thing, meaningless in itself, living in water, which is H₂O. It is the tendency to call something a symbol in order to account for our experience of its meaningfulness in what is assumed to be a homogenized, meaningless world. Thinking of Mary’s dream images as symbols affirms their meaningfulness and mystery in one sense, but possibly at the price of delegitimizing their ontological claim. The problem, in other words, is that calling the fish a symbol can inadvertently destroy the meaningfulness of the fish as the presencing of a world—in this instance, the world of her ancestors.

This is not a trivial theoretical issue (for ‘thinking types’). I once had a Xhosa graduate student who found Jung consistently disappointing. As we were talking, a bee flew through the open window into my office. He asked for a moment’s respectful silence as the ancestors were present. We had our example, and he could state his problem. A Jungian interpretation seems to assume that the primary reality of the bee is its biological reality and that, in the student’s (‘primitive’) mind, it symbolizes his ancestors and cultural commitments. This symbolic meaning is then projected onto the essentially biological bee, which is why it appears to be meaningful. Jung requires the concept of synchronicity to account for our experience of a meaningful lifeworld that is, for the phenomenologist, immediately given and available for description.

Although this is a powerful critique, it is also unfair. Jung does not have to be read in this way. As I have been arguing, psyche is not mind but a landscape in which things are alive with meaning and mystery. Certainly in Jung’s most sustained theoretical discussion of symbols (Jung 1921, paras. 814–29), there is nothing indicating that Jung was guilty of understanding symbols against this Cartesian background. On the contrary, he writes of symbols binding the observer and the observed and combining all four functions, including perception. Symbols are not re-presentational signs, but the presencing of a mystery in such a way that psychic life is integrated and the person is transformed.

The golden fish announce the presence of Mary’s ancestors. According to an authority I asked there is no mythology of golden fishes in Xhosa culture, nor did the Xhosa have fish as totems or other symbolic objects (Kalusha, personal communication, July 2009). He suggests that the colour gold might signify their great value. However, a prominent feature of Xhosa mythology concerns the River People, who are generally regarded as kind and supportive, and who sometimes bring messages from the ancestors (Elliott 1970). There is something of this myth creatively taken up in the dream. One possibility that
my interpretation missed is that the River People sometimes invite humans to join them in the water so that they can be trained as healers (sangoma). Perhaps Mary was being called more deeply than I had appreciated. On the other hand, even if this dream did not announce such a cultural calling, these associations to the River People do further amplify the dream’s healing power. Mary has, at least for a moment, become a healer within her own psychic world.

As archetypal symbols, the golden fish have not emerged from the unconscious topographically conceived as a sort of mental basement. They have emerged as a creative synthesis of cultural lore, familiar landscape, political and cultural history, personal anxiety and conflict, and the aesthetic requirements of the psyche at that moment. There are no material golden fish in those rivers and ponds, and there is no pond in those mountains that is quite like the one in her dream. What this emphasizes is that to think of the psyche as an open clearing within which the world can be disclosed is not to drain the psyche of its imaginal creativity and power. No matter how ‘extraverted’ or ‘objective’ we might be, there are no things or events that speak to us outside of psyche’s imaginal workings. This is what Jung refers to as the autonomy of the psyche.

Self and interiority

The phenomenological tradition, following Heidegger, is relentless in rejecting any language of interiority at all. It is argued that such a language violates the structure of human experience in the most fundamental way, which is that experience is always and irreducibly situated in and as a world (e.g., Craig 2008b). The arguments are rigorous and can be well taken. The problem, for me, is that such arguments throw out the baby with the bath water. Having an inner life, holding memories in mind, and distinguishing primitive phantasy from reality, do describe meaningful occurrences. To balk at the language of interiority here is to miss the point. What I think is required is an interpretation that values subjectivity and interiority without setting them in a Cartesian anthropology, i.e., without interpreting them as limited to matters of mind.

Interiority means that the human world is always threaded with psyche’s movements, or imaginally constituted, and that it becomes relatively enduring despite changing environments. What we have come to call object constancy is that developmental achievement in which the child’s psychological world is a gathering that is held through time, so that, for instance, his relationship with his mother continues in her absence. The capacity to be alone is possible, paradoxically, because of the absent (m)other’s continuing presence (Winnicott 1958). Interiority is a profoundly meaningful psychological accomplishment,

and is fundamental to the ordinary sense of self and mental health (Brooke 1994). The discovery that one can have an invisible ‘inner’ life is, for schizophrenic and severely borderline patients, increasingly reassuring. One such patient said simply, ‘For the first time in my life I know what it means to be a person’. Interiority reflects ego development and resilience, as the primordially gathered world of the psyche is appropriated — taken up and affirmed — as ‘mine’, held in imagination and memory. The development of interiority reflects a trajectory from assertions of fact to interpretations, concrete perceptions to self-reflective perspectives, and from merely having thoughts to dialectical thinking. What we do not need to do conceptually is to spatialize interiority so that it becomes a matter of mind, cut off from existence and absent from a world. What we do need is to recognize the constitutive and gathering power of language and time, which hold the world together as a psychic world.

