

What is Jung's understanding of society and how, in his view, can psychological development be socially beneficial?

Introduction

As an influential psychologist Jung was also interested in understanding how his insight on the psyche would apply to society and how psychological development can improve individuals and thus, to an extent, society. I will be outlining three main points that demonstrate Jung's understanding of society and how in his view, psychological development would be socially beneficial. Points covered include Jung's characterisations of society as mass minded, critique of the modern person as undifferentiated and lacking tradition, and how archetypal projections can lead to collective possession and susceptibility to authoritarianism, especially when opposing groups of people are projected as evil or inferior. This essay will draw upon various works of Jung such as *Undiscovered self*, to highlight what Jung views as one of the most important factors in contributing to mass mindedness, collected works volume 9 and 10 to elucidate on the shadow and the collective possession during Nazi Germany, and a journal entry highlighting the importance Jung placed on direct experience with the patient. The final text that will be cited is one of Jung's letters which demonstrates that he values the distinction between mysticism and empiricism.

Society as mass minded

One way Jung understands society and how in his view psychological development can be socially beneficial is through the characterization of society as mass minded and proposing that individuals further their self-knowledge and encounter their unconscious through experience-based religiosity. However, Jung values the distinction between mysticism and empiricism, as he says "I was particularly satisfied with the fact that you clearly understand that I am not a mystic but an empiricist. (Jung, et al. 1976, p.237). This is because mysticism is viewed as something irrational and anti-scientific whereas what Jung argues for is empirical evidence and experience as a way to gain knowledge. Jung argues that "one of the chief factors responsible for psychological mass-mindedness is scientific rationalism". (Jung, 1958, p.9). Scientific rationalism is defined as the view that science and rationality are the most appropriate tools of gaining knowledge. This was criticized by Jung as it ignores direct experience as a way of attaining self-knowledge, which is about finding out about oneself, as the focus on scientific

rationalism led society to follow institutions and thought leaders that represent science and rationality, creating mass mindedness as individuals and cultures that deviate from the scientific rationalist perspective are viewed as opposing science and rationality which connotes various undesirable traits, producing conformity.

To escape mass mindedness and groupthink Jung argued in favour of experiential knowledge and an understanding of Analytical psychology. This is because Jung views experience as important in defining an individual's identity and perspective on things. This means that rather than wanting individuals to subscribe to a set of beliefs such as in traditional religious institutions, a unique encounter with the unconscious, he argued, would instil a sense of individual autonomy, as having a strong sense of identity leads to reluctance to groupthink defined as the desire to conform to what a group believes. This is because having an understanding of Analytical psychology and self-knowledge allows for insight into when mass mindedness is occurring. For example, advertising or other societal trends can lead to an individual's decrease in autonomy. Jung also said that "I say to the young psychotherapist: Learn the best, know the best—and then forget everything when you face the patient." (Jung, 1960, p.97). This is important as it demonstrates that Jung valued the individual experience as preferable to learning a body of knowledge, which is applied in a mechanical way. Therefore, one way Jung's understanding of society and how in his view psychological development can be socially beneficial is through his characterization of society as mass minded and arguing for psychological development in terms of gaining and maintaining autonomy through seeking self-knowledge.

Critiques of the modern person

Another way Jung understands society and views psychological development as being socially beneficial is by looking at society as a collection of individuals who lack tradition, are undifferentiated and alienated. This is because Jung considered the modern person as generally hedonistic, viewing themselves as a free autonomous being that does not need to look at the past, leading to the rejection of traditional cultural values and traditions, that historically worked as a shared foundation between people. Jung also critiqued society as encouraging individuals to be undifferentiated from each other. For example, the rise of consumerism and basing an identity on things purchased leads to a never-ending cycle where individuals work to buy things, only

existing to maintain the economy, living as a number in the system. This is what Jung noticed, as the deindividuation of people in society as he said “As a social unit he has lost his individuality and become a mere abstract number in the bureau of statistics. He can only play the role of an interchangeable unit of infinitesimal importance” (Jung, 1958, p.10). This is because he viewed the modern person as alienated from a broader social structure that would have people regularly socialising and contributing whilst maintaining vastly different personalities and interests as way to foster local communal ties.

