

The myth of the collective unconscious

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Abstract

This essay challenges the most basic tenet of Jung's analytical psychology, namely, the existence of the collective unconscious. Despite the fact that there are purported to be universal processes and ontological features of mind throughout all psychoanalytical schools of thought, Jung's is unique in the history of psychoanalytic ideas for positing a supraordinate, autonomous transpersonal psyche that remains the source, ground, and wellspring from which all unconscious and conscious manifestations derive. This bold claim is analyzed through a close inspection of Jung's texts that questions the philosophical justification for postulating a supernatural macroanthropos or reified collective mind. Pointing out the problems of agency and fallacies of hypostatization, it is not necessary to evoke a transpersonal cosmogony to explain how universality suffuses individual subjectivity within social collectives. Here we may conclude that the collective unconscious construct is a signifier for the common psychological dynamics and characteristics of shared humanity. In this sense, the myth of the collective unconscious is better understood as a metaphor for a higher abstraction or ideal principle ordained with numinous value.

In this essay, I wish to examine a central notion of analytical psychology, if not the fulcrum on which Jung's philosophy of mind and human culture rests. Here I will take up a very specific question with a narrow scope of analysis; namely, Is there a Collective Unconscious? And if so, What is it, exactly? Jung (1953/1973) himself actually gives a very scant account of the collective unconscious throughout his *Collected Works*, instead focusing almost entirely on the archetypes, the presupposed contents of a collective psyche. Rather than focus on content, I wish to sustain the question of original ground, the metaphysical womb of all becoming. Indeed, although the archetype is purported to be its own original form (*arché*—origin, type—form), the collective unconscious is the original *source* of these innumerable self-instantiating forms, the foundation, wellspring, or encompassing principle in which archetypes originate—the ultimate cause and basis of appearances as such. Although this inquiry may amount to heresy within certain Orthodox circles, to lend coherence

and credibility to this theoretical postulate, it is incumbent upon us to offer a philosophical defense of this most important and radical concept that grounds the entire edifice of Jungian thought.

As a universal and necessary a priori condition for psychic life to exist and emerge, the collective unconscious becomes the most ontologically dependent force and locus of all human activity, perhaps even presupposing a transpersonal matrix that yields cosmic, if not supernatural, significance. But before we draw any conclusions, it becomes important for us to unpack Jung's concept of the collective unconscious and see if the philosophical implications of his theory bear plausibility and merit, if not pragmatic utility.

In the Jungian literature, there has been a great deal of critique on the notion of archetypes. In fact, this concept may very well be the most controversial aspect of Jung's analytical psychology. But whatever analysis we derive at, we must not forget that archetypes are conditioned on something far more ontologically basic, that is, indispensably primordial.

Because archetypes are essentially the contents of the collective psyche that are said to be emitted into individual minds—itsself a presumptive assertion that requires justification, this further challenges Kant's formalism where only a priori categories for understanding and forms of sensibility exist, which are the formal mental structures that allow us to apprehend objects of experience; whereas Jung imports content (the archetypes) at the very beginning that constitutes the presubjective agent—that is, the ontological preconditions that make subjectivity possible, thus present at birth without the aid of sense perception, space, and time. This becomes problematic unless one is willing to grant that the contents of past ancestral experience become incorporated, organized, preserved, and recapitulated by humankind, is transmitted phylogenetically, and re-emerges in subsequent transgenerational instantiations in future historical timelines of the human race. Here we must differentiate between an *original source* versus the forms, contents, and aims of manifestation. Recall that transitioning from the nonmanifest to the manifest is realized and accomplished through the archetypes. Is the collective unconscious the true *arché*, the true beginning, or should this be more properly ascribed to the archetypes themselves, presuming they exist, which further needs an argument?

Perhaps the collective unconscious is merely a symbol, a metaphor for the Center, or does it have a distinct ontology—the “really real,” the zone of an absolute reality? If we push this issue further, boundaries quickly become blurred to the point that the collective unconscious could be synonymous with the concept of God, the actor, and the act of creation taking place in and at the center of the cosmos. If we adopt this point of view, namely, of deifying the collective unconscious as a supernatural macroanthropos, it would be disastrous for Jungian studies, as the theoretical foundation of analytical psychology would succumb to inventing unverifiable fictions that satisfy the wishful fantasies of imagination at the expense of reason, logic, and science.

1 | JUNG ON THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

Jung's first use of the term appears in *Symbols of Transformation* (Jung, 1912, CW, 5, p. 177n), what he initially referred to as a “supra-individual universality” (p. 177), “the archaic heritage of humanity” (p. 178), the birth of “spirit” (p. 413). Here Jung makes a bold claim: spirit (*Geist*) comes from a collective unconscious and appears as archetypes, both as “primordial images” and “primary forms” (p. 413). In his Foreword to the 4th Swiss Edition, Jung concludes that “The psyche is not of today; its ancestry goes back many millions of years ... from the perennial rhizome ... the root matter” of the unconscious, “the mother of all things” (p. xxiv). In other words, mind and its contents come from a preontological substrate that conditions the coming into being of all psychological events up to our current times.

Jung makes many statements in his writings that enlist a nativist view of the psyche derived from innate substructures that favor evolutionary explanations (Jung, 1961, p. 348), but he also conflates the contents of mind (archetypes) with the collective unconscious itself. He specifically says that “The collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited” (Jung 1936, CW, 9, i, p. 43). How is a collective unconscious belonging to archaic humanity inherited? How can an unconscious collective mind be congenital? This would seem to suggest that we actually inherit some other supraordinate mind that is operative in us and dominates us from the start as

some foreign process superimposed on our consciousness. In other words, we inherit another Mind or many people's minds that are lumped into a categorical abstraction called the world soul (*anima mundi*). How is this possible? Of course, we inherit inborn structures, but to claim that "images" or supraordination is inborn is another matter.

