

RESEARCH IN ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND
JUNGIAN STUDIES

Towards a Jungian Theory of the Ego

Karen Evers-Fahey



Towards a Jungian Theory of the Ego

Despite their prevalence and weight in many of his collected works and letters, Jung did not articulate a general theory of the ego and consciousness. *Towards a Jungian Theory of the Ego* examines the development of Jung's concept of the ego as he expanded and revised this concept, from his earliest formulations about consciousness while a student to his mature thoughts at the end of his life.

Drawing on Ego Psychology as a theoretical framework, Evers-Fahey proposes that Jung uses the concept of ego in four distinct ways and that he developed and used his ego concept based on two discrete paradigms. These distinctions explain the confusion and ambiguity found when examining the development of Jung's analytical psychology over his lifetime. This book provides an examination of ego development and ego defenses based on a unique Jungian standpoint, as well as discussion of the relationship between the ego and the Self and the ego and 'the *individuum*'. Furthermore, the inclusion of a historical framework helps to place the development of these concepts in context.

This book proposes a theory of Ego Psychology based on Jungian theory rather than traditional psychoanalytic theory, thereby filling a gap in the knowledge of Jungian theory. The book will be essential reading for academics and postgraduate students engaged in the study of Jungian psychology and psychoanalytic theory and will also be valued by those interested in Jung and Ego Psychology more generally.

Dr. Karen Evers-Fahey is a Zurich-trained Jungian analyst and is a training analyst with the international program of the CG Jung Institute Zurich. She has been a training and supervisory analyst in Zurich at the International School of Analytical Psychology as well as the Jung Institute Zurich. She is also an assistant teaching professor at the University of Victoria School of Nursing, Victoria, BC, Canada.

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To Dirk, Gioia, and Naomi
With gratitude

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Introduction

The ego as a topic of study came to me through a dream, three dreams to be exact. Many years ago, while a diploma candidate at the CG Jung Institute in Zürich, I started my practice day by seeing a shy university student who opened his session by relating the following dream: “I was walking down a dark street at night and realized I was being followed by a brutish man. I was terrified and ran as fast as I could but he still followed me”. The second client of the day, a middle-aged teacher in the middle of a divorce, began the session with her dream: “I was walking down a dark street at night and realized I was being followed by a man with a knife. Rather than run, I turn and confront him. He then silently hands his knife to me”. The third client of the morning, a young shop clerk, also had the stranger dream: “I am walking down a dark street at night and realize a shapeless thing, possibly a man, possible an animal, is following me. I am terrified and begin to attack it, kicking and punching until I am sure it is dead. I am covered in blood”. The tremendous coincidence – some would call it synchronicity – of these three dreams in one day was striking: all had the same opening scenario but each with very different conclusions based on the actions of the dream ego, that is, the dreamer in one’s own dream. I responded to this striking experience with a new fascination for the ego concept, and I wanted to understand more about this aspect of Jung’s theory. During my education in Zürich, we students had a tendency to focus on Jung’s pioneering ideas about archetypes; my clients’ nearly identical dream scenarios led me to reread Jung in a new light. Yet as I explored his works for an organized theory of ego, I found instead confusion and contradictions.

The ego in Jung’s works

Jung clearly needs and values the ego in his theory of depth psychology. Regarding the development of consciousness, for example, in a 1943 letter to Aniela Jaffé, he states: “The Self in its divinity (i.e., the archetype) is unconscious of itself. It can become conscious only within our consciousness. And it can do that only if the ego stands firm” (Jung, 1976, vol. 1, p. 336).

In his autobiography Jung also made the observation that mankind's consciousness is "indispensable for the completion of creation" (Jung, 1983a, p. 284). These statements are made with Jung's often academic certainty, and yet they remain problematic once one begins to unpack them. They both clearly imply that the ego and the Self stand in opposition in the respective fields of consciousness and unconsciousness and that the ego factor has the decisive role in the transformation of the archetype from unconsciousness to consciousness. So important is this factor that apparently even God's work is completed by our consciousness.

