Metapatterns of the Mind: Archetypal Thinking, the Self, and the Power of Values

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Abstract

Humanity is confronted with numerous global issues, in part due to the moral values and societal norms that guide our behavior and interactions with the planet. For this reason, understanding the formation of values is immensely important. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung introduced the concept of the archetype to help clarify the reappearing patterns of valuation that occur human life. Through this notion, we can better recognize the values and tendencies that we hold. Today, external qualities such as wealth, fame, and power reside at the forefront of societal value-systems. In the past, however, value-systems focused on internal character traits. I will argue that to overcome the major issues of today, we must return to valuing internal attributes, rather than external gains. Crucial to this return is the Jungian notion of the "Self" – through it, we can begin to escape the societal values that have led to our strained relationship with the natural world and with one another. To help illustrate the concept of the "Self" and the lifelong process of self-development, I will use Volk's metapatterns of the center and the arrow. Ultimately, I conclude that in placing the development of the self as the central goal in our lives, we can discover internal values that are important to us as individuals, leading to a happier and more satisfied life, as well as a global shift in the way in which we interact with the world.

Introduction

Humanity is at a crossroads. We as a species face a multitude of global issues; viral pandemics, rapid climate change, rising wealth inequality – all threaten the stability of our institutions and social systems, as well as the lives of millions of individuals. With such adversity, it only seems logical to question the motivations and circumstances that have contributed to our current situation. Undoubtedly, our moral values and societal norms have played a role in our interactions, both with the planet and with one another. Thus, they are at least partly responsible for the global issues we face today. In order to successfully overcome these issues, we must understand both the focus and formation of our values.[1]

What we value as a society has changed drastically over time. Particularly within the last two centuries, wealth, fame, and power have become associated with an ideal life.[2] As

these things are greatly valued by our current social systems, we become convinced that we as individuals must value these things as well. Yet, a study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that lower well-being is associated with having extrinsic goals focused on rewards or praise. The importance of intrinsic aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and physical health, conversely, were associated with higher well-being (Kasser, 1996). These findings suggest that valuing internal qualities – rather than external rewards – may be fundamental to individual satisfaction and a happy life. By turning our value-systems inward, we can begin to work towards a healthier relationship not only with ourselves and each other, but the natural world as well – a world that has been heavily exploited and damaged by our current systems.

Values as Archetypes

Carl Gustav Jung, the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist and one of the founders of analytical psychology, characterized values in terms of archetypes, understanding them as psycho- physical patterns that are manifest throughout human existence (Jung, 1980). These patterns have been selected over time due to their inherent benefits, just as advantageous mutations are selected by evolution and incorporated into the genome of a species. In this way, both internal and external attributes that have provided an advantage to human beings have been ingrained in our psyche. The archetypal figure of the old man, for example, represents distinguished wisdom and sound judgement – undoubtedly beneficial traits for an individual to possess (Jung, 2013). Through these archetypal images and motifs, we can recognize basic themes in the human experience that are common to all, giving us a sense of community with one another (O'Brien, 2017).

Archetypes seek to inform and direct human thought and behavior. In this way, they represent innate psychic dispositions. If we value figures of wealth, fame, and power, we will align our behavior with theirs, emulating the perceived positive characteristics of those who possess such attributes. This certainly seems to be the prevailing attitude of the current era, particularly with the introduction of mass production and mass media at the beginning of the 20th Century. Wealthy entrepreneurs, famous actors, and prominent politicians are all commonly idolized by both children and adults, despite the majority of whom will never attain such statuses. Undoubtedly, this idolization is due in part to the cultural climate of our day, and the moral values that our society upholds. A study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that within a community, shared norms and moral values help to regulate the behavior of individual group members (Pagliaro, 2011).[3] Thus, by behaving in line with the moral group values of wealth, fame, and power, we are substantiating their role as important patterns in human existence.

Values: Then and Now

As stated, wealth, fame, and power are at the forefront of our society today.[4] On a personal note, growing up in the United States I can recall being told by high school instructors that I ought to pursue jobs and positions that would bring me these things, and that in doing so, I would be happy. While I am highly skeptical of this recommendation, one thing is clear – the attributes that we as a society hold in most esteem have led to the greatest tragedies and global issues of our day. The pursuit and adoration of wealth, for example, has resulted in a rapid rise in inequality; the few who possess great wealth are determined to maintain and increase their supply, which ultimately can only be done by reducing the amount available to the rest of society.[5] Additionally, this has led to greater exploitation of the natural world, as individuals and corporations have become more focused on profits and money-making rather than maintaining a balance with the world's ecosystems. It has even been argued that the widespread exploitation of nature is responsible for the current COVID-19 pandemic as well (Johnson, 2020).

