

Psychology Goes Toe-To-Toe With Totalitarianism in Carl Jung's "The Undiscovered Self"

I'm a big believer that good mythology and stories can teach us how to live well. In the past year or so, that has led me to thinkers like Joseph Campbell and Jordan Peterson, who both have left a big mark on the popular study of mythology and its intersections with philosophy and psychology.

One common thread of Campbell's work and Peterson's work (and the work of anyone in this comparative mythology space) is the work of psychologist Carl Jung.

A lot of Jung's work seems intimidating from the outside. So I decided to dip my toe into the shallow end with a very short work of his called *The Undiscovered Self*, published in 1956 near the end of Jung's career.

Summary and Review

In *The Undiscovered Self*, Jung gives a compelling reason for his life's work in psychology. He points to the rise of collectivist authoritarianism (and the nuclear weaponization of the Cold War) as a sign of the urgent need for self-knowledge:

"Today, as the end of the second millennium draws near, we are again living in an age filled with apocalyptic images of universal destruction. What is the significance of that split, symbolized by the 'Iron Curtain,' which divides humanity into two halves? What will become of our civilization, and of man himself, if the hydrogen bombs begin to go off, or if the spiritual and moral darkness of State absolutism should spread over Europe?"

To most of us living in the 21st century, it's easy to forget that weapons exist which could easily destroy life on the planet a few times over. Jung was not ignorant of that. What's more, he was living through a time when that kind of warfare seemed likely. The world had just lived through the destruction of two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism and National Socialism, and the Holocaust. In 1957, it was not certain that Communism would not spread over the whole world.

That's some pretty serious shit. Jung has set the task of stopping all that. No one can fault Dr. Jung for lacking ambition.

Jung first takes a look at the most likely alternative to (and enemy of) collectivist authoritarianism: religion. For Jung, religion at its best represents a way for people to develop inner lives and self-knowledge. They gain this through the kind of contact with the unconscious mind which people call “spiritual experiences.” Those who have experienced and understood these highly individual experiences are exactly the kinds of people who are hard to control.

But while Jung is appreciative of the Christian tradition, he points out that dogmatic religion – whether for reasons of expediency or even political power – has over the years lost its power as a medium for inner experience. Instead of a “religion”, Jung says that the Christianity known by most people in the West is a “creed” only, a set of conscious beliefs about objective reality. And, as Jung points out, this is a weak foundation (and a poor way of understanding religious symbolism):

The Churches stand for traditional and collective convictions which in the case of many of their adherents are no longer based on their own inner experience but on unreflecting belief, which is notoriously apt to disappear as soon as one begins thinking about it. . .

. . . the standpoint of the creeds is archaic; they are full of impressive mythological symbolism which, if taken literally, comes into insufferable conflict with knowledge.”

Creeds may help provide social bonding and belonging, but they do not ground or develop strong individuals in any kind of useful truth – either objective or mythological. On the other hand, a toxic phenomenon like collectivist authoritarianism has its own unconscious religious power – one against which Jung says the conscious creeds (and many people who live by them) will end up being powerless:

“Brass bands, flags, banners, parades, and monster demonstrations are no different in principle from ecclesiastical processions, cannonades, and fireworks to scare off demons. Only, the suggestive parade of State power engenders a collective feeling of security which, unlike religious demonstrations, gives the individual no protection against his inner demonism.”

In short, religion seems to have failed to do its job – to develop the individual psyche well enough to fend off the anti-individual forces that can so easily feed on undeveloped or unrecognized unconsciousness.

Beyond just religion's failure, Jung argues, it is the world's focus on the conscious mind to the exclusion of the unconscious that helped to create Cold War to begin with. While the conscious mind enables great human endeavors, it does not allow for access of the self-knowledge that lives in the shared evolutionary inheritance of all humans. It denies its own capacity for darkness, so it easily projects that darkness onto others. And that projection is not very helpful when you're in the middle of a geopolitical power struggle. You need to sit down and talk about nuclear disarmament, not rant at your opponent.

To Jung, psychology (practiced rightly) should do what Christianity does at its best: give self-knowledge to humans which can empower them to individuate – to become full human beings with full integration of conscious and unconscious minds, light and shadow selves.

Those are the individuals who – now able to withdraw the psychological projection of their own darkness onto their enemies – will be able to make peace. These are the individuals who – now able to develop themselves as individuals – will be able to resist the mass-mindedness of the world around them. They will be able to prevent the catastrophe which still hangs over the world more than half a century after this book's publication.

Jung ends with one of the most powerful individualist calls to action I have read:

"I am neither spurred on by excessive optimism nor in love with high ideals, but am merely concerned with the fate of the individual human being – that infinitesimal unit on whom a world depends, and whom, if we read the Christian message aright, even God seeks his goal."

This short read was just the thing for me. For an academic (and for someone who wrote this in German), Jung is a pleasure to read and an inspiring thinker. And he shows in this book that he knows how to boil down a lifetime of work into a form digestible for most intelligent readers.

I underlined a lot of this book (see below) – a credit to how many gems are here. And after reading this short book, I want to go deeper into both reading Jung's work and practicing some of its insights.

Some Standout Quotes

- "[The human psyche] should be worthy of all the attention we can give it, especially

today, when everyone admits that the weal or woe of the future will be decided neither by the threat of wild animals, not by natural catastrophes, nor by the danger of world-wide epidemics, but simply and solely by the psychic changes in man. It needs only an imperceptible disturbance of equilibrium in a few of our rulers' heads to plunge the world into blood, fire, and radioactivity."

- "Belief is no adequate substitute for inner experience, and where this is absent even a strong faith which came miraculously as a gift of grace may depart equally miraculously."
- "Christianity holds up before us a symbol whose content is the individual way of life of a man, the Son of Man, and that it even regards this individuation process as the incarnation and the revelation of God himself."
- "Resistance to the organized mass can be effected only by the man who is as well organized in his individuality as the mass itself."
- "This is not to say that Christianity is finished. I am, on the contrary, convinced that it is not Christianity, but our conception and interpretation of it, that has become antiquated in the face of the present world situation. The Christian symbol is a living thing that carries in itself the seeds of further development."
- "Since it is universally believed that man *is* merely what his consciousness knows of itself, he regards himself as harmless and so adds stupidity to iniquity."
- "The more unrelated individuals are, the more consolidated the State becomes, and vice versa."
- "One would first like to be assured that the man who talks of ideals is himself ideal, so that his words and deeds *are* more than they *seem*."