Self & Society, 2015
Vol. 43, No. 3, 231–236, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2015.1092332

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Self-actualization and individuation

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This article aims at relating Maslow's idea of self-actualization to the Jungian idea of individuation. It turns out that self-actualization is quite a definite and achievable level of consciousness, within reach of all of us. Individuation, on the other hand, is only vaguely stated, and it seems quite doubtful as to whether it is achievable at all. This article provides many references (see Further Relevant Readings section), enabling further corroboration of the arguments presented.

Keywords: Self-actualization; Maslow; individuation; Jung; levels of consciousness

At first sight, individuation and self-actualization look rather similar. In both cases there is a journey involved, from an earlier position or state to a later position or state. And in both cases the later position or state is more sophisticated, more evolved, more adequate than the earlier one. But when we come to look at these matters in more detail, we find that the two things are actually very different.

I would like to start with self-actualization, because it is more highly specified, and much better researched, than individuation. It comes from the work of Abraham Maslow, and at first his theory was usually described as the hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy is often presented in the form of a triangle, and this is quite wrong, as I shall explain in due course. It is actually a theory of motivation, and when I came to study psychology at university I found that it was superior to any other theory of needs, motives, drives, instincts or the like.

I found a way of testing this. When I was giving lectures on motivation, I often used a test I had devised, which simply asked people why they were here today. Step 2 was to ask what was behind that reason or motive. Step 3, what was behind that. I carried on until they reached their own terminus – something that was so basic they could not go behind it. And it turned out that nobody came up with a terminus of sex, hunger or any of the other conventional 'basic drives' – they always came up with one of Maslow's motives.

Now we were always warned that Maslow was not a good researcher, and that we should therefore take his theory of levels with a pinch of salt. But what started to happen was that some much better researchers came up with exactly the same series of levels as Maslow did. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) did his research on moral development in many different countries around the world, which was followed up by the complementary work of Carol Gilligan (1982). Jane Loevinger (1998) started her research on women and girls, thus complementing Kohlberg, who had done his

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research on men and boys. Ken Wilber (2000) did his research in the library, collating about 80 writers from different countries and centuries, and finding the same levels all over again, plus a further set of levels going beyond Maslow and the others. Then came the work of Don Beck and Christopher Cowan (1996), whose ambitious attempt to look at ideologies (which they called value-memes) again came up with the same set of levels as Maslow. The work of Robert Kegan (1994), William Torbert (1991) and perhaps most of all Susanne Cook-Greuter (1999) seems to be highly regarded from a technical point of view, and they, too, come up with the very same set of levels. What we now have, therefore, is a well-argued and well-researched set of developmental levels, which it seems to me have to be taken seriously. The most glaring feature of this work, which I have tried to underline by using the phrase 'the Great Gap', is that at a certain point there comes a great leap which many people never make. What is this leap, exactly?

One way of putting this is to say that it is the move from the false self to the true self (Winnicott), from the persona to the self (Jung), from the false self to the real self (Laing), from the unreal self to the real self (Janov), from the guiding fiction to the creative self (Adler), from the self-image to the self (Perls), and so on. But all these are perhaps oversimplified and too brief for our more critical era.

It is a level of consciousness where we are happy to play a role in society and not question it very much. We see ourselves as a stockbroker or a navvy, a housewife or a model, an accountant or a shelf-stacker, a shop assistant or a lady of leisure. In other words, we define ourselves by our roles. This is the world of what Heidegger (1962) called Das Man – usually translated as 'The They'. If asked the question 'Who are you?', people at this level will answer instead the different question, 'What are you?'. And this is what society wants. We get rewarded for playing our roles well, with money, honours, degrees, medals, recognition and prestige. And the highest we can go in this area is to the Mature Ego. Society is not interested in anything beyond this, and will not reward it.

So if we want to go beyond this in our psychosocial development, we have to do it for ourselves, on our own account. We have to step off the escalator. We have to take responsibility for our own lives. We have to cross the Great Gap. And what is on the other side? Primarily, and most obviously, it is authenticity. Now authenticity is a difficult concept. Just because it is not a Mental Ego concept, most people have only the vaguest idea as to what it could mean. They are not satisfied with the simple statement, 'It is seeing through your own eyes, instead of through the eyes of others'. A recent writer is Jenny Wade (1996), who says:

> Authentic consciousness differs dramatically from earlier stages because it is free from commonly recognised forms of ego-distorted cognitive and affective perception. Traditional theorists view this stage as markedly free of the ego defences seen prior to this level, so that persons at this level are able to experience and express themselves fully (Maslow, 1987; Belenky et al., 1986; Graves, 1981). Their increased capacities have led Maslow and the Gravesians to designate this stage the first level of another developmental order. (p. 160)

They distinguish between first-tier and second-tier thinking. First-tier thinking uses what is called formal, Aristotelian, Boolean, classical or Newtonian logic. It is familiar and easily understood, and all our computers are based on it. Its fundamental tenet is 'A is A'. Second-tier thinking uses dialectical logic. Dialectical logic, which can

embrace paradox and contradiction, has a different fundamental tenet: 'A is not simply A'. It can immediately be seen how important this is for therapy. If a client comes into the room and I as a therapist say to myself, 'Arthur is Arthur', that gives me no hint of what might happen later. But if a client comes into the room and I say to myself, 'Agnes is not simply Agnes', that immediately opens up vistas of future change in unspecified directions.