Unfortunately there is a wide gulf between the evocative Jung, the Jung of metaphor and vibrant imagery, and the precise Jung, one who structures and describes a consistent theoretical framework. In the earlier quote, for example, he refers to the Self becoming conscious in the consciousness of the individual, which leads to questions about the nature of consciousness for the individual as opposed to an 'archetypal', or collective, universal consciousness.

Left unexplored in this example is the relationship between the ego and consciousness. To which form of consciousness does he refer, personal or collective? Because Jung at other times refers to ego-consciousness as one entity, is he implying the ego and consciousness are equivalent, or are they separate? If separate, then are ego and consciousness separate entities in a unified concept of the psyche or rather functionally different concepts? Is the ego a function in the psyche, part of a structure and dynamic, according to Jung, or is it describing the experience of the subjective self in an interpersonal psychology? Where do issues such as identity, self-experience, adaptation, and ego defenses fit into Jung's model of the ego and consciousness?

This is the core of the problem. Despite its presence and weight in much of what he wanted to say about the psyche in his collected works and letters, Jung did not articulate a general theory of the ego and consciousness. Lacking in Jung's writings is a metapsychology of the ego. In other words, what is lacking is a complete abstract conceptualization of the experienced, experiencing, structuring, and transforming psychological factor in mankind that is beyond the individual and the unconscious: the ego factor.

Reasons for lack of clarity

There are a number of reasons why there is a lack of clarity about the ego concept in Jung's works. First, Jung gave diverse descriptions of the ego and consciousness in his collected works and letters. For example, Jung defined the ego in his first venture at precision, as "a complex of ideas which constitutes the center of my consciousness and appears to possess a high degree of continuity and identity" (CW 6/706). At a much later point he defines ego less operationally and more imaginally: "[the] relatively constant personification of the unconscious itself, or as the Schopenhauerian mirror in

which the unconscious becomes aware of its own face” (CW 14/129). At other times his ideas about the ego are ambivalent opinions: it is “the indispensable condition of all consciousness” (CW 14/129) but also “[a] petty, oversensitive personal world” (CW 7/275).

Second, Jung uses the terms ‘ego’, ‘ego-consciousness’, and ‘ego-complex’ in his writings in order to reflect a selected emphasis of meaning rather to describe a structured system. For example, he described the ego at another point as

a reflection, not of one, but of very many processes and their interplay – in fact, of all those processes and contents that make up ego-consciousness. Their diversity does indeed form a unity, because their relation to consciousness acts as a sort of gravitational force drawing the various parts together, towards what might be called a virtual center. For this reason, I do not speak simply of the ego but of an ego complex, on the proven assumption that the ego, having a fluctuating composition, is changeable and therefore, cannot be simply the ego.

(CW 8/611)

In this quote Jung emphasizes the dynamic qualities of the ego (a gravitational force). However, in the quotes cited previously he emphasizes instead the static qualities (continuity and identity), suggesting that ego definitions arise in order to clarify a separate theoretical issue rather than to present a unified model of the psyche.

A third factor that accounts for the contradictions in Jung’s writings about the ego is that his ideas about this concept evolved over his professional life. What he had to say regarding consciousness in the period of his collaboration with Freud, for example, differs from his later ideas. In 1912, at a time when Jung disagreed with Freud about the exclusively sexual nature of the libido but still numbered himself among Freud’s followers, he implied consciousness was a state of awareness or personal knowledge, a “constellation of our thoughts from the material in our memory [through] a predominantly unconscious process” (CW 4/317). Later, after his break with Freud and after a period of intense development of his own ideas, Jung would describe consciousness as a relational process rather than a state: “By consciousness I understand the relation of psychic contents to the ego, in so far as this relation is perceived as such by the ego” (CW 9/700). In the original German text, Jung used the term ‘*Bezogenheit*’, which is translated in the English edition of the Collected Works as ‘relation’, to describe the connection of ego and psychic contents. *Bezogenheit* has the connotation in German however of connection with one’s complete being to the complete being of the other. It is not simply a temporal connection, but rather, *Bezogenheit* implies a mutual reception and awareness of the other and the field he or she occupies. In this formulation, Jung emphasizes the ego as an interpersonal element rather

than a dynamic function in the psyche. This concept of consciousness is quite different from the earlier formulation of consciousness as perception or knowledge and goes to the heart of a relational concept in Jung's Ego Psychology.