Psychological development may be socially beneficial in his view, through individuation and Jung’s insight into the importance of community and tradition. As historically communities would meet for church and afterwards congregate to begin to know each other, building up communal ties that are mutually beneficial and fulfilling. Jung saw a void that the modern person has that deserves some form of replacement, he proposed the concept of individuation. This refers to a stage in life where someone makes the unconscious conscious and thus becomes an integrated unique person. This would be socially beneficial as an individuated person would become more productive, and creative as meaning is discovered. Therefore, another way Jung understands society is through various critiques of the modern person and viewing psychological development through individuation and seeing value in tradition and community as socially beneficial.

Archetypes and authoritarianism

Jung also understands society by applying the concept of archetypes to social phenomena, highlighting the susceptibility of populations to authoritarianism, due to collective possession and projection of the shadow archetype. This is because Jung lived during the rise of Hitler, witnessing the projection of the shadow archetype onto groups of people deemed as evil and inferior whilst maintaining popularity as the supposed saviour. Jung on the shadow stated, “The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself” (Jung, 1980, p.284) meaning that within every individual, certain negative traits are present which the subject refuses to believe. Jung also noticed the collective possession of the German people saying, “The impressive thing about the German phenomenon is that one man, who is obviously "possessed," has infected a whole nation” (Jung, 1970, p.185). This is because Jung understood Hitler to be a leader possessed by politics, infecting Germany with his vision of how the world should be, partially through his use of propaganda against those who allegedly harmed the ‘Volkskörper’ (National body).

In Jung’s view, psychological development may be socially beneficial by having a more accurate understanding of the human condition as having the tendency to project shadow qualities and suggesting empathy rather than retribution to deal with those deemed dangerous. Ways this could apply to society is through viewing justice through a rehabilitative lens aiming to help criminals for instance become rehabilitated into society, which is socially beneficial in a variety of ways, through for example saving tax money and decreasing the amount of single fathers. Another in his view socially beneficial outcome of psychological development would be a restructuring of the way people think about “bad” people, accepting that everyone has shadow qualities, even charismatic leaders that promise radical change, with psychological development leading to fundamental distrust of unchecked power and rhetoric focusing on retribution. Collective possession, which is defined as the submission by a population to an inflated leader, is argued to be less likely as strongman politicians are distrusted due to insight into how power can corrupt, diminishing the populations willingness to centralize it. Therefore, Jung understands society by applying the concept of archetypes to elucidate the susceptibility of populations to authoritarianism, due to collective possession and projection of the shadow archetype. Proposing psychological development through empathy and the acknowledgement of the tendency to project shadow traits onto groups deemed undesirable.

Conclusion

To conclude, although Jung was a psychologist first, his understanding of society and ideas on psychological development can be applied and understood in the broader context of society. This essay has aimed to do so through looking at society as mass minded, with psychological development being socially beneficial through numinous experiences with the unconscious. Critiques of the modern person as indistinguishable from each other, proposing psychological development through individuation and community as a way to develop a sense of uniqueness. Also, through looking at the Jungian concept of Archetypes and Jungs insight into Nazi Germany, the associated extremism was understood through projections of the shadow and collective possession of the population through a charismatic leader. With the proposed psychological development being awareness of archetypal projections and understanding the nature of collective possession as being the possible precursor of societal decline.

References

- Jung, C. G. (1958). *The Undiscovered Self*. London: Routledge.
- Jung, C. G. (1980). *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9, Part 1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1970). *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 10: Civilization in Transition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1960). Good and Evil in Analytical Psychology. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 5(2):91-99.
- Jung, C. G., et al. (1976). *Letters of C.G. Jung, Vol. 1*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul PLC.

Word count - 1525