How is the so-called collective unconscious "identical in all individuals" but does not develop individually? How could a suprapersonal configuration—a complex organization—be inborn? One way of interpreting these claims is to collapse the concept of a collective unconscious into a general abstract category subsumed within evolutionary biology, as Jung does when he first identifies the instincts (*Triebe*) with innate images and patterns of behavior derived from unconscious processes. Here the collective unconscious becomes merely a placeholder for something common in all people, our base embodiment that gives rise to conscious experience. So far there is no new thesis being advanced from that of classical psychoanalytic theory.

But Jung soon throws down the gauntlet. In his insistence that there are "universally present formal elements" in the psyche, he quickly jumps to posit the content of the archetypes and asks: "are there or are there not unconscious universal forms of this kind? If they exist, then there is a region of the psyche which one can call the collective unconscious" (Jung, 1936, *CW*, 9, i, p. 44). But why this inferential leap? Why are universal forms equated with archetypal content? How is formalism the same as particularities? Is there a difference between unconscious structure, form, and content (as a process, as the preconditions for cognition to transpire)? These differential classifications of explanation make a difference in how we come to conceptualize the notion of a collective unconscious. Jung's hasty generalization is furthermore met with a disclaimer followed by an assertion that "the collective unconscious is neither a speculative nor a philosophical but an empirical matter" (*Ibid*). What is "empirical" is the mere fact of our biological embodiment that is innately equipped with evolutionary pressures, drives, desires, affects, and a priori cognitive structures that allow all human beings to experience the world and their psychological realities, whereas positing a transcendental collective or objective (objectified) psyche is a "speculative" "philosophical" construct that must be justified with logical arguments and empirically demonstrated. So far Jung has failed to argue—let alone demonstrate—that just because there are universal structures of mind common to all people that they derive from a collective source or cosmic web of all becoming. Here becomes the first problem in grounding a theoretically justified transpersonal ontology, especially when it is inflated to the realm of cosmogony.

When Jung blurs his definition of the collective unconscious and makes it synonymous with the archetypes, he problematizes his project even further. He declares that the collective unconscious consists of instincts and their "correlates, the archetypes," which everyone possesses, but they also possess "a stock of archetypal images" (Jung, 1919, *CW*, 8, ¶281, p. 138). This would mean that "images" are stored in a collective psyche and transmitted over the ages through the evolutionary mechanisms that have created or given shape to the emergence of modern-day *Homo sapiens*. Reductive implications aside, at the very least Jung believes (stipulated under the guise of a hypothesis) that images are experienced by humankind and evolutionarily stored in the brain, which is transgenerationally transmitted genetically and culturally, and that they have fixed universal meaning in their symbolism. This is a very deterministic model of evolutionary emergence where image and symbolic meaning appear to be prearranged, programmed, or encoded. There also appears to be no real distinction between the content of the collective unconscious and an agency that produces such content. Why presume a stockpile of images exuding from an archaic mind that is purported to be present at birth and spews forth in the psyche when the same phenomena can be explained from innate cognitive processes that we are evolutionarily engineered to have to experience and adapt to our world in which we are thrown?

2 | ON THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

Jung explicitly states early on that "The instincts and the archetypes together form the 'collective unconscious'" (Jung, 1919, *CW*, 8, pp. 133–134). Here he makes desire, as part of our drives, along with the formative role of

imagoes, the substance of what comprises the collective unconscious. This means that our pulsions, which are part of our embodiment, as well as inborn images, form the organization and content of the collective unconscious. But what about agency? How are the drives and imagoes released or discharged into the psyche? How are the personal or subjective aspects of mind agentially constituted, let alone come from a collective provenance or supraordinance? Here Jung fails to answer to these basic theoretical elements.

To set out my first set of criticisms, we must establish that Jung does indeed at times conflate the collective unconscious *and* archetypes with an agency, whereas at other times, even in some of his later writings, he is more careful in his theoretical propositions. Let us first look at some of his statements of reification. When discussing mythology, Jung explicitly says that “the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious”; and when referring to the astrological influence of the stars, he asserts that “these influences are nothing but unconscious, introspective perceptions of the activity of the collective unconscious” (Jung, 1947, *CW*, 8, ¶325, p. 152). Rather than situating these determinative perceptions and judgments within the subjective mind of an individual, here he objectifies them as a concrete thing performing cognitive acts. He commits the fallacy of treating an abstraction as though it is a real entity or thing. This type of theoretical concretization as hypostasis is philosophically problematic, if not simply untenable.

