

# Psychosocial Implications Of The Shadow

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to give a psychotherapeutic interpretation of humankind's seeming compulsion to turn against its own self as a species and commit endless self-harm. My perspective is one of working for thirty years with individuals, families and groups who have come for psychotherapy to extricate themselves from patterns of destructive behaviour and the misery that goes with it. The consulting room might seem a long way from the killing fields cast by the shadow of mankind. But as the twig is bent, so grows the tree. Society at large mirrors the mental turmoil in each one of us.

## The beginnings of culture

I'll start by observing that on the one hand we are as Gods, while on the other hand we are very much animals still. Our gift of consciousness, which transcends the physical world, has to live with a brain and body geared to the evolution of the hunter-gatherer and the basic survival mechanisms of fight or flight. This is hardly surprising when we consider how recently language and culture have evolved.

It is thought that Homo erectus first appeared some 1.5 million years back. One notable achievement of Homo erectus was to harness fire, around 300,000 years ago. Not only did this enable food to be cooked, it also protected against wild animals. Our progenitors could relax in safety, in tribes or clans around the fire and begin the process of socialisation and culture. As little as 100,000 years ago, the blink of an eye on the evolutionary timeline, Homo sapiens discovered the miracle of language. To this day we can see how it began, as a mother reaches out to her baby with voice and gesture and the infant responds in kind.

## The mind of the infant

How does the infant mind start to form? To begin with, the mind has no constructs with which to organise information arising from the world of sense perception and a baby's experience of consciousness may well be something akin to what sages and mystics know as 'the ground of all being'. A sublime expression of this state of wonder is found in Gerald Finzi's cantata 'Dies Natalis' or 'Day of Birth' <sup>1</sup> set to the words of the seventeenth century poet Thomas Traherne.

*Sweet Infancy / O heavenly Fire! O Sacred Light! / How fair and bright!  
How Great am I / Whom the whol world doth magnify!  
O heavenly Joy! / O Great and Sacred Blessedness / Which I possess!  
So great a Joy / Who did into my Arms convey?*

The infant mind very soon begins to be structured by experience. Pleasure, and pain too, initially mediated by body sensations but then extending to the mental world, shape the behaviour of the little person. Without mother (or the

care-giver), the child would be in acute danger of physical or mental catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

The good mother keeps traumatic impingements to a minimum but to some extent they are part of life. Colic, chafed skin, bumps on the head; how does the child manage these inevitable mini-traumas? In fact, children can cope remarkably well with all manner of adversity provided they feel inwardly secure. Anxiety and discomfort can be tolerated when experience has taught them it will not be forever, just for a little while. Soon help will be on hand, best of all, a parent's love and concern.

### **The origin of the Shadow**

What if that same child is growing up in a world that does present serious threats to its survival and where there is little or no comfort? Firstly, the child dares not express healthy aggression because if it does, it will be punished. As it happens, the worst form of punishment is not a physical beating but threat of abandonment. The crucial developmental step taken by the higher mammals and primates especially is the intimacy and duration of the parent-infant bond. Parents have no idea of the emotional impact of shouting 'you do that again and I'll leave you right here!' The fear of abandonment will lead children to suppress all their anger and grievances while submitting passively to shocking abuse, just so long as they don't get thrown out.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the child has to find a way to get rid of unbearable psychic pain so that equilibrium can be restored to the child's ego. This is carried out by a variety of psychological defence mechanisms,<sup>4</sup> best collectively understood in terms of specific coping strategies.

### **Defence mechanisms**

Everyone has defence mechanisms on board. They are rather like a trip switch in an electrical circuit. Overload triggers the switch instead of burning out the circuit. A vulnerable and insecure child with a fragile ego cannot tolerate fluctuations in emotional tension. Instead, the child relies heavily on its defence mechanisms to protect it. By contrast, the more that love, protection and understanding have been given to a child, the more stable and resilient its inner world comes to be. Accordingly, it learns to handle emotions with confidence and not to anticipate disaster. Defence mechanisms still come into play in the event of major trauma, but the ups and downs of daily life can be managed well enough.

Numerous defences have been identified but I need only describe the key ones here.

