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On the Origins of Archetypes

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Abstract

The question of archetypes and their origins remains an ongoing debate in analytical psychology and post-Jungian studies. The contemporary discussion has historically focused on privileging one causal factor over another, namely, whether archetypes are attributed more to biology than culture and vice versa. Erik Goodwyn offers a mesotheory of archetypal origins that displaces the radical bifurcation as a false dichotomy. I offer my own reflections on the origins of archetypes and argue that this discussion can be further advanced by addressing the question of unconscious agency.

Keywords

archetypes – nature vs. nurture – origins of mind – collective unconscious – agency – biology – culture – analytical psychology

Erik D. Goodwyn (2020) provides a sophisticated critique of the nature versus nurture binary that has historically dogged archetype theory, hence showing this to be a false dichotomy, a topic I also deal with in depth (Mills, 2018, p. 201). Rather than privileging either innatism or empiricism as the origin and fulcrum of archetypal process, Goodwyn introduces a “third category,” what I would call a mesotheory, that mediates between biological predisposition or nativism and cultural acquisition or internalization, which virtually makes such antipodal thinking obsolete. Nor does he strictly follow in the tradition of Jung, who vacillates in his speculations about the origins of archetypes coming from an innate collective psyche encompassing both organic ontic conditions and content derived from human experience encoded and imprinted on the deep structural configurations of the archaic mind. Contemporary Jungians have been more content in emphasizing one domain of the continuum over

the other, such as evolutionary biology over socialization, emergence over apriorism, development over inheritance, and so forth, while Goodwyn seeks a middle ground. When it comes to the contents of archetypes, as he puts it, the question of “origins do not neatly fit into either category.” Here he convincingly argues that when it comes to the transmission of archetypes, the biology versus culture duality is wrongly posed, for they are both operative in any discourse on archetypes, whether psychologically, symbolically, or transpersonally conceived.

1 The Archetype-as-Such and Intermediacy

When Goodwyn discusses the archetype-as-such, he refers to Jung’s postulate of the deeper inherited layer of the psyche as inborn structural proclivity while the content is often relegated to the appearance of images. This mirrors Jung’s Kantian distinction between the noumenal *Ding an sich* and the mode of appearance, the world of the archetype *in itself* (as-such) versus the regulative, performative, and functional world of lived experience where the epistemological limit of knowing the supersensible is breached. Relying on Jung’s (1947) insistence that the archetype possesses the “ability to *organize* images and ideas” (p. 231; § 440) on the unconscious level, Goodwyn eschews the biology versus culture bifurcation, particularly arguing for how genetics *or* mere socialization cannot answer to such complexities. Rather, he evokes an intermediate domain where tendencies and action potentials “*arrange* memories and imaginary contents” belonging to “inherited archetypal structures.” So how does Goodwyn’s position add to the archetype debate?

He specifically focuses on the archetype’s tendency toward “*self-directed* learning” and this is what gives it its special character that is beyond the mere a priori embodied given, the impacts and effects of the lifeworld of personal experience, and the internalization of socialization processes such as language, culture, and symbolic transmission that originally transpire in early familial attachment and child development. But what seems to be missing from his discussion is any mention of agency, intentionality, or determinate (self-instituted) teleology inherent in the inborn capacity toward self-organization and purposeful self-expression that is implicit in such internally derived, directed, and self-taught learning that is fundamental to Goodwyn’s thesis.

2 A Mesothory of the Third

What does Goodwyn mean by a “third category” when positing archetypal process? He largely focuses on a “content source” that is self-initiated, “internally maintained and internally progressed,” what I have previously attributed to “unconscious schemata,” which are intrinsic organizing principles that are self-constituted and agentically executed (Mills, 2010). Rather than retain the binary discourse that has saturated analytical psychology, may I suggest this third category is more of a mediatory intervening function as a three-way relation to: (a) archaic ontology, namely, the corporeal, historical, and/or innate given of embodied biologic process; (b) our environmental surroundings in all their myriad forms, particulars, oppositions, and impositions as our being in the world; and (c) as self-relation to the experiential unfolding of interiority begotten within these other mediating dynamic domains. As *relata*, an archetype achieves a triadic or tertiary epigenetic level or emergent order of organization that serves mediatory functions. As an architectonic developmental agency enacted through and within the internal parameters and interposing external environs that inform its inner constitution and contours, an archetype is neither caused by evolutionary biology or genetics, nor is it the sole product of social development, environmental conditioning, or culture. Rather these complex forces are overdetermined and assimilated by archetypal agency. In effect, this third category is more like a performative and regulatory internal web of functional relations to self, other, and society within our natural encapsulated spacings in world that are ontically inseparable and systemically conjoined.