When Jung refers to the collective unconscious as “regulators and stimulators” or “dominants” (Jung, 1947, *CW*, 8, ¶1403, p. 204), the notion of agency is further attributed to the collective unconscious as an organizer of mental processes; although he refers to this psychic constellation as “impersonal,” hence lacking selfhood, here presumably referring to its functions rather than an agent in its own right. But this is by no means clear and is open to interpretation, especially given that he refers to the archetypes as “entities” (Jung, 1947, *CW*, 8, p. 231) and “spontaneous agencies” (Jung, 1947, *CW*, 8, p. 216) elsewhere. Given Jung’s preoccupation with the archetypes, the collective unconscious appears at times to be presupposed without offering a philosophical argument or theoretical justification for why it is necessary to even posit such an entity in the first place. In his early work, *Symbols of Transformation*, when focusing on the content of the “stock of primordial images” as “inborn forms peculiar to the instincts,” hence collapsing imago within drive (rather than an agentic function that generates images and experiences internal impulses), he refers to “this “potential” psyche the collective unconscious” (Jung, 1912, *CW*, 5, p. 408). Here the collective is only a potentiality. But “in this world of the collective unconscious spirit appears as an archetype” (Jung, 1912, *CW*, 5, p. 413). How do we go from potentiality to actuality, from the possible to the real? Jung is quick to suggest that spirit (*Geist*) emerges from a collective psyche and appears as content (archetypes). Collective or experiential universal images do not have to come from a collective mind. Why such a persistent (if not perfunctory) inferential leap? The psyche is obviously designed a priori to encounter, apprehend, and perceive images of experience, so why suggest they come from a suprastructural, transpersonal mind? There is no logical defense in making this claim other than being an intellectual intuition, which is paraded under the scientific language of a “hypothesis.” But here Jung’s hypothesis that there is a collective mind is rather suspect. Why is it needed to explain the phenomena of consciousness that are conditioned on unconscious processes that can be generalized to all human beings without the added theoretical onus of importing and justifying a Suprapsyche that pulls all the strings behind the anthropic curtain? This would imply that the collective unconscious is a macroanthropos (Mills, 2013), a rather antiquated way of looking at the psychological diversity of socialization and cultural diffusion that springs from a so-called cosmic godhead. Let us return to Jung’s ambivalence in how he came to struggle with and advance his theory.

3 | A RETURN TO BASICS

Jung was obsessed with the “activity of the psyche” (Jung, 1947, *CW*, 8, p. 233), but was quick to attribute it to a supreme cause. Here he cannot escape the influence of his theological inculcations and Christian upbringing. But let us examine more soberly his rational side. Although he flip-flops in his thoughts and writings in a rather haphazard

manner, he is obviously struggling with what he wants to convey to his audience based on his mood or psychological temperament at the time, something akin to his theory of typology—as each psychological configuration(s) offers its own insights. In a rather inconsistent fashion, we witness how Jung is inclined to contradict himself by offering contrary and incongruous ruminations. Let us examine some of his more sensible and insightful ideas.

In one of his early writings on aesthetics, Jung (1931) states that “the collective unconscious is not to be thought of as a self-subsistent entity; it is no more than a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain. There are no inborn ideas, but there are inborn possibilities of ideas” (CW, 15, pp. 80–81). This is a most sensible assertion despite his later pronouncements to the contrary. Here he is affirming that the collective psyche is not a being in itself but rather is merely a receptacle of experientially inherited images from the early times of man that have been incorporated within our evolutionarily informed cognitive structures that give rise to potential ideas encountered in our experience of the world. This is theoretically compatible with nativist views from Kant to evolutionary psychology. Jung is merely reinforcing the point that what is collective is universal to all humans regardless of time, geography, and context, what we typically think of today as our common human nature. But despite the fact that he does concede that the collective unconscious should not be conceived as a “self-subsistent entity,” he does nonetheless insist on a basic division between the personal and collective unconscious when this categorical separation is far from clear or is justified. If every subject has one’s own subjective experience of the world but is conditioned on objective universal features of the mind that belong to the human species, then what is subjective or personal is also simultaneously informed by the very psychic structures that permit subjectivity to emerge in the first place. So far in our investigation, I see no need to create a binary between the personal and the universal when both are operative within the minds of all people at any given time. Here the real distinction is between the experiential idiosyncrasies of a unique individual or subject that are peculiar to that specific person as a distinct personality versus what is a common organic and structural *a priori* substrate that belongs to and unconsciously conditions the human race on a universal level.

So far, the “collective” is merely a signifier for “universal,” namely, that which is common to us all. If the collective is then reified (or deified) to the status of a suprastructure, let alone a supraordinant entity, then we have some serious philosophical conundrums to contend with, similar to justifying the question of God or positing a supreme being that conditions all the activities of the psyche. Can we appeal to universal psychic structures without importing a collective mind that supports emanationism or onto-theology? Kant, as well as Hegel and Freud, had little problem in doing so because each affirmed an objective aspect to mind that serves as the preconditions for subjective experience and epistemology. For Kant (1781) it was the intuitive forms of sensibility and the categories for understanding mediated through the transcendental unity of apperception, whereas Freud (1923, 1932–1933, 1938/1940) introduced a more proper discourse on the unconscious processes that bring these faculties about. Even when Hegel (1807/1977) argued for an objective mind or spirit (*Geist*), despite stipulations and scholarly disputes, this was ultimately grounded in dialectical logic rather than a presupposed, transpersonal grand agent or cosmogony that conditions all psychic acts, such as Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. So where do we go from here? Let us return to his treatment of universal human experiences.

Jung first focuses on images, which he rightfully insists gives form “to countless typical experiences of our ancestors ... the psychic residue of innumerable experiences of the same type” (CW, 15, p. 81). He then immediately says these primordial images are the “products of creative fantasy” mediated (“translated”) through language. But these mediatory concepts signify “the unconscious processes that lie at the roots of the primordial images” (*Ibid*). What Jung thinks lies at the “roots”—the rhizome—is the collective unconscious, which is presumed to *generate* such images that are laid down within an ancestral psyche. Here a certain hypostatization is suggested, and the archetypes are quickly evoked. Are we justified in positing an ancestral psyche in the first place, what Jung calls the “objective” psyche, or are we merely referring to archaic mind that belonged to humans in the past, not as one source point or supernatural procreative entity, but rather as an abstract idea used to denote a common universal

feature attributed to all people, which now evolutionarily and culturally informs the current mental processes of collectives? If we stay attuned to the creative power of imagination to form meaning through semiotic and symbolic mediation, then we may argue that a hypostasized collective psyche is hardly theoretically necessary, for fantasy is the basis of (and is the basic language of) all of humanity.