### **Repression**

Repression is the defence most people have heard of. The traumatic event is simply split off from consciousness and buried, out of sight and out of mind. But it is still there ten, twenty, fifty years on, for so long as it lies concealed, the imprint of the trauma remains as powerful as the day it was laid down. We see this with child sexual abuse, where terrifying flashbacks may occur for the first time during lovemaking in adulthood. But the problem can be compounded by the unconscious choice to engage in an abusive adult relationship. It often transpires in such cases that deep down, the child was left with guilt and shame, or a sense of badness, and years later

unconsciously selects a partner on the basis of 'I'm not worthy of more' at best and 'I deserve to be punished' at worst. The reality we create for ourselves is usually the one we half expect.

### **Splitting and Projection**

The defence of splitting and projection is one we often see parents aiding and abetting in small ways. A child trips over a chair and starts to cry. 'Naughty chair', says the grown up and even gives the chair a smack. The child is comforted, since it obviously must have been the chair's fault and the child is not to blame. The problem has been split off and projected into the hapless chair! This game does no harm to a healthy toddler and its self-esteem, which had momentarily collapsed, is quickly restored.

Projection is not necessarily defensive. We know that what we see is always coloured by how we feel, for the world is not a thing apart but part of us. We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are.<sup>5</sup> When we project love, we can find beauty in all of creation. There is no splitting, for we are happy to feel ourselves part of it too. But when we project anger, it makes the thing bad, 'not-me'. Me good, chair bad! Splitting has put that bad feeling outside of me, where I can kick it, smash it up, run away from it or enjoy watching it on television in the form of other people's misfortunes.

Children begin making categorical judgements about good and bad when they are still very small. Parental input is needed to soften the harshness of those early judgements. Children have to learn that justice needs tempering with mercy and grandiosity with humility. This is where the action of love is required.

When we see pathological splitting at work in the adult, we regularly find a characteristic feature, that such persons hold their opinions with absolute certainty. Ambivalence is to be avoided at all costs in case it leads to inner confusion.

Now the capacity for ambivalence requires us to tolerate conflicting impulses, feelings and ideas, for example, selfishness and generosity, love and hate, right and wrong. It means owning the problem as your own and coming up with a mature solution. It often results in having to bear with a degree of frustration, accepting that you cannot have your cake and eat it. It means loving others and yourself as well, while knowing your faults and failings, and those in your loved ones too. As a developmental achievement, ambivalence gives us the capacity for introspection and depth of personality. Where would Shakespeare be without it!

Unencumbered by such introspection, people prone to splitting often make charismatic, if immature, leaders because of their conviction in themselves and the rightness of their view of the world. The enemy 'out there' is ruthlessly attacked and any attempt at conciliation is seen as a sign of weakness and scorned - a scapegoat must be found! The dynamic operating here requires that if an enemy cannot be found, one will have to be invented. This can lead to paranoia - the cold war mentality - while to question such a leader's authority is felt as an act of betrayal.

### **Manic-defence and Idealisation**

The combination of self-idealisation and denigration of other is known as manic-defence; the need for power and triumph over others is understood psychoanalytically as a defence against helplessness and depression.

An alternative way of dealing with weakness and vulnerability is to attach yourself to someone you see as all-powerful and who can be made the object of idealisation. But if that person should let you down, the fall from grace is precipitous and he or she is now seen as public enemy number one. Immediately the search is on for a replacement to become the new hero and saviour. The hallmark of this dependency situation is the expectation of getting rescued from without, rather than learning how to rescue oneself.

### **Relationships and Projection**

Splitting of the ego can take place without projection, as in the case of multiple personality. More often, splitting is accompanied by projection into something or someone else.<sup>6</sup> It can be an object, as in the example I gave of the child and chair, but projection is frequently directed at people. Hate, for instance, can bind a couple as powerfully as love. People say, 'why not leave?' as if it was the obvious thing to do. But then who would be left to hate? You might discover it was yourself you hated all along and end up contemplating suicide. (This is why paranoia and depression are two sides of one coin, depending on whether the hostility is directed outwards or inwards).

Sometimes projection systems are mutual and complementary. Take the husband whose wife gets depressed. Until they are seen together, the wife would seem to be the one needing treatment. But closer investigation shows that the husband's anxieties and fears are inadmissible because he was brought up never to show vulnerability. Unconsciously the wife takes on the role of the carrier of these emotions for the both of them. And she, let us say, was brought up to believe that the woman must give support to the man. So, she projects the inadmissible aspect of herself, her own strength, into her husband, where it fortifies his self-esteem. Sometimes such relationships work out well enough. But when the roles become embedded, there is usually trouble, since neither of them are being truly themselves. They are likely to do better if seen for therapy as a couple.