Of course there is far more to self-actualization than authenticity or dialectical thinking. Maslow (1987) laid down 17 characteristics, and I added to these (Rowan, 2001) to make a total of 30. We all thought in the 1970s that self-actualization was an immense achievement, perhaps the ultimate state of consciousness, and therefore it would be *hubris* indeed to claim to be self-actualized. In fact, I once heard someone say that 'anyone who claims to be authentic can't possibly be authentic'. But if in truth self-actualization is just a step on the way, not a final goal, it need not be a dubious statement at all. It produces an authentic person, who sees through their own eyes, no longer through the eyes of other people. Wilber (2000) calls this the Centaur self, in his masterly vision of this transition, not because there is any reference to classical mythology, but simply to establish that this is the stage where we begin to recognize that body and mind are one, rather than two separate things. This is a very worthwhile aim, and much of the humanistic spectrum of approaches is devoted to its achievement. But it is quite a modest and achievable aim.

What Wilber also does, however, is to specify what the next step is, along the path of self-development. It is the Subtle self, where we realize that we are spiritual beings, and start to have experiences of a spiritual nature, such as meetings with archetypes, polytheistic deities, fairies, angels, nature spirits and so forth. Jung was very interested in this area, and was at times even obsessed by it, but he never made clear its connection with individuation, to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Individuation

Having clarified this, then, let us go on to examine the process of individuation. This has, so far as I can discover, not been researched in the same way that the Maslow work has. And Jung himself is not at all clear about it. I approached his chapter entitled 'Individuation' with great hope of a clear definition, but in it there was no such thing to be found. Instead, I had to go to the work of others for any real clarification.

Andrew Samuels' *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* (||Samuels, Shorter, & Plant, 1986) is helpful here. It says:

> The process of individuation is a circumambulation of the self as the centre of the personality which thereby becomes unified. In other words, the person becomes conscious in what respects he or she is both a unique human being and, at the same time, no more than a common man or woman. (p. 76)

But this is only a start. June Singer is, I think, more helpful, when she says:

> The goal of treatment, which is rarely understood at the beginning, and then only in an intellectual way, is the shift of psychic balance from the area of consciousness with the ego

> as its centre, to the totality of the conscious and unconscious psyche. This 'totality' has its own centre, which Jung has called the 'self', in contradistinction to the 'ego'. (Singer, 1972, p. 12)

The problem is, however, that the self, with or without a capital letter, is a deeply confusing idea in Jung. People like Edward Edinger do not help when they say things like, 'We might give a geometrical formula for the individuation process this way: it starts as a circle, which must be turned into a square, which must be transformed again into a circle' (Edinger, 1995, p. 199).

If we say, then, that the journey of individuation is from the ego to the self, what exactly does this mean? Singer puts is very succinctly when she says: 'The individuation process, in the Jungian sense, means the conscious realisation and integration of all the possibilities immanent in the person' (Singer, 1972, p. 158). But I think this is too ambitious: how could we ever know whether all the possibilities were integrated?

Edward Whitmont offers another thought, when he writes:

> For our time, individuation means not only a conscious relationship to the archetypal world, but also a conscious relationship to interpersonal reality and social collectivity. It includes developing the ability for introspection no less than for experiencing, playing with, feeling for, and fulfilling one's calling in outer reality. Relatedness is not a feminine principle, nor is it an Eros function; it is the extraverted aspect of individuation for both sexes. (Whitmont, 1982, p. 340)

If we now compare the place we have reached so far in Jung on individuation with the earlier statements of Wilber on self-actualization, it seems clear that we are talking about Wilber's Centaur stage, rather than his Subtle stage. And this is quite puzzling, because Jung is well known for being very interested in the Subtle realm, which after all is the realm of dreams, symbols, images, archetypes and so forth, which he wrote about so often and so well.

It seems to me that Jung is confused about individuation because of his reluctance to embrace the idea of the Subtle as a new stage of development, beyond the Centaur, or normal integration. He brandished the term 'Self' as if it were some kind of answer, but he never distinguished between the Centaur self, the Subtle self and the Causal self, even though he was interested in all of them.

In my own understanding and experience, the main distinguishing feature of the Centaur stage is the wholehearted adoption of dialectical thinking, and the embrace of paradox and contradiction. This is, it seems to me, the right logic for dealing with people, just as formal logic is right for dealing with things.

But the Subtle stage is quite different. Here we admit and own up to being spiritual beings, willing to admit to being interested in gods and goddesses, angels, fairies and nature spirits, and in all the concrete expressions of the divine. And here we encounter a different logic again. At the Subtle level, you cannot ask the question, 'Is it true?'. Instead, you have to start asking the question, '… and what effect did that have on you?'. This applies to seeing angels, being abducted by aliens, experiencing past lives and so forth. 'What effect did that have on you?' is the new question, taking the place of 'Is it true or false?' or 'What is the evidence?'.

So if I had to say what the Self really means in Jung, I would have to say 'the Subtle self' – but I know that would be wrong. I really believe that he did not actually know what he meant, and sort of revelled in the mystery of it all. If I had to settle on one

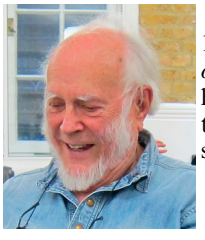
definition of the Self, I would go for Singer's version – 'Individuation leads through the confrontation of the opposites until a gradual integration of the personality comes about, a oneness with oneself, with one's world, and with the divine presence as it makes itself known to us' (Singer, 1972, p. 389).

That seems about as far as we can go, and I have to leave it at that. But I am still not satisfied that I really know what individuation is, or how and when it finishes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor



John Rowan has been working in the field of Humanistic Psychology since 1970, and his book *Ordinary Ecstasy: The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology* is now in its third edition. He is at present working on a third edition of his book *The Reality Game*, which contains much new material. His work in the field of the transpersonal is now well known, and he has published several chapters in that area in recent compilations.

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