Jung places a great deal of importance on the emotional intensity of experience and at times makes hasty inferences and generalizations to import some greater Über source as the foundation or cause of affective intensity, when this can simply be fated to the universal processes of psychic organization and developmental emergence common to all humans. Just because we are seized by emotions does not mean they come from an ultimate collective receptacle or wellspring that causes phylogenetic resonances. Jung claims: "At such moments we are no longer individuals, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds in us" (CW, 15, p. 82). Although Jung attributes this to the "hidden forces of instinct," he also believes these reflect "the spirits of [our] ancestors." Rather than claim that the intensity of affect is both the evolutionary residue of history within developmental maturation and cultural diffusion coming from a particular place and epoch in time, he suggests a reification of an original prototype to "the realm of the ever-enduring" that is reactivated in the personal encounter. Whereas equating the overwhelming power and sense of affective release to archetypal experience rather than just psychic experience, he makes a philosophic leap of faith to generalize such emotional intensity to the universal—but not just any universal: rather he makes it a Collective Psyche. Not only is this similar to Hegel's Objective Spirit, but it is also objectified as a transpersonal mind. Rather than emotional intensity being duplicated in collectives due to a confluence and inseparable interpenetration of biology and culture, it becomes The Collective—the encompassing matrix of everything, the Neoplatonic One.

In many places in his writings, Jung equates the collective unconscious with a corresponding world soul (*anima mundi*) portrayed as an Anthropos (Jung, 1944/1952, CW, 12, pp. 189, 233) enveloped within a wider unified, metaphysical cosmos, namely, the *unus mundus* (see Jung, 1955, CW, 14, pp. 462–465), presumably yoked together by God (see Jung, 1959, CW, 9, ii, pp. 194–195). We may further conclude that the collective unconscious posit serves as its own Godhead and is either a symbol or surrogate for the original divine creation and causal point of origin. May I suggest that this leap is not philosophically necessary to ground a theory of the archetypes that stand in relation to archaic ontology. One does not need to evoke a transpersonal cosmogony to explain how universality suffuses the individual within masses. It becomes a matter of teasing out how universality operates within plurality, difference, individuality, and expressions of collectives rather than attributing it to one supraordinate psychic Source that conditions all psychological productions within individuals and societies worldwide.

4 | CONFOUNDING SOURCE WITH FORM AND CONTENT

Jung frequently equates archetypes with the collective unconscious when they are, strictly speaking, two fundamental categories. One is *ab origine*, based on the primal ontic ground, whereas the other is *derivative* from such original source. This confusion is exemplified when Jung asserts that we inherit a "stock of primordial images which everybody brings with him as his human birthright, the sum total of inborn forms peculiar to the instincts. I have called this "potential" psyche the collective unconscious" (Jung, 1912, CW, 5, ¶631, p. 408). Here Jung equates *images* with inborn *forms* that belong to the *drives*, which he then hesitantly attributes to a "potential" collective psyche. Originally written in 1912, Jung is navigating himself away from Freud but has not yet taken the plunge to make the collective unconscious the heir to the drives. Here we may see how he wants to make inborn forms (archetypes) imaginal (imagoes), which are laid down within the biological substrates of the human mind, and hence are instinctual involuntary contents and natural events. Jung goes on to emphasize the equiprimordiality of the image inherent in myth within a collective birthplace as transcending any personal subjectivity of individual agents and hence arises from the ontological fabric of a collective fountainhead.

The image is called primordial when it possesses an archaic character. I speak of its archaic character when the image is in striking accord with familiar mythological motifs. It then expresses material primarily derived from the collective unconscious, and indicates at the same time that the factors influencing the conscious situation of the moment are collective rather than personal. (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶746, p. 443)

Here Jung is emphasizing all people rather than just one person, or the subjective personality of an individual, but he is situating his argument in such a manner that it may be considered to be a false binary. All personal subjectivities participate within collective organizations that are universal even though they may be enacted in a peculiar way from a specific person not reflective of other personalities, but this does not justify an ontological distinction between the individual and the collective. Collectivity is simply shorthand for the universal dimensions of human nature. The collective does not trump or supersede the personal, nor does the individual override the collective: both are equiprimordial and dialectically conjoined even if they are unfolding complementary, parallel processes.

In his evolving thought, Jung continues to privilege the collective over the individual in such a manner that he elevates it from mere commonly shared attributes of humanity to that of a supraordinate construct that developmentally conditions all particularities of consciousness and culture. This is when he begins to move away from generic references to the collective unconscious through a displacement and preoccupation with the archaic content of archetypes as imaginal forms that populate the psyche. “The primordial image, elsewhere also termed *archetype*, is always collective, that is it is at least common to entire peoples or epochs. In all probability, the most important mythological motifs are common to all times and races” (Jung, 1921, CW, 6 ¶747, p. 443). Despite his hasty generalization, source, form, and content are ontologically inseparable, although there is a cleavage forged between the generative wellspring and the manifest product. The collective unconscious presumably produces archetypes, yet the archetypes are phenomenal appearances, whereas the so-called objective psyche remains obscured, inaccessible to direct experience or observation: it, therefore, remains a hypothesis, an informed inference, an educated guess.

