



MAGNUM OPUS: ALBEDO

Module 4: The Ego

QUOTE

“The self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness.”
~Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy," CW 12, para. 44.

The Ego

Compiled by The Centre for Applied Jungian Studies

Table of Contents

Transcript..... 2

Applications:16

Transpersonal/personal "I"..... 16

Understanding/creating a conscious ego identity. 16

The role of self-love in determining the ego position. 17

Transcript

The topic we are going to be dealing with is the ego. It is a very important concept in depth psychology and certainly from the perspective of Jungian psychology.

The ego is sometimes given a bad rap, and understood and equivocated with the idea of egoism or being egotistical. Often in depth psychology the focus tends to be on the unconscious but, in fact, as one gets to understand depth psychology better, what one realises is the centrality and the importance of the ego in both the Freudian and Jungian models.

When we talk about the ego, what we are talking about is the conscious function. Jung described the ego as the centre of consciousness. When we are talking about the ego we are talking about your sense of personal identity. The ego is, roughly, the person that you consider yourself to be, however the ego can be defined in alternate and contrasting ways and I'm going to try and explain these ways to you.

To repeat: The ego then, has this empirical aspect to it; when we talk about the ego or the ego complex, we are talking about the sense of personal identity - the person that you consider yourself to be. Not necessarily equivalent to the person or face that you show the world, which we would describe as the persona, but rather, the person that you genuinely consider yourself to be, in the privacy of your own thoughts; in the privacy of your own home; when you are being completely honest with yourself.

So when we use the personal pronoun, “I” - so I say, “I am” - with whatever follows e.g., “I am Stephen Farah. I am a man. I am a teacher. I am a loving father”, etc. When I use the personal pronoun “I”, I am referring to - evoking, if you will, or calling upon - the notion of the ego.

So, the ego has a transcendent aspect in the sense that when I say “I”, I can never truly exhaust what I am. I can describe myself in various ways but nevertheless there is a distinct sense that I have not fully exhausted who I am or who it is, that says, “I”. And this is the notion of the transcendent self or the transcendent ego or the “I am”.

The ego then occupies a dual position in that it is both : -

1. the sense of personal identity, so that when you talk about yourself and you describe yourself and tell me about who you are; the person that you reveal – the empirical self - is an aspect of the ego; an aspect that we could refer to as the empirical self or the sense of personal identity.
2. At the same time the one that describes herself, the one that witnesses herself, the one that uses the word “I”, is also present. And in that sense the “I” is not equivalent to the personal identity. So, in a strange, sort of perverse way you both are and are not who you claim to be.

In any case I hope I have given you a sense at least, of what it is that we are speaking about when we use this term, “ego”. I hope that it will become clearer when I locate the ego for you, in both the Freudian and Jungian models of the psyche.

I think that it is very useful to look at Freud's model. Freud's model has the advantage over Jung's in that it is a simpler, psychic model and it is particularly good when it comes to understanding what we mean by the ego. Freud says that the ego adheres to the reality principle - it has been modified by the direct influence of the external world. Freud contrasts this adherence to the reality principle with the Freudian unconscious, which is governed by the pleasure principle. So, in Freud's model you have the ego which adheres to the reality principle - which is adapted to and which mediates the events coming towards you from the outside world, and your reactions to the external world. You do not necessarily always act in complete accord with your feelings and desires, but necessarily mediate your responses to the world, and that mediation happens through the ego. The loss of this mediating function of the psyche is witnessed, for example, in certain psychoses and it is also witnessed as the loss of ego function in brain damaged individuals, where what is thought, what is felt or what is desired is simply expressed without mediation, and the consequence of that is a loss of adaptation and a difficulty in functioning and mediating oneself in a social situation.

In Freud's model the ego is called to mediate between the Id and the superego. I'll speak very briefly about what we mean by the Id and the superego. The Id is the instinctive, "drive driven", uncultivated, uncultured, uneducated aspect of the self – the infantile, animalistic self; that which demands immediate gratification, and this idea of the Id is a central aspect of the Freudian unconscious. Juxtaposed against the Id is the notion of the Freudian superego; the superego is the opposite of the Id. It is the idea of

one's cultured, educated, civilised, cultivated and moral self. The idea in Freudian psychology is that the ego is neither of these. Both of these are aspects of our psychology and the ego mediates between the two of them and is, in a sense, caught between the two of them; called upon to hear the demands, the imperatives, the questions and the criticisms – the critical voices, etc. that come from Id and the superego, demanding to be heard and seeking to drive one's behaviour. A nice illustration of this with which we are all familiar (and one that is often used in literature and the cinematic arts) is the idea of the good angel and the bad angel sitting on alternate shoulders. Although that is not exactly analogous to the Freudian psyche, it is similar enough, I think, to be illustrative. The ego has to necessarily listen to both of these and then make a choice. An important property of the ego is the notion of choice.