### **A brief note on ego development**

Defence mechanisms inevitably develop as the growing child finds out how to protect its sense of personal identity. Two early markers of a child's ego development are worth noting. One is the ability to say no, which comes well before the child learns to say yes. This is a crucial step, for the child is establishing a sense of its own, separate being. The other milestone, which holds lifelong significance, is the discovery of the personal pronoun, 'mine', coming way ahead of 'yours'. 'Mine' is a four-letter word with devastating implications for human society

The advent of the human ego is something of a two-edged sword. Without it there could be no development of will, no mastery of the environment and no spur to emotional and intellectual growth. The ego ideal<sup>7</sup> which first arises in every child based on its love and admiration for its parents, later acquires a prohibitive function ('I said no!') as parental injunctions are internalised. Sigmund Freud called it the superego.<sup>8</sup> Having a conscience means learning to set limits for oneself as a self-governed individual with a capacity for moral introspection.

At the same time, this separating out of self from 'other' presents an existential challenge for every child, for where there is emotional instability, healthy competitiveness can easily turn into destructive rivalry, admiration into

envy and need into greed. These negative developments arise when the child continues to experience a core sense of threat, feeding the need for power. Look at what happens in school playgrounds every day, up and down the land. Unless a protective and respectful culture has been established by the teachers (and for which parental support is also needed), we find everywhere the same struggle for power that William Golding wrote about so chillingly in 'Lord of the Flies'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Identification with the aggressor**

In the blackboard jungle, a child who is perceived as weaker than others is fated to be bullied, often ruthlessly. On investigation, the psychological mechanism is always found to be the same and we can readily understand it in terms of projection and splitting. Anna Freud named this defence mechanism 'identification with the aggressor'. The bully comes from a disturbed background. He or she has experienced what it means to be a victim. Now there is a chance to turn the tables; the child takes on the characteristics of the abuser, relishing the feeling of power. But what is to be done now with the split-off victim aspect, which has never known love and sympathy? The bully must get rid of this Achilles heel at all costs, so the name of the game is to find someone weaker, into whom this hated aspect of the self can be projected and then attack it out there, in the other. We call this scapegoating, but in its more malignant expression, it can lead to murder.

Such is the danger when, for defensive purposes, 'other' has to be treated as alien to self. It highlights the crucial task facing the child in being helped by parents and teachers to develop the capacity for empathy, to learn to understand what could be going on in the mind of the other. It is our good fortune as a species to be hard-wired for this kind of learning (neuro-psychologists call it 'theory of mind'). Unfortunately, for a small minority, the hard-wiring doesn't work - autistic children are severely handicapped by the inability to put themselves in the mind of anybody else and consequently, the world of the autistic child is completely self-centred.<sup>10</sup>

In effect, the same psychological endpoint is reached when defence mechanisms come to dominate the workings of the inner world. Humans then show no compunction in seducing, bullying or manipulating others into doing what they want. It is also of note that few such people regard themselves as bad. This leads to some bizarre situations, for instance some mass murderers would seem genuinely to have been conscientious and loving parents.

### **Denial**

This brings me to the last term I want to include, the defence known as denial. The facts may be staring a person in the face, yet what they signify cannot be grasped. Some patients really don't want to face that they have cancer. The unexpected death of a loved one is another case in point - the shock is so overwhelming that the defence cuts in and the person simply cannot take in the bad news. Such denial is usually temporary. But in other situations, like admitting responsibility for genocide, the denial may be lifelong and buttressed by all manner of justifications and rationalisations. Should such denial break down, the outcome can be fatal. Franz Stangl, who was commandant at Treblinka, was later interviewed by Gitta Sereny weekly for about a year.<sup>11</sup> In the last interview, he admitted to some degree his

responsibility for mass murder. Nineteen hours after this last interview, he died from a heart attack.

### **Group processes**

I have been illustrating how the pathological use of defence mechanisms can operate in the individual case. Now let us look at some of the consequences for human society.