For Jung, primordial images are innate and inherited, given over a priori, not through conscious experience that is then mnemonically laid down in the unconscious, but rather instead they belong “to certain inner determinants of psychic life” (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶748, p. 444). The image becomes “a condensation of the living process” that dislodges psychic energies upon encountering perceptual stimuli in one’s environment, which lends meaning and order to consciousness and motivates paths of action connected to such meaning (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶749, p. 445). For Jung, the archetype is a spontaneous “self-activating organism” that releases its vital energies in the psyche as procreative powers (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶754, p. 447). Jung continues to elaborate:

The primordial image is an inherited organization of psychic energy, an ingrained system, which not only gives expression to the energetic process but facilitates its operation. It shows how the energetic process has run its unvarying course from time immemorial, while simultaneously allowing a perpetual repetition of it by means of an apprehension or psychic grasp of situations so that life can continue into the future. (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶754, p. 447)

Whether one reads this passage through the lens of evolutionary psychology¹ or as an innate animating process belonging to psyche (ψυχή), soul (*Seele*), or spirit (*Geist*), what is clear is that the archetype has moved from being a mere content or product of the collective unconscious to being a self-activating system or organizing principle in its own right, in other words, an autonomous entity teaming with psychic energies. In Jung’s shift from the collective unconscious to the nature and function of the archetype, he is, albeit unintended by him, paving a theoretical scaffolding that draws into question the nature of origins. If an archetype is self-activating, autonomous, systemically self-contained, and self-generative, then the collective unconscious becomes an unnecessary category: theoretically it is superfluous. In other words, if the archetype becomes the prototype for the collective mind of the human species and is autonchrous, the collective unconscious becomes a redundant concept.

Early in his conceptualization of the collective unconscious, Jung was more faithful to the scientific naturalism of his day, as was Freud, espousing evolutionary paradigms that gave credibility to the rise of modern psychology. In *Psychological Types*, an early work of renowned importance, Jung is already preoccupied with the “wrappings of collectivity” (Jung, 1921, *CW*, 6, ¶12, p. 10). By the time he wrote *Alchemical Studies* in his late period, he equates the collective unconscious to the cognitive neurological processes operative in all human beings irrespective of race, time, location, and cultural relativity.

*The collective unconscious is simply the psychic expression of the identity of brain structure irrespective of all racial differences. This explains the analogy, sometimes even identity, between the various myth motifs and symbols, and the possibility of human communication in general. The various lines of psychic development start from one common stock whose roots reach back into the most distant past. This also accounts for the psychological parallelisms with animals (Jung, 1967, *CW*, 13, ¶11).*

Here he stays faithful to the scientific party-line, reducing collective psychological functions to universal “brain structure,” which by and large is no different than neuroscience today, with the exception that Jung wanted to include every aspect of the human race, whereby during his time eugenics was on the rise in popularism. In identifying with collective humanity, in groping for a way to express the sentiment of a union of all people, Jung was likely struggling with a universal psychological theory that the philosophers, mystics, Gnostics, and medievalists alike were wrestling with in their own ways long before him. But Jung later parted company with a purely evolutionary account of psychology, for it could not fill the bill. What was missing from these reductive ontologies was the *mysterium* of the transcendent, the religious, the soliloquy of affective life, the resonance of prelinguistic experience, and that which is occluded from linguistic mediation, such as intuitive internal reverberations or self-states, aesthetic and moral intuitions, and the pursuit of the numinous and sublimity.

5 | JUNG'S LATER METAPHYSICAL COMMITMENTS

Jung's conceptualization of the collective psyche differs from Freud's in the sense that he presumed a whole hoard of content in the form of primordial images and cultural-mythological motifs to exist at birth, and more specifically, that they predate and pre-exist within a transpersonal potential realm or psychic spacing before the birth of any one individual. Such content (i.e., the archetypes) is the alchemical *prima materia* of the psyche, an outpouring of the unconscious that when taken up by consciousness can be reactivated and reorganized within a newly assimilated order of meaning (Jung, 1912, *CW*, 5, p. 408). This “potential” psyche is often objectified or reified by Jung as an entity or being-in-itself; this is when Jung gets into philosophical trouble because he does not take the care to rigorously delineate his theoretical propositions. On the one hand, Jung succeeds, like Freud, in offering a metapsychology articulating the universal unconscious characteristics of the human mind. Empirical apologists are content in subsuming the collective unconscious within this universal rubric whereby unconscious contents become reliably emergent despite wide variations in context and social environments. But on the other hand, for Jung, the animation of the collective unconscious becomes much more than just the unconscious infrastructure we all possess as human beings; it is *supernatural*.

In many of his writings, he makes the collective a world soul, deified entity, or transpersonal subject that conditions all unconscious productions. Here is where he elevates the collective unconscious in ontological priority and makes it a first principle, the ultimate origin, and prototype of Mind. This theoretical move from mere formal universality to cosmogony, from evolutionary psychology to hierophany, constitutes the Neoplatonic enlistment of a godhead or macroanthropos that supervenes on humanity, hence it disperses its essence and properties within the psyches of all people over eons since time *in memoriam* through some ill-defined emanationist process. Here the collective unconscious becomes a transcendent first reality where everything else is derived. This all-encompassing,

supraordinate metaphysical order or cosmic force presupposes a unitary divinity principle or archaic ground upon which all else materializes and appears. The collective unconscious becomes the root of all things that emerge or flow from an ontic fountain as absolute ground that gives rise to the phenomenal psychic universe belonging to humankind, but it could very well be a form of panpsychism that interpenetrates everything in the cosmos. This would make the personal unconscious a hypostasis from a grand metaphysical originator. If all the a priori contents of the mind are natively implanted and conditioned by a higher spiritual principle that begets the *anima mundi*, then the collective unconscious would constitute an Over-Soul.