I'll read a quote from Freud with respect to the ego. He says,

“Analysis does not set out to make pathological reactions impossible but to give the patients ego freedom to decide one way or another.”

This idea of freedom of choice is very central to the ego. It is a defining quality of the ego and Jung shares the sentiment that it is the fundamental property of the ego, that it is able to make choices.

If we accept the depth psychological model - inasmuch as one is able to become conscious, inasmuch as one is able to strengthen the ego and for the ego to become, to a degree, the executive centre of the psyche -, one's sense

of freedom, one's experience of being free and by freedom we mean the ability to make choices, is increased.

There is a useful opposite that one can think of to illustrate this point; the opposite is the idea of compulsion. So, as far as you experience yourself as compulsive, and maybe the easiest compulsion to imagine is the compulsion of addiction; inasmuch as one is the victim of an addiction, it seems as though the addiction makes the choices - the addiction is in control. I may be very sincere in wanting not to be a victim of my addiction. My addiction may lead to a miserable outcome. It may destroy aspects of my life, it may destroy relationships, it may destroy trust and it may destroy my trust in myself and I may feel desperately unhappy at being the victim of my addiction. I may very sincerely commit to resisting my addiction or not giving in to the addiction, and working against the experience of the addiction, but nevertheless, when the craving for whatever it is I am addicted to is visited upon me I find myself powerless to resist it. Addiction is a particularly dramatic and maybe provocative example, but I do think it is analogous to all compulsions - all compulsive behaviours behave in this way. With the best of intentions, one wants to act in a particular way; one wants to be a particular way in the world, and yet you experience yourself contrary to these intentions as behaving in line with a *compulsive* way of being in the world.

Now to the degree that the ego is strengthened, and fragmented aspects of your psychology are assimilated into the ego - making the ego robust - the ego becomes healthy and fulfils the role in your psychology in which it is ideally meant to function. The degree to which one is able to resist compulsions – to

an extent free choice - is then increased and one is able to make certain choices; you are able to act in accord with what you believe you should be and what you should do. This property, ability or privilege (whatever you want to call it) of free choice is directly linked to the function of the ego.

Turning now to Jung, and I think there is lot of convergence between Jung and Freud on this point, so much of what I have said carries over into Jung as well. The Jungian model is slightly more complex than the Freudian model, and I will unpack some aspects of that for you.

In Jung's model of the psyche the ego would be described as an archetype. Like other aspects of the Jungian psyche - the shadow, the anima, the persona, the self - the ego is an archetypal presence. It is a player in a psycho-drama. A psycho-drama that could be described as your life. I'm going to use the analogy of a movie and a movie set, to illustrate the role played by the ego in Jungian psychology; the ego is a role player in a movie set. It is useful to think of the ego as the director of the movie. Various actors are called upon to come forward and to play in various scenes and to bring our certain characteristics, certain qualities, certain ways of being, certain talents etc. to their roles, but the director is behind the scenes and he directs and coordinates these various psychic actors which are equivalent to other archetypes or complexes in your psychology. The point here is that the ego is called upon to direct the movie. When the ego functions in the ideal role - that in which it is meant to function - , it is functioning like a movie director; he is meant to manage the process; he is meant to direct the other actors; he is meant (to change metaphors for a moment) to act as the conductor of a symphony orchestra. He synthesises

these different impulses, different actors and different complexes to ensure that the movie turns out the way it is meant to be.

The ego is called upon to differentiate one's self and one's own unique individuality. It is the role of the ego to understand what it is and what it is not. To some degree you may think of your personal identity – even if your personal identity is authentic – as something which is constructed. Inasmuch as one constructs one's personal identity (and importantly for Jungian psychology is the idea that it is an authentic construction of one's identity) that which you are, consciousness is said to obtain. The idea is that one consciously becomes who you are. It is not simply given. It is not a completely unconscious way of being. Authenticity, in this sense, is quite paradoxical. We often have this idea, I think, in populist psychology that being authentic is simply being who you are. In a sense yes, this is true – it is simply being who you are - but the challenge is that it is not simple. Like any simple thing in the world, simplicity is very difficult to realise. There is a process of becoming aware of who you are, of constructing who you are and of differentiating yourself. This is what the ego is called upon to do and this is the process of constructing your identity. The ego necessarily needs to differentiate and not identify with other archetypal presences in the psychology. The ego needs to understand itself as distinct from the persona, the shadow, the anima (or animus) and even, very importantly, the self archetype. Once again, paradoxically, ego is the one that is called upon to become conscious. When we talk about being conscious, what we mean is that the one which becomes

conscious is, in fact, the ego. Also, it uses consciousness to become conscious so it is both the one that is conscious and the one that becomes conscious.