Yet, such values were not always so highly esteemed. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – the oldest extant works in Western literature – present an altogether different world, a world in which heroism, dedication, and honor represent the most valuable qualities a human being can possess. It is only by overcoming great struggle – both within himself and against external circumstances – that Odysseus became the legend and hero we know him as today. The opposition between the worldview presented by the Homeric myths and that of the 21st century illuminates dissimilarities in social and moral valuations, as well as in the archetypal motifs used to represent them. Wealth, fame, power – these are all external appearances, rather than internal character traits. Thus, we seem to have transitioned from valuing the internal qualities of individuals to valuing either their possessions or aspects of their social status. In doing so, we have also shifted our actions from those focused on internal development to those focus on external gain, resulting in our present situation.[6]

The Self as a Center

If we are to overcome the great difficulties we face today, we might emphasize a return to the internal. Carl Jung understood the rejection of societal values and the subsequent development of personal values as a natural and essential process for every individual (Edinger, 1992). At the forefront of this development is the notion of the "self". In Jungian psychology, the self represents the whole of the psyche, and signifies the unification of consciousness and unconsciousness within an individual (Jung, 1969). Jung understood the self as an evolved archetype as well; over time, humanity developed the ability to recognize our subjective individuality. This self-consciousness was integrated in our psyche, in part

because it allowed us to have more direct interaction with the world. It was only by becoming conscious of our place in the universe as well as our relation to the material world that we were able to expand our control of both the environment and ourselves.

The self is the center of our total personality, and thus, it can be understood as a psychic representation of the metapattern of the center (Volk, 1996).[7] Jung saw various symbolic manifestations of the self – among them, the circle, the square, and most importantly, the mandala – as representations of our internal wholeness, in which the opposing forces at the circumference are resolved at the peaceful center. This can be seen, for example, in the reconciliation of opposing beliefs and values into a unified notion of the self. In this way, the self is both the whole and the center of the psyche, and includes within itself the ego as well as the unconscious, as shown in figure 1. In the Jungian framework, the ego merely represents the center of consciousness – the daily notion of "I" that we all experience – as opposed to the center of our total personality. Similarly, the unconscious is composed only of those parts of ourselves that we have repressed and ignored, as well the intuitive psychic structures inherited from our ancestors. Together, they denote the self.
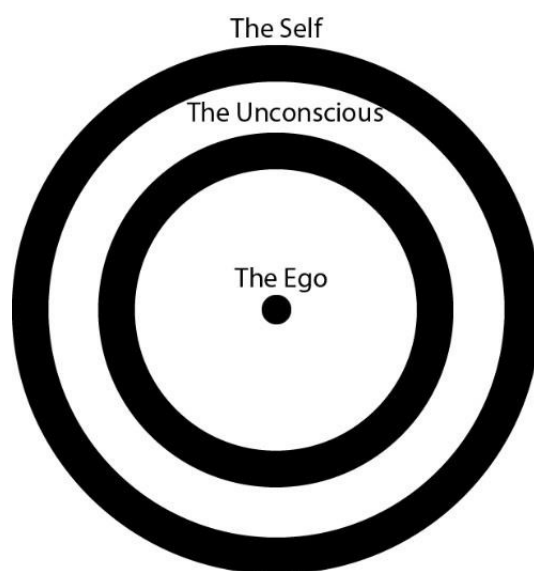
The Self

The Unconscious

The Ego

Figure 1: The central dot is representative of the Ego, which is surrounded by the unconscious. The Self consists of the whole, including both the centered dot and the surrounding layer.

The realization of the self is the ultimate goal of the life-long process of psychic development; it is only by integrating the various aspects of our personality – both conscious and unconscious – that we become fully aware of who we are and what we believe. This process can be further understood through Volk's metapattern of the arrow, as shown in figure 2 (Volk, 1996). Beginning with a state of unconsciousness during our early childhood,

we slowly develop more and more consciousness – both of our external reality and of our internal conception of self. Through this unidirectional arrow of progression, we gradually come to realize who we are as individuals, and better understand our place in the world. For these reasons, the concept of the self is a useful and important tool for every human being.

Ultimately, by making the self the central objective in our lives, we can replace external values with values that come from within.
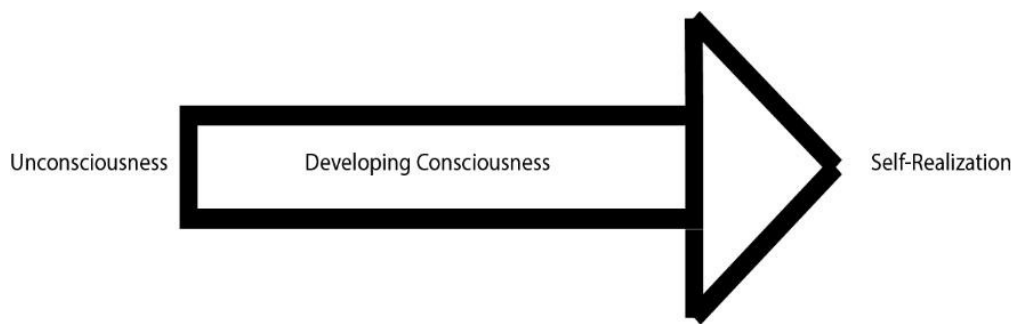

Figure 2: The arrow represents the life-long process of psychic development, beginning with a state of unconsciousness and ending with the realization of the self.