In addition, as he developed his theory of the psyche, earlier formulations were altered through re-editions of his writings. Chief among these revisions was the major reworking of what became CW 5, *Symbols of Transformation*. Originally written in 1912, this book was completely revised, whole sections removed and rewritten, in 1952. Also, the theoretical work 'The Structure of the Unconscious', first published in 1916, was revised in 1928, and later after Jung's death in 1961 based on revisions and additions discovered among his papers. The original work 'New Paths in Psychology', first published in 1912, was revised and expanded threefold in 1917 and republished as 'The Psychology of the Unconscious Processes'. This work was again revised and expanded for its final form published in 1943. Works such as these that contain detailed descriptions of Jung's theories have the unfortunate and confusing drawback, however, of carrying over old terminology that was then used in a new way.

Not only did Jung's ideas about the ego and consciousness evolve over time, there was also an expansion of his theory of the psyche beyond the drive psychology of Freud (intrapersonal) to include interpersonal (two-person) psychology as well as collective psychology. All of these views of the psyche amount to differing visions or paradigms of the role and place of ego and consciousness in the individual and mankind.

Finally, another reason Jung did not articulate a metapsychology of the ego was that ultimately his research interests lay elsewhere. After writing Volume 6 of his Collected Works, *Psychological Types*, which included some of his most differentiated ideas about the ego, and except for his 'Modern Psychology' (known as the ETH lectures, 1933–1941) and 'Analytical Psychology' (1925) seminars, Jung left this line of inquiry and pursued his lifelong research into the archetypes and the Self. In this later work, Jung dropped a promising concept in terms of Ego Psychology, the ego vs. the *individuum*, and instead pursued research into the nature of the Self.

Resolution of this problem

Psychology as hermeneutic inquiry has always striven to take multiple levels of complexity and what is uniquely human into account, but it faces a great obstacle in the process. Analysis has been called "a border science" (Edelson, 1977). In other words, it is a study of the mind at the edges of empirical inquiry and scientific rigor but also leaning hard against philosophical theorizing and the personal equation of the theorist.

Jung the hermeneutic theorist and Jung the rigorous scientist walked this divide as a way to honor the complexity of the psyche and at the same time

to structure what he perceived in essence as “inaccessible” (Jung, 1983a, p. 153). He was aware of this dilemma and moved back and forth between these perspectives in his work as it evolved over time and as it deepened in his understanding.

Therefore, to understand Jung’s concept of ego, one has to see it in the context of both science and philosophy. Jung was working from both traditions, and in his concept of ego in particular, one sees him drawing on his interest in philosophy and religion as well as his desire to work within scientific convention. Jung’s conception of the ego as a function and a dynamic process, for example, comes from his scientific side, while his sense of the ego as a subjective experience, an interpersonal and relational factor in the psyche, comes from his philosophical and religious background.

The energetic paradigm and the symbolic paradigm

I have chosen to call these two influences in Jung’s work the energetic paradigm and the symbolic paradigm. Paradigms describe not just a difference of interpretation of agreed upon phenomena, but rather a complete, separate manner of seeing the world (Kuhn, 1962, p. 94). The scientific view of the world in which the laws of science prevail, as others have noted (for example, Edelson, 1977; Gould, 2001; Nagy, 1991), is fundamentally at odds with the religious/philosophical view of the world, in which phenomena exist beyond physical reality and physical laws. In his works, however, Jung tries to bridge this divide by stressing physical reality is only one reality. He said in 1935, for example,

The psyche is an extremely complex factor, so fundamental to all premises that no judgment can be regarded as ‘purely empirical’ but must first indicate the premises by which it judges. Modern psychology can no longer disguise the fact that the object of its investigation is its own essence, so that in certain respects there can be no ‘principles’ or valid judgments at all, but only phenomenology – in other words, sheer experience.