Another interesting way to think about the ego - or locate the ego - in the Jungian model is that the ego forms a bridge between the inner and the outer world – between the soul and the persona. So going back to Freud’s model of the ego mediating between the Id and the superego, a similar tripartite structure for Jung would be the mediation of the ego between the inner world - the soul - and the public personality - the persona. The ego is the bridge between those two and mediates between those two.

Somebody who has written, probably from the Jungian perspective, most extensively about the ego would be Joseph Campbell and he writes about the mythological hero and the hero’s journey. He equates (and he follows Jung in this regard) the ego with the mythological hero. The ego plays the heroic role in our psychologies, the ego carries the burden, the ego is called upon to be courageous and the ego is the one that embarks on the hero’s journey which is a metaphorical expression of the individuation project in Jungian psychology.

I think it’s worth saying something about the distinction between Eastern and Western systems of spirituality, but possibly of psychology as well to a degree, as far as there is a relationship between spirituality and psychology. There is a very significant distinction between Western mysticism and Eastern mysticism in that the ego plays a very important role in Western mysticism. I think this is illustrated best in the Christian myth. The idea of resurrection and of eternal life which is so central to Christianity – the idea that is captured in these

notions, is that the ego is resurrected. Sometimes this is illustrated or understood as being equivalent to the body – that it is the physical body that rises up and is reborn – but the important idea, I think, that is contained in this myth is that it is essentially the ego that continues into the afterlife. So, it is who you are; who you consider yourself to be, which continues into an afterlife. This is illustrated very vividly in the notion of the resurrected Christ. The resurrected Christ is an idea, the mythological or metaphorical expression, of the spiritualised ego moving from a purely physical or organic expression to a spiritualised form. But nevertheless, it is the ego that continues the journey. It is important to understand that this is very central to the Western mystical tradition and plays a significant role and influence in depth psychology, even for Freud who, ostensibly, is secular and scientific, and one wouldn't ordinarily think of him as being mythologically conditioned. Nevertheless, this idea from Western mysticism is present in both Freud's and Jung's thinking.

At this point I would like to move onto a more practical exposition of how you can approach your own relationship with your ego or how you can understand your ego and I'm going to ask you a few questions that I would like you to reflect on.

The first one is, when you use the personal pronoun, "I"; so when you talk about "I" or "me" or "I am", I want you to think about whom it is that you are referring to. Now maybe at first the answer may seem obvious but when you reflect on this the answer is anything but obvious. In any case, don't take my word for it – please do the process yourself and just reflect on this question; who is it that says "I"? What I'd like you to think about is, do you exist

independently of your sense of identity – the manner in which you describe who you are to someone else? So, when you use “I”, I would think that relatively un-controversially - “I” refers to your sense of personal identity. My question for you is, does it refer to anything else, and if so, what is it that “I” refers to?

The other question that I would like you to think about is the distinction between the first and third person perspectives. This is a distinction between the ego considered as object and the ego considered as subject. I’ll try to explain this: There is a distinction between being you (being who you are) and considering who you are. So, you can simply be yourself but you also have this ability to transcend yourself and to consider who you are. I want you to think about what this distinction is and how you experience this distinction and what the meaning is of this distinction. Who are you? Are you your personal identity or are you the one that witnesses yourself?

Now, to maybe give you a “heads-up” – I don’t want to short circuit the process for you, but to give you a heads-up – I don’t think there is any definite answer or simple answer to any of those questions – certainly nothing that can be put meaningfully into words, anyway, but I do think that those questions are important to enter into sincerely and to think about, and in the process of thinking about them or meditating on them it does help to reveal different dimensions of the ego, different ways that you experience yourself in the world and it will help you to conceptually understand what it is we are talking about when we talk about the ego.

I mentioned earlier on in this exposition that part of becoming conscious, part of constructing the ego, part of differentiating the self is simply to differentiate the self, but I'm going to try to put some meat onto those bones and give you some guidance in terms of how you may do that. I really cannot over-emphasise the importance of the exercise that I am going to give you now, in terms of the process of embarking on the journey of individuation and of differentiating the ego.