With this theoretical background we might recall with appreciation Hillman’s (1975) comment that interiority ‘is not a spatial idea, but an imaginal metaphor for the soul’s invisible and non-literal inherence, the imaginal psychic quality within all events’ (p. 173).

Interiority and object relations theory

Now to return to my comments on object relations theory and interiority. The great insight of this tradition is that personal identity is irreducibly constituted in and as an interpersonal world. The claim is deeper than that one is always in relation to an other. It is that self and other are reversible and mutually constitutive. Otherness pervades identity so thoroughly that the answer to the question, ‘Who is speaking to whom?’ (attributed to Paula Heimann) is not self-evident. This radical reversibility of self and other is evident not only in interpersonal relations but in the very structure of thinking and self-evaluation. In fact, one of the moves of analysis is to deconstruct simplistic self-certainties (ego positions).

In my view, object relations theory has described in detail the psychological dimensions of Heidegger’s (1927/62) ontological argument that Dasein is Mitsein: that human ‘being-there’, is already ‘being-with-others’. Before the development of object relations theory, Heidegger found it necessary to ask ‘who’ a human being (Dasein) is, even when he or she says ‘I’ (p. 150). Who is this ‘I’ that speaks? What Heidegger finds is that being human is an open clearing that is inextricably interpersonal before it can be said to be ‘mine’ and before anyone can say ‘I’. I am born into the language and world of the other, which surrounds, pervades, and constitutes me.

Heidegger’s analysis of human being as pervasively shared with others is the anthropological ground that makes possible, and calls for, the development of object relations theory. In its turn, object relations theory takes up Heidegger’s anthropology and describes in detail the constitution of identity as it emerges out.
of this relational matrix. The theoretical problem for object relations theorists has been an inability to speak about this without trying to force into it the categories of Cartesian metaphysics. Zinkin (2008, p. 416) notes the irony that Kleinian thinking turns back into a one-person psychology by systematically focusing on the baby and ignoring the relationship with the mother. What one ends up with, therefore, tends to be a theoretical image of isolated subjectivities throwing ‘objects’ back and forth across an empty and intrinsically meaningless space.

I think Jungian psychology can make two radical contributions to object relations theory. First, Jungians can deconstruct object relations theory by listening to its accounts with a broader cultural-historical ear and hearing archetypal meaning within its contemporary theory. Then we can hear, for instance, tales about the role of the ancestors in our development and the ways in which we try to stay in right relation with them for a sense of well-being. Second, Jungian psychology can offer object relations theory an understanding of psyche that reaches outwards, far beyond the psychodynamics of mind. Winnicott (1964) was right: Freud and Jung had ontologically different views of the psyche (although I would not reduce it to a matter of their respective psychopathologies). For Jungians, psychoanalytic models of mind are a Procrustean bed. The integration of Jungian psychology with object relations theory has been a major contribution to our field. However, we have not fulfilled our mandate until we blow ORT’s model of mind wide open.

Self as origin, then and now

In an important sense, the self as origin is not something that is original in time once and then left behind. The self remains as a sustaining origin and ground to the ego throughout one’s life. The realization of the self in ego consciousness refers to an ongoing and dialectical relation of being and knowing (Colman 2008), being existentially situated and vitally engaged on one hand, with acts of self-reflective affirmation and personalization on the other (all being well enough). Jung (1973) writes, ‘What I have left behind, seemingly lost, I meet in everything that comes my way and I collect it, reassembling it as it were’ (p. 195). Jung’s description is exactly right. The lost, forgotten, or repressed self is all around me in my situation as much as it might in addition refer to a selfhood lived in a remote past. In short, the self as origin is given and situated, both then and now. Colman comes hair-splittingly close to what I am saying when he writes:

Now, if the self is my very being and my very being is in some way this body that is being in the world, then it follows that the self is there from the very start, not as a hypothetical ‘integrate’ but as the process of psychosomatic development. There is no need to posit a self that ‘initiates’ processes such as deintegration and reintegration; these processes are the self in action and this activity is the self.