(CW 18/1738)

Jung uses the scientific view in his description of the psyche as a dynamic process. In this view energetic concepts borrowed from 19th century scientific psychology are used to describe the actions of psychic energy. Others refer to this as scientific materialism (the principle reviewed extensively in Sulloway, 1979). The ego in this paradigm is a part of the psychic structure involved in this dynamic process. It is for this reason I have chosen to refer to this view of psychical mechanisms as the energetic paradigm.

The energetic paradigm characteristic of the field of psychology of the 19th century was based on scientific assumptions borrowed from the physical sciences of the time. The psyche itself was ‘observed’ and investigated

‘objectively’: the point of reference outside the subject. Jung turned this around and instead placed the point of reference inside the subject; the images and emotional experiences of the subject became the objects of investigation. These inner experiences were facts just as tangible as reaction times. This shift in thinking on Jung’s part, away from the scientific and medical developments of the 19th century and the energetic paradigm and toward a paradigm based on psychical phenomenology and inner experience, characterizes the paradigm that was to dominate his mature psychological theory.

I have chosen to call this later paradigm the symbolic paradigm, a label not used by Jung himself, for a number of reasons. First, the term ‘symbol’ described a specific experience in Jung’s psychological theory. A symbol, according to Jung, was best defined as the combination of inner experience and mental image that “states or signifies more than itself” (CW 6/817). In Jung’s approach to psychical phenomenology and inner experience, there is the underlying assumption that these psychological ‘facts’ are filled with ineffable meaning and not quantitatively measurable. The symbolic approach thus takes into account the qualitative measure of psychical phenomena.

Second, the term ‘symbolic’ has grown over the years to describe Jung’s basic approach to the psyche. For example, the last volume of his Collected Works published in 1977, comprised of miscellaneous writings from all areas of his life’s work, is called *The Symbolic Life*. Edward Whitmont, in summing up Jung’s ‘working model’ of the psyche in a text of Jung’s basic concepts, said, “The most basic hypothesis about the human psyche with which we deal . . . is that of a pattern of wholeness that can only be described symbolically” (Whitmont, 1991, p. 15). The symbolic paradigm is a sensibility, then, an attitude toward psychical phenomena associated with Jung.

Third, the symbolic paradigm captures the aspect of *Bezogenheit* and purpose in the interaction of ego and other parts of the psyche. While the energetic paradigm focuses on mechanistic dynamics, the symbolic paradigm is more mytho-poetic and views the operations and experiences in the psyche as having a teleological intention beyond psychical balance or compromise. The integrative functions of the ego, for example, would have an underlying purpose beyond personal growth and development and lead to greater consciousness and relatedness in the world in general.

Lastly, the symbolic paradigm is an approach to psychical phenomenology and inner experience, but also it is a way of understanding and working with the psyche. As a consequence, the clinical extension of Jung’s symbolic approach was the development of methods and techniques for working with patients that focus on the inner experience and spontaneous image for growth and development. These innovations of Jung in the symbolic paradigm are relevant to clinical understanding in work with the ego and consciousness.

Energetic and symbolic paradigms also refer to the assumptions surrounding the processes by which psychic contents contained in the unconscious

become conscious. Not surprisingly, this question of how the individual becomes conscious has occupied great minds for millennia. In historical context, the concepts of energetic and symbolic transformation of unconscious contents and the assumptions about the nature of the psyche implied in them, evolved from essentially three sources for Jung: medical/scientific, religious, and philosophical.

Sources from philosophy that influenced Jung's thinking in regard to these issues are primarily Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and the 19th century philosophical movement known as *Naturphilosophie*. It would be difficult, however, to explore the philosophical roots of the symbolic paradigm without noting major personal influences for Jung: William James, Théodore Flournoy, and Frederick Nietzsche (in the case of Nietzsche, not through personal contact but rather through intense engagement in his ideas and philosophy, c.f. Jung's *Nietzsche Seminars*, 1984).