When we consider groups, we see the collective emergence of the same mechanisms that apply to the individual. However, the group situation adds a whole new dimension and to help conceptualise this, I want to include another term coined by Freud, called 'transference'.<sup>12</sup>

### **Transference**

Transference refers to the way in which we unwittingly transfer the emotions we have felt towards key persons in our formative years onto other people and into other situations. Typically, it is not uncommon for someone with a domineering father to have difficulty, years on, with the boss at work, since unresolved rebellious emotions surface and get in the way of a good working relationship. Or if a child never felt sure of the parent's affection, it may be left excessively anxious to please when grown up. Or else, if the children in a family had desperately to compete for the parents' love, poor peer relationships may well result later, since rivalry rather than co-operation still feels like the only way to succeed.

These unconscious patterns surface because the archetypal constellation of the family is always being activated in the group situation.<sup>13</sup> But just as the saying goes, 'blood is thicker than water', when there is an external threat, people will sink their differences to join forces against the common foe, like a family under threat. The leader of the group becomes the object of intense transference projections, for he or she now carries the 'ego-ideal' for all, be it cause or crusade, religious uprising or political ideology.<sup>14</sup> Special sanctions are dispensed in the name of the cause, like permission to kill other people. The 'us and them' dynamic, lurking only just beneath the surface at the best of times is now legitimised, while propaganda ensures that the enemy is thoroughly vilified. (The army knows how dangerous it is to allow fraternisation).

Once the rules of normal civilised behaviour have been suspended and killing is approved, a profound taboo has been lifted; little wonder that rape and other atrocities are commonplace. In some cultures, it is explicitly held that taking a life is strong magic against losing your own. This would be another example of manic-defence, in which the person triumphs over death by projecting his own fear of death into the other, and then exultantly destroying it out there, in the enemy.

The larger the group, the more individual identity is swept aside.<sup>15</sup> Football matches are a fairly harmless case in point. Group cohesion is vested in the favoured team - a secular ego ideal that for some is as powerful as any religion; indeed it becomes the religion. It has been argued that in a society in which so many feel alienated and estranged, to have such opportunities to unite with fellow man must be a good thing. Clearly a deep need is being met, otherwise football would not hold such appeal.

Because transference reactions have their roots in the hopes and fears of childhood, they tend to be extreme in character, inherently unstable, riding

on a wave of emotion and not much amenable to reason. Politicians know how fickle the mood of the electorate can be, and how suddenly disillusionment can set in. Or looked at the other way round, how quickly it can happen that a popular leader is felt to become a persecutor and a tyrant. Democracy may be a wonderful thing but, the world over, leaders and led get caught alike in the dynamics of the dependency relationship. Every child needs guiding and protecting. Yet as it grows, it resents being controlled, the more so as the idealisation of the parent is replaced with a keen perception of the parent's fallibility. Parents are usually hurt by this biting of the hand that feeds, just as politicians usually end up feeling wounded by the slings and arrows of the electorate. In the family of origin, the solution is to leave home. In a totalitarian state, the solution is literal repression and the attempt is made to expunge individual memory by re-writing social history. In a democracy, we elect a new government and with the help of splitting, projection and idealisation, fresh hope springs anew.

### **The dominance of emotions over intellect**

In the evolution of civilisation as we know it, war has played a big and perhaps indispensable part. Until now, the planet has been sufficiently large, and the weapons of mankind sufficiently limited, to allow each nation to go on behaving as if it was the epicentre of the world. Yet, even the most rudimentary knowledge of the geography and history of the planet shows this to be patently untrue!

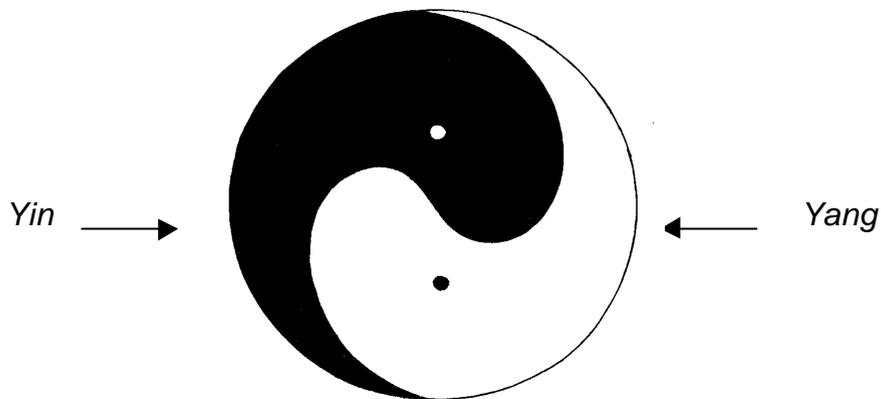
We find the same egocentrism mirrored at every level of social structure, in each community, each family, and each couple, down to each individual self. We must conclude that there is a profound discrepancy between emotional reality and intellectual comprehension. For instance, study of the earth's ecosystems clearly shows that to survive as a species, we urgently need to devote ourselves to caring for spaceship earth, which means confronting the problems of pollution, deforestation, arms proliferation, conflicting ideologies, and social and racial injustice. Yet, from the emotional standpoint we have not advanced very much beyond the world of the child, which experiences itself as the centre of all things. This is the field of action of our defence mechanisms, which develop in the early years to shield the young human being from anxiety and fear, long before the intellect is able to grasp the meaning of the big picture. Nor can these defences be simply extracted from the human ego, for they are deeply woven into the ego and its limited view of self-in-the-world.