(Colman 2008, p. 357)

The self, the psyche and the world

I would only emphasize that the self as ‘my very being’ is one’s embodied being in the world as a single world-disclosive and constitutive structure. In any event, I take this to mean that deintegration and reintegration do not describe a rhythm of movements from ‘in here’ to ‘out there’ and back again, but a rhythm of rising and falling within the whole structure of being in the world. To take the prototypical example, the baby awakens hungry, finds a breast, has a fulfilling feed, and sinks back into a blissful sleep. The initially sleeping baby was already the relaxed embodiment of a warm and comfortable world. Then his hunger changed the world, even before waking, so that he awoke distressed and searching for the breast that was both materially offered by a devoted mother and, perhaps, already hallucinated in phantasy, equally ‘out there’. The nourishing and loving feed brings together the world again, satisfied, fulfilled, on the way to being trustworthy, loved and lovable. The reintegration process allows the baby to drift back into a reintegrated world of loving sounds, soft and warm clothes, intimate smells. His reintegrated sleep is the incarnation of this world.

If the self is that original gathering of genetic endowment and world which is potentially a person, then the ego is the personification and personalization of that gathering such that it is known and owned as a person. Colman (2008) persuasively argues that the self in this sense is first of all given and lived as a kind of unconscious existence, and it is only with what we call ego development and consciousness that this existence is taken up and known, or affirmed. It is then, with ego development, that the self is appropriated and realized as an integrated and responsibly engaged world, and that one can be said to have a self as well.

The centre as archetype and as quality of experience

Since Fordham (1963) rejected Jung’s intuition that the self could be both the totality of the psyche and the archetype of the centre, the notion of self as centre has not had much currency in the tradition of this journal. Urban’s (2008) recent paper is an important attempt to restore our sense of the psyche’s centring capacities and to fill in this theoretical lacuna. What seems generally recognized in the Jungian experience is that the psyche has a capacity to organize psychological life around a centre, and that, when this happens, it produces a sense of rightness and inner coherence. It can also occasion a sacred sense of one’s place in the wider scheme of things.

On the other hand, Jung’s repeated assertion that ‘The self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference [of the psyche]’ (Jung 1944/52, para. 44) is presumably not an intellectual aberration, and is open to interpretation. This becomes clearer when we recall that Jung sometimes referred to St. Bonaventura’s claim that ‘God (the self) is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere’ (e.g., Jung 1955/56, para. 41). In addition, Serrano (1968) quotes Jung as saying ‘I have found no stable or
definite centre in the unconscious and I don’t believe that such a centre exists. I believe that the thing I call the Self [sic] is an ideal centre... [a] dream of totality’ (Serrano 1968, p. 50). In other words, for Jung, archetypal images of the self have a centre, but this centre is not to be found in psychic life. Centre and circle must surely refer to a quality of being in the world that is somehow centred and balanced, open-hearted, humble, and spacious, whatever else one might want to say. If the archetypes are the psyche’s inherited capacities, and the archetype of the centre refers to the self’s capacity to organize psychic life around a centre, then the term has some merit. My theoretical concern is only the reification of that capacity, i.e., the hypothesis that there is a central archetype doing this centring.

A young man presented with depressed mood, blunted affect, irritability, obsessionial self-criticism, and a history of emotionally split relationships with women. During an early session in which he spoke about the limitations of his emotional life, he mentioned a recent dream. It was simply an image of a giant wheel containing all the colours of the rainbow radiating out from the centre. This mandala image is a single organizing image, a Gestalt, which does not require an archetype of a centre to organize it. Nor is there evidence, even indirectly, of a centre in the psyche that produced it. On the contrary, the dream opens a psychic space in which the mandala appears, gathering in symbolic form the possibility that the young man’s life might be first of all imagined, then perhaps lived, with greater affective range, harmoniously contained and integrated. The telos in the dream means the mandala image is a vocation, calling him to know that the full range of human experience is manageable and available to him. His task is to take it up, otherwise he will continue to be depressed and only half alive. Through the mandala image the self gathers the repressed and split off latencies of his life, offering to him (as ego) its compensatory and healing power. Like the mandala, the self as psychic totality is itself the organizing process, arranging psychic life around an imaginal centre (Brooke 1991, p. 97; Colman op.cit.).