Important religious sources that influenced Jung in the symbolic paradigm, in addition to the Christian background in which he was raised, include religious mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Gnostic writers. Jung's encounters, through certain close friendships in his life, with Eastern religion and philosophy would also have a profound effect on his thinking about the process of becoming conscious. Later in his life, he was to embrace alchemy as a philosophical system and base his later work extensively on its principles.

Jung's choice of profession was based on the fact that psychiatry was the "empirical field common to biological and spiritual facts" (Jung, 1983a, p. 130). Just as he sought to understand and interpret the symbolism behind psychiatric disorders, so too did Jung endeavor to understand religious phenomena scientifically. Medical/scientific sources which shaped Jung's energetic and symbolic paradigms for understanding ego transformation were scientists and psychologists such as Wilhelm Wundt and, again, William James and Arthur Flournoy. Of course, the influence of Freud and his own commitment to the scientific investigation of the psyche was seminal. The medicalization of psychiatry in the 19th century did not leave Jung behind. During his psychiatry training he was especially influenced directly by his supervisor, Eugen Bleuler, and professionally by the innovative pioneer in psychiatry, Emil Kraepelin.

The energetic and symbolic approaches to understanding the mechanisms of the psyche were paradigms Jung struggled with and attempted to reconcile his whole life. In a wider sense, however, his personal theorizing was part of a greater struggle in the 19th and 20th centuries to reconcile the scientific and the philosophical/religious traditions he inherited. Jung's ideas evolved in and out of an atmosphere of tremendous development in science and scientific method, but also in a period in history of great cultural upheaval. It was as if Jung's ideas and theorizing not only grew out of his own great intellectual curiosity and drive, but also arose out of a climate of personal and historical turmoil for him in which, as Lifton (1979) would say, the

previous psychical forms were broken and new ones were not yet available. In this examination of Jung's concept of the ego, therefore, the personal as well as the historical context anchor the chronological examination of Jung's works.

Historical and conceptual perspectives

In order to construct a Jungian Ego Psychology based on Jung's writings, then, two separate developmental processes in his work need to be taken into account. The first is the historical perspective. Jung's work – his thinking about and understanding of the psyche – evolved over time. Statements made about the ego early in his career cannot be equated with statements made later. His involvement with late 19th/early 20th century psychiatric and psychoanalytic leaders, for example, led to an emphasis on structure and the economic, dynamic aspects of the ego, whereas later, as Jung focused on philosophical and religious issues, his ego concept became more experiential and relational. Ultimately, Jung found his own integration of these two aspects that assigns the ego a functional/dynamic as well as relational nature. Therefore, the question to which the historical perspective responds is: when did Jung make this statement about the ego?

The historical perspective

I propose that there are three phases to Jung's work regarding the ego. The first phase covers the period from the 1890s, when he began his career as a physician and psychiatrist and encountered Freud, to 1912, when he published the second part of his work *Symbols of Transformation* and broke with Freud. This period, the time in his life of his encounter with Freud, "the first man of real importance" (Jung, 1983a, p. 172), saw the emergence of Jung's first ideas about consciousness and ego. In this period Jung had a materialist frame of reference regarding the psyche and its transformation influenced very much by Freud; medical psychologists such as Emil Kraepelin, William Wundt, and his chief at the Burghölzliklinik in Zürich, Eugen Bleuler; and work being done in Geneva by Théodore Flournoy. Jung's student work in this period, however, contains intimations of his later emphasis on the transformational processes whereby unconscious material becomes conscious through the participation of the ego, which reaches the full symbolic frame of reference in his final works.

The second historical phase of Jung's work is the period from 1912 after his break with Freud to about 1945 when a severe illness left Jung himself transformed by the visions he had as he lay near death. This period of intense outer research and inner transformation began with the ideas expressed in *Symbols of Transformation* regarding consciousness and the ego and covers a period of intense research and lecturing about his theory of