### **Good and Evil**

The developmental psychology I have outlined so far does not address the question of good and evil. Indeed, psychology claims to be a science supposedly independent of moral value judgements, seeing good and evil as best left to philosophers and theologians to argue about. In fact, psychology has all sorts of built-in assumptions about what is good and bad, usually implied by integration of the psyche (good) versus fragmentation (bad), as well as placing a value on the importance of truthfulness, the relief of suffering and the goal of happiness, to name but a few.

Since we live in a time when whole countries are being castigated as 'the axis of evil', I had better offer my own working paradigm for good and evil before I discuss the psychology of the shadow any further. I don't think

psychology needs to stand back from the question of good and evil. In our world of sense perception, structured in four-dimensional space-time, everything is experienced by way of its polarities. This is embodied in the ancient Chinese symbol of the Taiji, where yin and yang entwine within the circle.<sup>16</sup>



Dark is dark because it compares with light, inside is contrasted with outside, bigness with smallness and, more abstractly, pleasure compares with pain, love with hate, right is distinguished from wrong and good from evil. We therefore know good because we know evil too, just as there can be no light without shade.

Scientific materialism, which has been in the driving seat for some three hundred years, argues that our awareness of good and evil, like everything else in our consciousness, is just a by-product of the activity of the brain. (Materialists haven't worked out why consciousness was required in the first place but since it exists, it is presumed to be playing its part in the Darwinian scheme of things). So, from the standpoint of materialist psychology, through projection of the ego ideal we invent a God of goodness, who is supposed to protect us like a loving parent. At the same time, by means of splitting and projection, we invent the Devil so that we can keep the badness outside.

While Freud has taught us a great deal about defence mechanisms, applying the reductionist approach to spirituality is completely outdated. Instead, we have a new cosmology derived largely from quantum physics during the last century. It suggests that we live in a multidimensional cosmos comprising a gigantic hologram, out of which our physical universe unfolds in the dimensions of what we know as space-time.<sup>17</sup> Since the process is not static but flowing, the physicist David Bohm used the term holomovement to describe this flux between the hidden and the revealed, what he called the implicate and explicate orders.<sup>18</sup> Since in a hologram the whole is contained in its entirety within the part, it follows that humankind carries and faithfully reflects the image of the greater whole. On this basis, what we experience as consciousness is nothing less than the hallmark of a self-aware universe.

The most radical claim of quantum theory, incredible though it may seem, is that through the action of human consciousness (what is known as the collapse of the wave), we physically materialise our four-dimensional universe of space-time and everything it contains.<sup>19</sup> What is more, our search

for meaning is not a luxury but a necessity, for meaning is the bridge between consciousness and matter. This is a great undertaking on behalf of creation, in which we are instruments of the supreme consciousness we call God.

### **Living in our own Shadow**

If this is our God-given task, how come the folly and wisdom of humankind exist cheek by jowl and why should the impact of hatred and violence be allowed to jeopardise our very existence? My own view is that it could hardly have been otherwise. Our history suggests that Homo sapiens is still at a very early stage of evolution. Just as Neanderthal man was superseded by Homo sapiens, (indeed they co-existed during the last Ice Age), perhaps the next stage will be the emergence of Homo spiritus.<sup>20</sup> But we are not there yet; too much of our consciousness is deployed in fight/flight mentality. And while love and compassion go about their business with a minimum of fuss, the ego-defences shout out from the rooftops; repression, splitting and projection, manic-defence, idealisation and denial have noisy consequences since the human ego is given to much posturing and self-justification.

