



Individuation

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The Concept of Individuation in Analytical Psychology: A Brief Snapshot

The basic definition of the term “individuation,” as used in analytical psychology, is: *Self-realization*. This means, the gradual incarnation of potentials housed within the Self at birth and realized in the course of an entire lifetime. This is sometimes called “the acorn theory” of psychological development. A person becomes in life what they have brought with them as potential at birth. We are born with a Self, and it takes a lifetime to bring it to more or less full realization. Individuation is a process that unfolds in stages of psychological development.

A basic distinction between ego and Self must be kept in mind. The ego is a part of the whole; the Self *is* the whole. Becoming WHAT one is and not only WHO one is a useful distinction. The word “WHAT” implies the psyche as a whole, while the word “WHO” refers to a conscious sense of identity as an individual. In the course of the individuation process, the “WHO” can approximate the “WHAT.” This process is called “integration.” Typically, integration is preceded by separation of elements in the Self, which results in the formation of the personality with the “WHO” located in the conscious sector and identified as “I” (ego). The left-out pieces of the Self, either simply neglected or pushed out in the process of separation, remain in the unconscious.

Full individuation is a goal, and it is never fully achieved. It is approachable, but only relatively. This is because the unconscious is too comprehensive to integrate fully. One can get a glimpse of the Self in symbols, but one cannot fully integrate it.

Individuation is an archetypal process. This means it is universally human and can therefore be thought of as a type of instinct that is inherited. It is a native human tendency to develop on the psychological level, which matches to a degree physical development.

The process of individuation falls into essentially two phases: the first half of life and the second. The first half of life is typically further divided into two stages, which Erich Neumann named the Mother stage and the Father stage. The first half of life is dedicated to ego development; the second half of life is aimed at integration of the whole psyche to the degree possible in a given human life.

The Mother stage, which begins in the womb and continues typically until the age of 10-12, is characterized by an atmosphere of containment, nourishment, and attachment. The infant must be brought psychologically into this world, and emotional attachment is the means by which this is achieved. This produces an essential experience of belonging and instills trust and security in the young person. Demands for achievement and judgments of performance are mild, ideally, at this stage of development, although the beginning of ego and persona development emerge since conformity to expectations of others is a required feature. Innate features of will and personality appear early on. Typological preference can be seen quite early in this phase.

The Father stage begins with initiation into the world of demands for performance. This calls for identification with a peer group and with wider than familial cultural images and expectations, also for a stable location in the social order. Hierarchy is a feature of the Father world, and the individual is required to find a location in this social system. Ambition to achieve a place in the social world begins and dominates this phase. This is the phase of adaptation to culture, and a strong emphasis is placed on persona development. An adequate social identity is paramount for functioning in the Father world. High performance is rewarded, and the lack of fulfilment of cultural expectations is punished.

The Mother and Father stages constitute the first half of life. At the conclusion of this period, the individual has formed a stable set of identifications and has generally established adult relationships and a secure position in the surrounding cultural world. Success is determined by social location in accord with the surrounding culture. Features of individual difference from siblings and family members also mark this phase of development. A recognizable stable adult personality has been achieved by the conclusion of this phase. Ego-consciousness has grown along with physical maturity, and we can speak of young adulthood achieved by the age of 35 or thereabouts.

The second half of life begins typically with a kind of new birth, which is initiated by a crisis at midlife. This brings about a major transition in the individuation process from early to late stage developments. The second half of life is characterized by the Self replacing Father and Mother as the central figure of authority. Neumann calls this the stage of the Individual. The emphasis is on becoming as fully as possible the “WHAT” that was given as potential at the beginning of life. This is a process of circumambulation of the center, as Jung spoke about it. Psychological development in this stage is not linear but circular, moving around a center (the Self) in ever widening patterns of integration.

The integration of shadow belongs to the second half of life. This is a process of becoming conscious of parts of the Self that were not admitted into the persona in the first half of life. The ego now begins to confront inner “opposites,” and this work will continue in ever wider and deeper circumambulations throughout this period as consciousness expands to include ever more aspects of the Self.

Late stage individuation is characterized by an increased sense of the importance of discovering life’s meaning and developing the spiritual aspects of the Self. A sense of transcendence from the everyday world of achievement and social position as well as a broader view of life’s meaning can result in a psychological state of what people have traditionally called “wisdom.” Toward the end of life, this development becomes increasingly urgent. The “religious instinct” comes to dominate instincts of nourishment, sexuality, and activity. The emphasis is more on reflection and a deeper type of creativity than has been in operation in the earlier phases. Many of the great works of world literature, such as Dante’s *Commedia*, have been the products of this phase of individuation. Jung’s late autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, is another example.

This outline of the individuation process is used by Jungian psychoanalysts as an assessment tool in their clinical work. It gives them insight into what the important issues are for their

clients often beyond what the clients are able to express on their own. The goal of Jungian analysis is to foster the individuation process in the lives of clients, which also has the effect of doing the same for analysts.

Further Reading:

Jung, C.G. (1950/1969) "A Study in the Process of Individuation." In *Collected Works*, vol. 9i.

_____. (1961). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Vintage Books.

Neumann, E. (1954) *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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