I would like you to create a list of between five and ten items listed in order of priority if possible, on each of the following topics. Only work on these lists after completing this lecture:

- Your Values
- Your Desires
- Your Aversions
- What You Most Love
- What You Most Hate
- What Makes You Happy

Now if you are going to do this exercise seriously and sincerely, while processing most of the categories that I've mentioned, you need to necessarily suspend your superego. So, what we are looking for here is absolute honesty – that which rises up in you from your most honest place. Maybe to some extent, you may say, from your personal unconscious or from your Id. That is,

when you create the lists of desires, aversions, loves, hates and happiness – these need to come from the soul; these need to come from the most sincere place. In order to do that I suggest the following:

Make sure that you do these lists when you have the time and space to do them, and do them in a medium, a format or a journal, that you are able to keep private. If you secretly suspect that you are being observed, and this sounds really strange, but I think that the truth is that we often have the sense of being observed as we live our lives, or if you have the sense that somebody may, at some point, get hold of your journal or see your list, this is going to inhibit the process, and to the degree that the process is inhibited it will be less effective. It needs to be sincere, so if it means creating these lists and then burning them afterwards, then that is what you need to do. Keeping them is not terribly important because, they do change; they're dynamic and they change over time. What is important is to enter into the space.

The one that is slightly different in the categories that I gave you is your values. So, to some degree, it's useful to look at desires, aversions, loves, hates and happiness initially, and then look at values finally, because what you may find is that there is a tension between your values (your internal ethic) and your desires and aversions, and as ego, you are called upon to mediate that tension. So, you may desire certain things, you may have certain aversions, but nevertheless you may feel that your internal ethic dictates that you live your life in such a way that certain desires are not fulfilled. That is part of becoming conscious, but what is essential to the process is to own those desires, to start off from the point of view of recognising what it is that you desire. That is to

say, that you may need to suppress certain aspects of yourself. You may not be able to fully actualise or live everything that you want in the world, but becoming conscious means recognising what it is that you want, and common sense dictates trying to actualise as much of that as possible. But there is a tension between these desires and the values. In any case, go through the process and take your time. That is the type of process that the ego is called upon to go through, in order to become as conscious as possible.

Another exercise that I would like you to look at (and this is the final exercise for today's exposition) is the question of love and specifically of love in relation to yourself. It seems to be, if we accept the findings of depth psychology, an essential component in a healthy ego identity, that one has a healthy degree of regard, respect and self-love. Now typically, and I think that this is largely true, the developmental idea here is that you are called upon to internalise the love that your parents had for you, that you internalise the parental imago's and you regard yourself through their eyes. This has some malevolent aspects to it as well, which I'm not going to talk about now, but it has a very, very important aspect, and that is the aspect of love – the love that your mother and father had for you. And to the degree that one experiences an absence of, or a breakdown in, that process of love, there's often difficulty in then internalising what was absent. Or rather, let's say it is the absence that is internalised rather than the love. This self-love is an essential component in a healthy ego. You necessarily need to regard yourself through the eyes of love. You need to care about yourself. You need to husband yourself. You need to parent yourself. This self-love is what allows you to endure adversity, endure doubt,

endure criticism, and to make the effort that needs to be made in order to live in this world and in order to endure what can often be very challenging – simply the process of being alive.

There is much to be said about how one may address the absence of love, but it is too lengthy and too tangential for the purposes of the current exposition. But what I would like you to do is simply to think about this in relation to yourself. How do you regard yourself? Do you love yourself, and what is the nature of the love that you have for yourself? Think about it and how it acts out in your relationship to yourself.

Maybe one final question I would put to you is, where in your own life have you experienced the most intense spiritual or platonic love. I don't want you to think here of erotic love, but of love for a child or a sibling or a parent; or simply someone for whom you have a deep and profound spiritual love. Think about a time in your life and the relationship in which you experienced that. And once you've done that I want you to compare your love for that person with the love that you have for yourself.

And that is it for the ego.

I refer you to the concept document and transcript of this recording, and the exercises that have been documented as well.

Until we speak again, this is Stephen. Goodbye

Applications:

Transpersonal/personal “I”

Consider the contrast in perspective between the ego viewed as object and the ego viewed as subject.

In other words, you are reading this sentence. Who is this “you”?

There is also another whom is observing you reading this sentence. Is there a difference and what is the difference?

Understanding/creating a conscious ego identity.

Create a list of between 5 and 10 items, listed in order of priority (if possible) on the following topics:

Your values.

Your desires.

Your aversions.

What you love

What you hate.

What makes you happy

The role of self-love in determining the ego position.

Do you love yourself?

How much do you love yourself?

Healing developmental trauma or absence of love.

Is there anyone else that you love more than yourself?

Is it possible for you to internalise that love?

The more real and authentic your ego construction is the more stable and powerful it will be. The need to be 100% honest with yourself in this process cannot be overstated.