

Understanding the Ego.

Our ego which is comprised of the “persona” and the “shadow” are not separate parts of mind or self, they are descriptions of particular patterns of thinking from reactions to our experiences.

Ego

Written by Peter Russell ©

I don't have an ego. And nor do you.

That doesn't mean you and I don't get caught up in egocentric thinking and behaviour, but that we are mistaken in thinking of the ego as some separate individual self. some "thing" in the mind.

When I observe my own mind, I notice there is an ever-present sense of "I-ness". This has been there all my life, and has not changed. The feeling of being "me" is the same feeling I had when I was ten years old. My thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes, attitude, character, personality, roles, desires, needs, and beliefs may have changed considerably over the years, but the sense of "I" has not.

I do not find a separate ego, another "self" that sometimes takes over. What I find instead are various patterns of thinking that condition how I decide and act. At times, I may feel fearful or judgmental, and I may behave in ways that are manipulative or self-protective. I may think that if I could just have things be a particularly way I would be happy. I may feel insecure and want attention from others, seeking to feel important. I may draw a sense of identity from my social status, the roles I play, my character, or my lifestyle. And when this is challenged in some way, I may try to defend and reinforce this constructed sense of identity.

In each case, past experiences and conditioning create beliefs, attitudes, needs, desires, and aversions. These become the lens through which I see my world, affecting how I interpret my experience, the thoughts that arise in my mind, and a whole set of stories about what to say or do, in order to get what I think will bring make me feel better. However, the "I" that is interpreting and thinking is the same "I" that is always there. But its attention has become engrossed in some or other "egoic" pattern of thinking, leading to correspondingly egocentric decisions and actions.

What we call the ego is not another separate self. It is as a mode of being that can dominate our thinking, decisions, speech, and actions, leading us to behave in ways that are uncaring, self-centered, or manipulative. Our exploration of ego would be more fruitful if we stopped using the word as a noun, which immediately implies some "thing", and instead thought of ego

as a mental processes that can occupy our attention. For this a verb is a more appropriate part of speech. I am "ego-ing".

The difference is subtle, but very important. If I see the ego as a separate self, some thing, then it is easy to fall into the belief—common in many spiritual circles—that I must get rid of my ego, transcend it, or overcome it in some way. But seeing ego as a mental process, a system of thinking that I get caught in, suggests that I need to step out of that mode of thinking—to look at the world through a different lens, one less tainted by fear, insecurity and attachment.

This is a much easier and more effective approach. When I notice myself caught up in egoic thinking, rather than berating myself (or my imagined ego), I can notice what is going on and step back from it. This doesn't mean I have eliminated that way of thinking. It will surely return. And when it does, I can choose to step out of it again. Transcending the ego thus becomes an ongoing practice rather than a far-off goal.

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The Persona

The **Persona**, for Jung, was the social face the individual presented to the world - 'a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual'.

Identification with the persona

For the growing child, the development of a viable social persona is a vital part of adapting to, and preparing for, adult life in the external social world. 'A strong ego relates to the outside world through a flexible persona; identification with a specific persona (doctor, scholar, artist, etc.) inhibits psychological development'. Thus for Jung 'the danger is that [people] become identical with their personas - the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice'. The result could be 'the shallow, brittle, conformist kind of personality which is "all persona", with its excessive concern for "what people think" - an unreflecting state of mind 'in which people are utterly unconscious of any distinction between themselves and the world in which they live. They have little or no concept of themselves as beings distinct from what society expects of them'. The stage was set thereby for what Jung termed Enantiodromia - the emergence of the repressed individuality from beneath the persona later in life: 'the individual will either be completely smothered under an empty persona or an enantiodromia into the buried opposites will occur'.

The Shadow

In Jungian psychology, the **shadow** or "**shadow aspect**" is a part of the unconscious mind consisting of repressed weaknesses, shortcomings, and instincts. It is one of the three most recognizable archetypes, the others being the anima and animus and the persona. "Everyone carries a shadow," Jung wrote, "and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is." It may be (in part) one's link to more primitive animal instincts, which are superseded during early childhood by the conscious mind.

According to Jung, the shadow, in being instinctive and irrational, is prone to projection: turning a personal inferiority into a perceived moral deficiency in someone else. Jung writes that if these projections are unrecognized "The projection-making factor (the Shadow archetype) then has a free hand and can realize its object--if it has one--or bring about some other situation characteristic of its power." These projections insulate and cripple individuals by forming an ever thicker fog of illusion between the ego and the real world.

From one perspective, 'the shadow...is roughly equivalent to the whole of the Freudian unconscious'; and Jung himself considered that 'the result of the Freudian method of elucidation is a minute elaboration of man's shadow-side unexampled in any previous age'.

Jung also believed that "in spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness—or perhaps because of this—the shadow is the seat of creativity."; so that for some, it may be, 'the dark side of his being, his sinister shadow...represents the true spirit of life as against the arid scholar'.

Sex and the life instincts in general are, of course, represented somewhere in Jung's system. They are a part of an archetype called the **shadow**. It derives from our prehuman, animal past, when our concerns were limited to survival and reproduction, and when we weren't self-conscious.

It is the "dark side" of the ego, and the evil that we are capable of is often stored there. Actually, the shadow is amoral -- neither good nor bad, just like animals. An animal is capable of tender care for its young and vicious killing for food, but it doesn't choose to do either. It just does what it does. It is "innocent." But from our human perspective, the animal world looks rather brutal, inhuman, so the shadow becomes something of a garbage can for the parts of ourselves that we can't quite admit to.

Symbols of the shadow include the snake (as in the garden of Eden), the dragon, monsters, and demons. It often guards the entrance to a cave or a pool of water, which is the collective unconscious. Next time you dream about wrestling with the devil, it may only be yourself you are wrestling with!