Given the aporetic nature of the collective unconscious construct, we may wish to ask, Why do we need a reified collective psyche to perform these mental functions and why not simply a generic unconscious that is common to us all? If the unconscious is merely universal *and* subjective, there is no need to posit a transpersonal agency or macroanthropos pulling the strings behind the curtain of the psyche. To appropriate Jung's language, the "personal" unconscious explains it all, whereas the objectified collective unconscious *qua* supraordinate entity is merely a *myth* in itself. You can have unconscious subjectivity (*viz.*, an unconscious ego at the center of agency, *i.e.*, universal in all people) that performs these activities of mind, which further gives rise to higher forms of consciousness without the need to appeal to a supraordination directing these psychological processes. Jung's reliance on a macroagent that is the source point for generating archetypes also introduces the debacle of an infinite regress where we would need to account for how a collective unconscious agency and the contents of mind got there in the first place. Without attention paid to such complications, Jung embarks on a theoretical leap of faith and introduces all kinds of philosophic problematics, such as the question of origins, the question of agency, of ground, of how the personal unconscious is colored or conditioned by another entity, of freedom and determinism, and so forth. Viewed from this perspective, the collective unconscious seems like a magical construct that emanates and descends from an imaginative sky and induces content as some form of *supravention* over the psyche. From this vantage point, I argue, the collective unconscious postulate is not necessary. Psychic life can be partially explained from the standpoint of universal unconscious processes that condition the unique subjectivities of each agent. Such a universal unconscious is not an entity, but rather is the given hardware of the psyche, a necessary albeit not a sufficient condition for mental life. On the one hand, the unconscious is transsubjective, transhistorical, and universal, hence comprised of a priori structures, features, and organizations that allow for subjective psychic life to arise; whereas on the other hand, it is merely a formal, nonpersonal organizing principle, the ontic foundation that gives rise to consciousness and individual personality. So when I refer to the *universal unconscious*, I am merely highlighting the ubiquity of unconscious structure that underlies mental processes and conditions the manifestation or appearance of all psychological phenomena.

If the logical operations of mind observe a path where consciousness must arise from a prior ontic ground, then following the principle of sufficient reason, every mental object must stand in relation to its prior occurrence, hence its origins or archaic ground. There must be some preordering or internal regulatory organization to the psyche (*i.e.*, following teleonomic and telic processes) that allows us to experience the world of consciousness. Consciousness arises from unconscious configurations even if they are crude and biologically informed. I would first describe these basic organizations as constellating through unconscious schemata that take self-apperceptive forms of desire and drive, sentience and affect, only then to breach into consciousness as percept and image, imagination and fantasy, and eventually thought proper, even though we may say that any form of mentation is implicit mediatory thought (Mills, 2010). Reason or logic is the culmination of thought and must derive from its earlier constituencies. In fact, imagination is the mediatory faculty between intuition and thought in many of the great Modern and German Idealist traditions, which leads Hegel (1817/1830) to conclude that "phantasy is reason" (§457). You really cannot think without imagination. Logic is imaginative as well as ordered. Mathematics is the invention of the imaginative mind, even if it is the sublation of reason. As the source of imagination, the unconscious is the house of Being.

When Jung sinks into his Neoplatonic identifications, the collective unconscious posit is elevated to the supraordinate sphere of the Godhead, the *Anima Mundi* within the *Unus Mundus*. It is unfortunate that he never worked through these theoretical complexifications in his system. Rather than eschewing metaphysics in his writings, he should have embraced it more fully. Here his theory suffers because he is not able to account for these

details. Claiming that metaphysics is mere speculation and antithetical to science, he falls into the professional (and political) dualism of his day: empiricism is the only so-called credible road to truth, whereas philosophy and theology (despite his constant engagement with both disciplines) take a back seat to reveal true reality and knowledge. Yet this is merely a party-line, an appearance to win his professional credibility. He would not have wasted his time studying these traditions in the humanities if he did not have a personal investment in the outcome. Jung delved into all matters contrary to extrospective science, not merely philosophy, but Gnosticism, theosophy, medieval alchemy, the occult, orientalism, and everything that hinted at the supernatural. Attempting to distance himself from theology despite his strong personal inclinations and identifications, he made psychology the new Godhead. And with good reason. All human experience is psychologically mediated. This is an uncontested empirical fact. But it does not mean that human psychology is animated from a godhead (Mills, 2017). In his more monistic attempts at theoretical posturing, Jung makes the following claim:

While the concept of the unus mundus is a metaphysical speculation, the unconscious can be indirectly experienced via its manifestations. Though in itself an hypothesis, it has at least as great a probability as the hypothesis of the atom. It is clear from the empirical material at our disposal today that the contents of the unconscious, unlike conscious contents, are mutually contaminated to such a degree that they cannot be distinguished from one another and can therefore easily take one another's place, as can be seen most clearly in dreams. The indistinguishableness of its contents gives one the impression that everything is connected with everything else and therefore, despite their multifarious modes of manifestation, that they are at bottom a unity. (Jung, 1955, CW, 14, ¶1660, pp. 462-463)

Here we can discern the mystical elements of Jung's thought as he moves from phenomenological manifestation to underlying ontological unity. He starts with the Plotinic One, only then to modify and differentiate its essence into particularities, which eventually return to the cycle of being as the recapitalization of its divided unity brought together again as an eternal recurrence. But given that the contemporary field of physics speculates that the universe is interconnected in all its multifarious details, Jung would be among good company. From the *Upanishads* to CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, metaphysics is hardly an antiquated topic.

