



#80 Carl Jung and The Spiritual Problem of the Modern Individual

As a practicing psychologist and keen observer of the Western world, Carl Jung noticed that many people in his day were afflicted by debilitating feelings of insignificance, inadequacy, and hopelessness. Over several chapters in Volume 10 of his Collected Works, Jung examined this issue and came to conclude that such feelings were caused by what he called a “spiritual problem”.

This “spiritual problem” continues to be an issue for many people in the modern world and its widespread existence poses a great threat to the freedom and prosperity of Western societies. For not only do those afflicted by it suffer as individuals, but as more fall victim to it, the stability of a society falters and the potential for political and social unrest increases. Jung observed the social ramifications of this problem play out first hand in the form of two world wars and the rise of numerous totalitarian states. He was so appalled by these events that he tried his best to convey his insights to others in the hope of averting similar occurrences in the future.

Jung believed that the emergence of this spiritual problem coincided with the declining influence that traditional religions, most prominently Christianity, have had on Western societies over the past several centuries. Casting aside these religions has had many effects, but the one which Jung saw as most pressing, was the fact that it forced countless people to face the existential dilemmas of human life without the helpful crutch of religious dogma.

“How totally different did the world appear to medieval man! For him the earth was eternally fixed and at rest in the centre of the universe...Men were all children of God under the loving care of the Most High, who prepared them for eternal blessedness; and all knew exactly what they should do and how they should conduct themselves in order to rise from a corruptible world to an incorruptible and joyous existence. Such a life no longer seems real to us, even in our dreams.” (Carl Jung, The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man)

In addition to the rise of secularism, Jung suggested that the development of modern mass society also played a significant role in the emergence of the spiritual problem.



Modern society came into existence during the industrial revolution, when large portions of the population were driven from small towns into big cities in search of work and opportunity – instigating the birth of a mass society. While the development of a mass society generated benefits through the intensification of the division of labor, it also brought perilous problems. “This new form of existence...produced an individual who was unstable, insecure, and suggestible.” (Carl Jung, *The Fight With the Shadow*)

The insecurity of the individual in a mass society is partly a function of the sheer quantity of people which surround him. The bigger the crowd, the more nullified the individual feels. But this insecurity was also instigated, according to Jung, by the rise of a rational and scientific mindset which accompanied the industrial revolution, and over time, saturated more and more corners of society.

In the 19th and even more so in the 20th century, social planners, politicians, and leaders of various industries, mesmerized by the fruits which scientific inquiry was producing in the fields of industry and medicine, came to believe that the methods of science could be used to remodel society. The result of this movement was a massification of society, that is, an increase in uniformity and a drastic decrease in the importance of the individual.

For in order to model and subsequently remake society based on scientific and rational principles, the uniqueness of the individual must be negated in favour of statistical averages, and the redesign of society enacted by a group of elites, or Technocrats, who view humans as nothing but abstractions, homogenous social units to be managed and manipulated.

The perilous effects of this attempt to use science to remodel the individual and society, effects still in play today, were described by Jung:

“Under the influence of scientific assumptions, not only the psyche but the individual man and, indeed, all individual events whatsoever suffer a levelling down and a process of blurring that distorts the picture of reality into a conceptual average. We ought not to underestimate the psychological effect of the statistical world-picture: it thrusts aside the individual in favour of anonymous



units that pile up into mass formations...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.” (Carl Jung, The Undiscovered Self)

The existential uncertainty brought by the decline of religions and the diminished importance of the individual in mass society have combined to create a situation where the vast majority of people view themselves as insignificant and impotent beings. This mindset can be very detrimental for as Jung discovered, when the conscious attitude of the individual is deficient in a manner which is detrimental to psychological health, the self-regulating mechanism of the psyche will produce an unconscious compensation in the attempt to correct the faulty conscious attitude, and bring the psyche back into relative balance.

Those suffering from a spiritual problem, due to their feelings of insignificance, lack the proper levels of self-efficacy required for psychological health. Jung proposed that to compensate for this deficiency the unconscious produces a compensation in the form of a strong hunger for power.