Herein we have a deep ethical quandary. There can be no solution to injustice through repression of violence, or retaliation, for however much the retaliatory strike is seen as a lesson in deterrence and a ridding of evil, the act of retaliation draws the offender and the offended against into the same behaviour. Where there was one bully in the playground, now there are two. How could any real progress ever result? Nor is overcoming these ego-defences easily achieved. First, by their nature they work through the unconscious so that they fly in the face of reason. Second, a vicious circle is invariably established; interactions based on threat and counter-threat intensify the operation of defences. Maintaining the ego ideal means having right on one's side. How else could one man's terrorist be another man's freedom fighter?

### **Integrating the Shadow**

Carl Jung was deeply concerned with how humankind maintains its sense of goodness, what he called the persona, at the cost of getting rid of all those unwanted aspects of the self, which he named 'the Shadow'. While Freud was busy working out the structure of the ego and its defences, no one had grasped the implications for humankind as a species. Jung saw with dreadful clarity how the Shadow falls on humankind and spares no one.<sup>21</sup>

Jung concluded that unless a way could be found to integrate the Shadow within the psyche instead of projecting it, humankind would be forever doomed to act out the shadow in all arenas of life, personal, national and international. Jung saw this maturational task as the crucial challenge for humankind. He called the process 'individuation' in the sense of becoming indivisible, a unity, and thereby whole. Jung believed that this potential is found not in the ego but in the Self, which he described as '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 the conscious mind'.<sup>22</sup> This means that healing, which comes from wholeness, can never be accomplished by the activity of the ego. Only the Self, embracing the psyche of both the individual and the collective, holds the key. Jung saw that the Self has the power to accept and contain the internal splits

and factions within the psyche because its prime concern is with totality and completeness. From the true perspective of the bigger picture, the squabbles of the ego can be managed as you would manage an unruly child.

There are three implications. One is that the Shadow can be lived with as part of one's humanity, as part of oneself, instead of being inflicted on others. The concerns of the ego need to be accommodated, for we never entirely outgrow childhood. But we don't have to remain the victim of childhood when we see it from the perspective of the adult.

The second implication is that individuation is not merely an intellectual exercise but a path of transformation for the emotional and spiritual development of the psyche. Overcoming the limitations and distortions of transference-driven emotions is to become self-sovereign, to experience freedom for the first time.

The third implication is that the collective aspect of the Self is more than interpersonal; it is transpersonal and makes one creature of all humankind. Jung wrote that '...what is divided on a lower level will reappear, united, on a higher one'.<sup>23</sup>

All great leaders of peace movements and spiritual and religious faiths express these characteristics of the larger Self. They are not concerned with advancement of the personal ego; on the contrary, their guiding light is humility. They are indifferent to their own status while dedicated to the welfare of others. They eschew all violence. They give love without reserve, unconditionally, and inspire love in return.

As to hypothesising about the exact balance of good and evil, such leaders don't pre-occupy themselves with philosophising. If the drama being played out on the world stage is such that some humans are bent on destruction, all the more reason to throw your weight behind creativity. If there is a collision of values, be steadfast in holding to one's own without standing in judgement over the other.

### **The ethic of interconnectedness**

Change through acceptance of self and of other is alien to most of us since our reflex mode as an emergent species is defence and attack. So what does acceptance actually mean? It does not mean condoning behaviour we believe to be hurtful and harmful. We can distinguish between the behaviour and the human being that is driven to act destructively. It does mean recognising that not only do we need to share the same planet, the same air, the same water; we also participate in the same unitary consciousness of the greater Self.<sup>24</sup> Acting out the impulse to destroy makes absolutely no sense once we have grasped this essential point.<sup>25</sup> When we put aside the fortress mentality of the ego and see how the Self extends to comprise one living, sentient consciousness, to shoot another is only to shoot oneself in the foot! This realisation brings ego and the Self into line; individuality and commonality are two sides of one coin.<sup>26</sup> What is most personal is universal.

If humankind is to have a future, a quantum shift from the ego and its defences to the Self and its inclusive vision is urgently required. What will happen to the Shadow? It will always be acted out in the playground of childhood, since the ego must have its day. But retrieving the Shadow is the object lesson of spiritual education. And while owning our own Shadows doesn't make us into murderers, it helps us find compassion for those who take life and never realised it was their own they were taking.

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