In Jung's (1951/1973-1975) more informal correspondences in his *Letters*, he takes up the notion of oneness in more mystical ways, but with imported metaphysical implications nonetheless. When referring to the collective unconscious, Jung tells us:

This particular psyche behaves as if it were one and not as if it were split up into many individuals. It is nonpersonal. (I call it the "objective psyche.") It is the same everywhere and at all times. (If it were not so, comparative psychology would be impossible.) As it is not limited to the person, it is also not limited to the body. It manifests itself therefore not only in human beings but also at the same time in animals and even in physical circumstances. (Answers to Rhine's Questions, 1945, p. 395)

Notice the reification of the psyche as one enlarged cosmic mind, the tendency to collapse difference and individuality within an overarching medium—the "substance" from Aristotle to Spinoza, the undifferentiated beginning of sameness throughout world history, and the suggestion that such supraordination supervenes on yet transcends the body, hence it is immaterial.

In his letter to Pastor Max Frischknecht, Jung (1946) writes:

The collective unconscious, on the contrary, is made up of contents which are formed personally only to a minor degree and in essentials not at all, are not individual acquisitions, are essentially the same everywhere, and do not vary from man to man. This unconscious is like the air, which is the same everywhere, is breathed by everybody, and yet belongs to no one. Its contents (called archetypes) are the

prior conditions or patterns of psychic formation in general. They have an esse in potentia et in actu but not in re, for as res they are no longer what they were but have become psychic contents. They are in themselves non-perceptible, irrepresentable (since they precede all representation), everywhere and "eternally" the same. Hence there is only one collective unconscious, which is everywhere identical with itself, from which everything psychic takes shape before it is personalized, modified, assimilated, and so forth by external influences. (Letters, Vol. 1, p. 408)

Here Jung acknowledges a minor modification to his theory, namely, that personal elements of experience may *slightly* alter the collective psyche of humanity and its confluence on the individual, but he holds steadfast to his theory of universality as being "the same everywhere" without variation in the life of "man." These contents—the archetypes—are said to "precede all representations" when as logical argument they *re-present* original images that are stored in a so-called collective psychic receptacle. Here Jung problematizes the question of primordially and the transmission of the archaic. But he then moves from the actual (contents) to the potential (imperceptible and ineffable) domain of a shrouded reality we can never know in-itself, the *mysterium* where everything is "identical" and "'eternally' the same." Here we may conclude that Jung is groping for a way to explain the problem of the one and the many, differentiation from unity, the particular from the universal.

At the height of his convulsion, Jung wades out into even deeper waters of speculation when describing the archetypal, giving it a magical ambiance in its own right.

The primordial images which, in their totality, constitute a psychic mirror-world. It is a mirror with the peculiar faculty of reflecting the existing contents of consciousness not in their known and customary form but, as it were, sub specie aeternitatis, somewhat as a million-year-old consciousness might see them. Such a consciousness would see the becoming and passing away of things simultaneously with their momentary existence in the present, and not only that, it would also see what was before their becoming and will be after their passing hence. (Jung, 1921, CW, 6, ¶1649, p. 395)

Let us begin with the claim that the image constitutes a mirror reflection of a "million-year-old consciousness," as if representations are laid down mnemonically as they would have originally occurred and transpired in the minds of primitive ancestors over a million years ago, as if this would be remotely possible. This notion by definition harnesses a hard psychic determinism of pure replication of original content, when at most we can say that representations undergo mediation, translation, transmogrification, and a displacement of subjective experience into any reiteration, recurrence, and interpretation of the past. There is no pristine undiluted reproduction of archetypes, for everything in the psyche is mediated and subject to translation and reinterpretation of so-called inscribed archaic events through the lingering resonance of after-effects (*Nachträglichkeit* or *après-coup*), or perhaps more appropriately, aftershocks. Here the universal "collective representations" thesis is deemed suspect at best. When Jung continues with his hypostasized language of making the image a psychological "faculty" that has its own "consciousness" that is regenerated as pure and unadulterated replication of its original instance in antiquity, he has reified archaic mind and has superimposed it as a fixed artifact on the contemporary psyche without considering how evolutionary and cultural forces would have mutated and shaped our contemporary understanding of cognition today. When Jung further evokes the fantasy of a supraordinate, omnipotent consciousness that can observe the coming into being and passing away of everything that has ever transpired in the collective experience of humankind, he has succumbed to a mystical metaphysical theory of consciousness that lacks argumentation, theoretical justification, or empirical support. By today's standards, at face value, Jung's theory is antiquated and unsubstantiated from the domain of logic and modern scientific principles.

The notion that the archetype is a "mirror-world" of a previous world experienced in the minds of archaic men and women suggests that our psychic representations are the holographic duplication or reiteration of the

experience of another person or agent in the past, rather than our own unique phenomenal engagement with the world. Equating my current experience with an amorphous, ancestral supraordination or entity that determines how I perceive and encounter the world is illogical, if not delusional. How could a cosmic mind be distributing its essence into my mind as dispositional content and thought? How could that possibly work, let alone be remotely probable? At most, this may be psychologically explained, I suggest, as a merger fantasy with an omnipotent object such as a godhead, or as a repetition of the myth of eternal recurrence—of the cycle of timeless, infinite pervasiveness through modified form only to reconnect with its original lost source and unity motivated by the longing for return, rebirth, and regeneration. Here we may conclude that the collective unconscious construct is nothing more than a signified abstraction based on identification with the universal unconscious structures and features of shared humanity.