Internal Development

In order to overcome the major challenges we face as a species, it is imperative that we focus on the development (and ultimately, realization) of the self, just as Odysseus did on his journey home to Greece from the fabled city of Troy. Recognizing the archetypes that factor into our psyche can be immensely useful in this regard. Through the understanding that we – both as individuals and more generally as human beings – possess certain innate values and attitudes, we can come to know the motivations behind our thoughts and actions. Being conscious of these motivations is the first step in overcoming our mental and behavioral tendencies, including those imposed upon us by societal norms. The archetype of the ruler may help to illustrate this clearly; if the ruler plays a dominant role in our personality, we will make it our goal to create a prosperous community, in part by exercising power over others. (Jung, 1980). The ruler is the stereotypical leader, an individual who believes it is their duty to bring order to a situation. While this can certainly represent a positive character attribute, being oblivious to its existence can easily lead to authoritarian tendencies.[8] Becoming aware of its role in our thought-processes, on the other hand, can help us set limits on our desire to impose our will upon others, and thus, avoid tyrannical behavior.

In addition to recognizing the archetypes that influence our behavior, awareness of the self – as well as its unidirectional development – can help us live fuller and more satisfied lives. This awareness includes an understanding of the limitations of the ego and the unconscious; we are not merely our conscious thoughts, and similarly, we are not entirely

governed by our unconscious tendencies. On their own, the ego and the unconscious represent only a part of our total personality. Together, however, they represent the whole of who we are and what we believe – in short, our conception of self. Through this notion of self we can begin to understand that we are more than our ego (which is the part of us that has been shaped by our interactions with the external world), and thus, gain the knowledge that there are aspects of ourselves that are still unknown to us. These unrealized values and attributes are not dependent on the approval or disapproval of those around us, but rather, come from within. On the other hand, if we feel as though we must conform to the values of our society – in other words, if we overlook the unconscious aspects of our personality and focus solely on the ego – we are more likely to act in accordance with social norms (Lönnqvist, 2010). These norms may even run contrary to our personal, yet unrealized value-systems.

Through the celebration of our individuality, we can break free from the bonds of conformity. While the essential nature of the self is unknowable (due to its unconscious aspect), its recognition can send us on a life-long path of personal growth and discovery – one that allows us to uncover our personal values and gain control over our innate tendencies. These values will reflect the way in which we truly want to live, and furthermore, will help us develop new ways of interacting with the natural world – ways that are not based around needless exploitation and the myth of endless growth.

Concluding Thoughts

The discovery of our own internal values – rather than the blind acceptance of those imposed upon us by the society we live in – can not only lead to drastic changes in our own lives, but in the world as well. Emphasizing this process in my own life has helped liberate me from my unconscious tendencies, as well as escape the impositions of others – particularly the emphasis on wealth and power that pervades our society today. Not only has this led to greater personal freedom, it has altogether transformed the way in which I view and interact with the external world. Through understanding and recognizing the archetypes that compose my own psychological structure, I have become more aware of how I make decisions, and thus, have improved my control over the mental and behavioral tendencies that had previously unconsciously directed my thoughts and actions. Furthermore, by using the centrality and realization of the self as a guide for my personal arrow of development, I have not only become more conscious of who I am as an individual and who I wish to become, but have also gained a greater awareness of my unique skillset, as well as deeper insight into how I wish to live my life independently of what others promote.

For these reasons, the realization of the self can play an important and decisive role in the fight against global catastrophes. By turning inward towards the discovery of our own

subjective values, we can begin to recognize the singular contribution that we each bring to the world, giving us a greater sense of self-worth, as well as the world a share in our unique talents and worldviews. This will further demonstrate that it is our individuality – not our conformity – that is of the greatest benefit to the world. Furthermore, it will force a societal transition from external to internal valuation, which ultimately will allow us to live in greater harmony with nature and better take care of our fellow human beings.

About the Author

Brogan Hannon is a senior studying philosophy at New York University. After encountering the ideas of Carl Jung – particularly the recognition of a deep connection between the internal life of an individual and the state of the external world – he was inspired to find solutions to global issues through internal rather than external means. For this reason, he chose to analyze the conflict between individual values and societal values, with the hopes of finding a resolution between the two.

Endnotes

[1] I use social norms and society's moral values interchangeably.

[2] In this context, power is equivalent to possessing a high social status.

[3] This is due to the anticipated reaction of other group members; we behave in line with moral group norms because we anticipate receiving ingroup respect when enacting moral values that are shared by other group members.

[4] This can be seen in the notion of the "American Dream".

[5] The Panama Papers, for example, show that a large number of wealthy individuals and elites have been hiding money in offshore bank accounts, rather than paying taxes that would benefit the majority.

[6] The Greeks were certainly not above the pursuit of fame entirely. The famed hero Achilles, for example, chose to pursue the eternal status of a legend, rather than a happy and quiet life with a family.

[7] The self includes consciousness, the unconscious, and the ego.

[8] This stems from the fear of chaos and being overthrown.

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