“The individual’s feeling of weakness, indeed of non-existence, [is] compensated by the eruption of hitherto unknown desires for power. It [is] the revolt of the powerless, the insatiable greed of the “have-nots.”” (Carl Jung, The Fight with the Shadow)

A compensation can be beneficial if one is able to integrate the compensatory contents of the unconscious into their consciousness, thus bringing more balance to their conscious mind and an overall improvement to their psychological health. However, If the unconscious contents of the compensation, which in the case of a spiritual problem take the form of a lust for power, remain hidden in the unconscious, the compensation can prove extremely dangerous.

“If such a compensatory move of the unconscious is not integrated into consciousness in an individual, it leads to a neurosis or even to a psychosis.” (Carl Jung, The Fight with the Shadow)



If a compensatory desire for power is not integrated into consciousness, Jung warned that one will become possessed by unconscious impulses for power, and thus seek it at any cost. Failing to find it in their personal life due to profound feelings of impotence, such people are very likely to gravitate toward collective ideologies, mass movements, and institutions which they view as having the power they as individuals lack.

“If the individual, overwhelmed by the sense of his own puniness and impotence, should feel that his life has lost its meaning...then he is already on the road to State slavery and, without knowing or wanting it, has become its proselyte.” (Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*)

When this psychological process occurs on a mass scale, a society becomes highly vulnerable to the rise of State tyranny.

Jung described this process in the following chilling passage.

“Instead of the concrete individual, you have the names of organizations and, at the highest point, the abstract idea of the State as the principle of political reality. The moral responsibility of the individual is then inevitably replaced by the policy of the State. Instead of the moral and mental differentiation of the individual, you have public welfare and the raising of the living standard. The goal and meaning of individual life (which is the only real life) no longer lie in individual development but in the policy of the State, which is thrust upon the individual from outside...The individual is increasingly deprived of the moral decision as to how he should live his own life, and instead is ruled, fed, clothed, and educated as a social unit...and amused in accordance with the standards that give pleasure and satisfaction to the masses.” (Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*)

This form of dystopia occurred in varying degrees in the 20th century, and seems to be re-emerging in the West today. While many people realize the dangers posed by the existence of centralized states, most react to the growth of state power with feelings of hopelessness, believing there is nothing that they as individuals can do about it. Jung’s analysis is profound for the reason that he suggests that the rise of state tyranny is a by-product of the proliferation of the



spiritual problem afflicting the modern world, and thus can be subdued if more people learn to resolve the spiritual problem affecting their own lives.

Jung held out hope that many people in the West were capable of achieving this, and saw evidence of such potential in the growth of the field of psychology in the 20th century, and in the increased desire of many to explore the depths in their psyche in search of self-knowledge.

“To me the crux of the spiritual problem today is to be found in the fascination which the psyche holds for modern man....if we are optimistically inclined, we shall see in it the promise of a far-reaching spiritual change in the Western world. At all events, it is a significant phenomenon...important because it touches those irrational and—as history shows —incalculable psychic forces which transform the life of peoples and civilizations in ways that are unforeseen and unforeseeable. These are the forces, still invisible to many persons today, which are at the bottom of the present “psychological” interest.” (Carl Jung, *The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man*)

In times of desperation ancient peoples looked to the gods which inhabited the oceans, the forests, and the skies for regeneration. In Jung’s view, the modern individual, for whom all the gods are dead, must look to the forces within for answers to the spiritual problems which plague them. In finding answers, he thought one will not only be curing the spiritual sickness which afflicts them personally, but will also be contributing to the renewal of a world gone astray in the darkness of State domination:

“Small and hidden is the door that leads inward, and the entrance is barred by countless prejudices, mistaken assumptions, and fears. Always one wishes to hear of grand political and economic schemes, the very things that have landed every nation in a morass. Therefore it sounds grotesque when anyone speaks of hidden doors, dreams, and a world within. What has this vapid idealism got to do with gigantic economic programmes, with the so-called problems of reality?

But I speak not to nations, only to the individual few, for whom it goes without saying that cultural values do not drop down like manna from heaven, but are created by the hands of individuals. If things go wrong in the world, this is



because something is wrong with the individual, because something is wrong with me. Therefore, if I am sensible, I shall put myself right first. For this I need—because outside authority no longer means anything to me—a knowledge of the innermost foundations of my being, in order that I may base myself firmly on the eternal facts of the human psyche.” (Carl Jung, The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man)