6 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

By making the collective unconscious a hypostatization, Jung commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, namely, he makes the idea *qua* idea or abstraction a concrete entity or reality in its own right. Such concretism or thing-making by lending real identity and existence to a concept elevated to the incorporeal heavens yet occluded from direct observation or epistemology is mythology at its finest. In this sense, the myth of the collective unconscious is better understood as a metaphor for rhetorical effect, or when symbolized, an imagined representation of a higher abstraction or ideal principle ordained with value. Here we may compare the collective with the idea of infinity, eternity, timelessness, the *apeiron* of the Greeks, the numen of the Romans, or the Platonic *chora*—the womb, matrix, or interval of all becoming. As a theoretical placeholder—a spacing that transfers from and begets ideality, the collective unconscious construct becomes a conduit or medium for representing surplus value, much like the metaphor of the World Soul or Universal Spirit, which represents the values of shared humanity as personifications.

The hypothesis of the collective unconscious is only tenable through naturalized psychology conceived as a construct that signifies the universality and deep psychic contours of the unconscious mind, whether considered from nativist evolutionary perspectives or as *a priori* faculties belonging to the functional structures and processes informing the emergence of psychic life. As such, the collective unconscious is not a noun, is not a thing, rather it is a signifier for collective *unconsciousnesses* of the masses—the unconscious minds of subjects—of people—who comprise collectives within society and across cultures historically subsumed within certain epochs throughout the rise and development of human civilization.

It does not make sense that a collective unconscious would be a reified entity without importing onto-theology, emanationism, or supervenience from a divine artificer or cosmic source as the “matrix of everything,” and hence pejoratively devalue the concept by making it a supernatural force pulling the levers behind the machinery of the universe. This is really tantamount to the belief in magical thinking whereby the myth of the collective unconscious devolves into its own recalcitrant dogma or sacred religiosity. So where does this leave us? What can we reasonably conclude about a universal collective?

In order for there to be *représentations collectives*, there must be a process of memorialization that is inscribed on the psyche and left like a mark or trace, which is transmitted as a semiotic on a collective scale. Without memory or replicators, if using the language of evolutionary biology, then cultural motifs would not be universal. But we see recurrent forms or patterns in all civilizations—from the primitive to the refined. Now it makes no sense, as suggested earlier, that this collective unconscious is a Cosmic Mind or Universal Psyche in-itself, as this would make the collective or cultural unconscious a macroanthropos tantamount to a godhead or supraordinate transpersonal agent or being. Rather, collective representations must be encoded and retained as concrete universals within the material structures of objective society (e.g., in educational institutions, museums, libraries, archeological sites, public facilities, etc.) only to be reiterated as images and symbolic patterns instantiated in a particular social context

and cultural milieu. This is why we have variations of content within replications of forms and patterns that are similar across cultures, societies, time, and historical eras.

If the collective unconscious is the *fount*, how are representations (*Vorstellung*) preserved and memorialized on some cosmic psychic scale and then imparted to each person upon birth? Would it not be sufficient to merely conceive of such a process as a naturalized occurrence explainable through reason, logic, and science, either from the standpoint of metaphysics, cultural transmission, cognitive science, or evolutionary theory despite wide variations in scope and speculation? Recall that I am not talking about the archetypes per se, but rather a more fundamental source or abyss *in illo tempore* from where everything is said to come from, arise, and is ontologically dependent upon for any possibility for manifestation to occur. The collective unconscious construct as semiosis may be viewed as a heuristic to explain the process in which replication and presence, that is, *re-presented* form and content, are laid down *ab origine*, memorialized, and activated over the historical development of the human race in transmogrified ways as collective repetition. What are in fact archaic are not merely the archetypes as *prerepresentations* that arise within consciousness, but the primordial unconscious organizations or psychic structures within the organism that make memorialization, reactivation, semiotic transmission, and symbolic reduplication possible. Here we may say that the collective unconscious becomes a semiosis that confers *meaning*; moreover, the notion of an overarching encompassing collective signifies an existential meaning of supraordinate importance, namely, ideal value.

Although a collective unconscious is universal, it is merely a theoretical description and explanandum of phenomena referring to universal psychological processes inherent in the human species that saturates the cultural ethos of collectives, but it is not an explanans. In fact, Jung's prediction that the collective psyche is an explication for the phenomena in question is to presuppose the existence of the very thing that needs an explanation; hence he is begging the question. When he reverts to archetypes as the products of a collective unconscious, he makes them synonymous with the collective and hence their ontic manifestation is causally conditioned on the original presupposition of a collective Mind. And when Jung theoretically justifies collective phenomena oozing from an originating collective ground, this collapses into tautology. Here we may say that the collective unconscious is tantamount to a myth as explanans for it provides a story—of origins, of functions, of structures inherent to human mental processes. In fact, the generalization and reification, if not deification, of the collective unconscious has generated its own myth among many Jungians where a collective psyche is thought to maintain its own ontological independence, which thereby grounds, conditions, and is the foundation of all productions of consciousness, supervenes on our subjective minds through supernatural means such as emanationism, and is of divine provenance, namely, the presence or derivative of the mind of God.

END NOTE

¹ Cf. "The human psyche possesses a common substratum transcending all differences in culture and consciousness. I have called this substratum the collective unconscious. This unconscious psyche, common to all mankind, does not consist merely of contents capable of becoming conscious, but of latent predispositions towards identical reactions (Jung, 1967, CW, 13, ¶11).

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