The mandala image certainly emerges from the unconscious, so to speak, but the unconscious is equally the young man’s situation. His affective restrictions are also perceptual ones. If his capacity to love, for instance, or to be creatively angry, is repressed, then this repressed unconscious lies between him and others, including his girlfriend. (I have often been struck how the unconscious is imagined, following Freud’s topographical model, to lie within us and below consciousness, whereas it is more often in front of us, alarmingly visible to others but not ourselves.) If the young man does not perceive his unconscious feelings, it is equally true that he does not see his girlfriend clearly or fully. Phenomenologically, the unconscious is lived within the structure of perception and our behavioural engagements with others (Merleau-Ponty 1945/62; Romanyshyn 1982/2001, p. 111). His girlfriend appears in his world without interiority or depth, with little subjectivity, embalmed in his idealization, unconscious hostility, and anxiety. In his tightly restricted existence, she barely has the presence to be another centre of subjectivity. In an immediately descriptive sense, she is the place where his repressed unconscious is visible: we can see her but he cannot. Being in the world means that the whole structure is repressed as a single occurrence. Thus the mandala in his dream invites him to see her as much as his feelings and phantasies. If the self made visible in the mandala can be realized, she will become visible and present in his world no less than will his affective life.

In drawing together these ideas regarding the phenomenology of the self as centre, I would like once again to acknowledge Colman’s (op. cit.) comments:

When Jung speaks of the self as the centre of the personality and the goal of individuation, I think he is speaking about a way of imaging the self that enables a maximum of expression of the total self through action. So the more I can develop an image of the self as centre, the more it is also possible for me to contemplate and allow for the totality of my being. And vice versa: the more aspects of myself that I can accommodate in my self-image, the closer I might come to having such a ‘centre’ at the core of my being.

(Colman, op.cit., p. 364)

Conclusion

To appreciate Jung’s understanding of being human, we need to understand that the psyche is conceptually radically different from mind. The psyche surrounds us as the world of meaningful relations with which we are engaged, whether or not the phenomena in our word are material or imaginal. The self, as the totality of the psyche, is situates as the total structure of our being in the world. Jung’s insights into the dynamic processes of the self are affirmed, even as phenomenological descriptions of some central terms call for greater conceptual precision.

Translators of Abstract

Cet article prend pour point de départ la définition par Jung du soi comme totalité de la psyché. Cependant, du fait du manque de clarté conceptuelle du terme « psyché », le concept de soi comme totalité, origine e: but, voire comme centre, demeure vague. En référence à l’analyse de Heidegger de l’être humain comme Dasein ainsi qu’aux écrits de Jung, j’émet l’hypothèse que le concept de psyché n’est pas synonyme d’esprit pour Jung, mais du monde dans lequel nous vivons psychologiquement. Une compréhension existentielle de la psyché suppose que nous repensions certaines des caractéristiques du soi. Ainsi par exemple, le soi comme origine n’est pas un amalgame pré-existental de potentialités pures mais il est formé par l’existence dans laquelle et à partir de laquelle se constitue l’identité personnelle. Le mé es émerge du soi comme le développement et l’appropriation d’aspects d’une existence déjà posée et assimilée. Les relations moi-soi portent sur du connu ou de l’admis, en lien avec ce qui se vit au sein de cet agrégat qu’est l’existence. Les notions de transformation, d’intégration et d’intériorité sont examinées. L’article comporte des discussions critiques d’articles récents sur le soi.
Este trabajo toma como punto de partida la definición de Jung del Ser (Self) como la totalidad de la psique. Sin embargo, porque el término psique queda conceptualmente poco claro el concepto del Self como totalidad, el origen y objetivo, aún central, queda vago. Con referencia al análisis del Ser Humano de Heidegger como Dasein, se discute el concepto de Jung de psique como no sinónimo de mente en los escritos de Jung sino como el mundo en el cual vivimos psicológicamente. Una comprensión de la psique como existencialmente ubicada nos requiere de volver a pensar algunas características del Self. Por ejemplo el Self como origen no es un pre-existente constituido de pura potencialidad sino la conjunción original de la existencia en la cual, y de la cual, está constituida la identidad personal. El ego surge fuera del Self como el desarrollo y propiedad de aspectos de una existencia situada y conjugada. Las relaciones entre el ego y el Self están acerca de lo que es conocido, o es admitido, y su relación con lo que ya se ha vivido dentro de la conjugación que es la existencia. Se reflexiona sobre la transformación, la integración, y interioridad. El trabajo incluye discusiones críticas de escritos recientes sobre el Self.

References


Acknowledgements

Thanks to Professor Russell Kaluschka, Chair of the School of Languages, Rhodes University. I would also like to thank my wife, Jungian analyst Sandra Miller, for her helpful comments.

Any errors are mine alone.