Goodwyn’s *Third* as tertiary relation is really an intermediacy or meso-domain where mediation occurs. What he refers to as internally directed learning that is innately initiated and self-generated has been taken up extensively through the language of unconscious agency in my work (Cf. Mills, 2010, 2013b, 2018), yet his discussion of self-taught/self-directed learning could easily apply, as this is what is implied when attributing freedom, choice, and action to archetypes that are inborn a priori processes with self-derived impetuses and self-directed aims. When Goodwyn introduces the notion of the archetype-as-such as the “tendency to arrange” while omitting the most essential issue—namely, the question, scope, and limits of agency—this does not sufficiently explain, let alone shore up, the murky “third category” or intermediate emergence of mediatory relations that he likely wants to argue for.

If I understand him correctly, he wants to give priority to an unconscious a priori ground where we may situate and attribute some kind of unconscious agency to, whether personal or impersonal, which is informed by our evolutionary preconditions. This agentic function allows us to have self-derived, self-

generated, self-directed tendencies toward broader and more sophisticated forms of self-organization we call psyche; and that input from our senses, or the experiential manifold of internalized objects in the world—environment, family, society, culture—allow us to form synthetic judgements independently from being taught them directly from others or through some interpassive or secondary process of mimesis. What develops is a sense of agency that makes self-learning possible; so it is not strictly biology or culture that is pushing the proverbial buttons, but an intermediary process of mediation that is a procreative self-instigated epigenetic achievement, which is internally commenced and linked to a fundamental unconscious subjectivity with degrees of innate freedom. In other words, this unconscious agency is the archetype-as-such, to use his preferred language.

3 Archetypal Agency

The infrastructure of the brain is not the same as the Psyche, which is a higher order agency, a complex, self-determinative process system arising from its original dialectical autochthonous parameters. Although our embodiment is necessary and makes the experiential apparatus and internalization process possible, it is not a sufficient condition to explain psyche. Neither is our environmental facticity. What is missing from the equation is that intermediate mediatory sphere of the capacity to spontaneously express and actualize freedom in all its glory and shortcomings. This is where the language of archetypes intervenes nicely as a potential *explicans*. In other words, an archetype is self-constituted and self-generative within the context and confines of its immediate ontological thrownness.

Increasingly throughout his career Jung began to refer to archetypes as “autonomous” (*CW*, 9i, p. 40; *CW*, 11, p. 469), “autocratic,” and manifesting themselves “involuntarily” to consciousness (*CW*, 9i, pp. 153–154, § 260), hence having a degree and level of independence emanating from the unconscious (see Mills, 2013a, for a review), which are “experienced as spontaneous entities” (*CW*, 8, p. 216) that “arise from self-creative acts” (Mills, 2018, p. 205). Following Jung, who attributes subjectivity to archetypes (see *CW*, 11, p. 469; *Letters II*, p. 22), if Goodwyn sees the archetype as a *psychic arranger*, much like the soul-animator that coordinates, controls, and directs the internal relations, forms, contents, and modes of unconscious process, then we may not inappropriately refer to this mediatory organizer as an unconscious nucleus or impersonal micro-agency spewing forth self-states into consciousness as the dispersal of its internal essence with quasi-autonomous properties bubbling up from within its

deep abyss. What develops is a sense of agency or selfhood that makes further self-experience and self-learning possible. The content of such self-dispersal we have come to label and identify as manifestations of the archetypal. While the archetype-as-such is occluded, we experience and know its presence as appearances *within* consciousness.

4 Beyond the Biology vs Culture Binary

Archetypes are beyond biology and culture for the simple fact that they elude the certainty of ground and beg the question of beginning. Because we cannot epistemologically discern their precise origins we are left to extrapolate from our inner experience of felt-causation, whether accurate, incorrect, or falsifiable. Inner experience does not necessarily mean truth, as we are accustomed to use the word, only disclosedness. What is made manifest to us must have a cause, a ground, a principle of sufficient reason that derives from origins, even if left indiscernible or undecidable. This is a logical proposition, not an experiential one, but the phenomenology of lived experience may simply be its own ground.

When pondering the question of origins, and in this context the source or genesis of archetypes, we must be humbled by an epistemological diffidence: we don't know. We don't even know if archetypes are *real*, other than employing a convention of language to signify some thing or designate some meaning to a nebulous abstract variable. We find ourselves embedded in the midst of being there (*Dasein*), of being *in* experience, even if an archetype is merely a metaphysical fiction. But when it comes to the metaphysics of experience, we are often seized by an inner presence that manifests itself from the unconscious, what we have come to call archetypal process. Where it comes from, that is, how it derives and arises, how it is organized, and how it expresses or relates to objects of experience through unconscious mediation is what we may abductively infer as the *pre-ontological*, namely, the preconditions of appearance as such, that is, *prior to beginning* and the manifestation of entities and objects of consciousness. But when it comes to the archetype-as-such, we are left with a speculative hypothesis of deducing original ground. Jung called this ground the collective unconscious or objective psyche, but this could very well be due to self-instantiating acts of self-generation derived from the archetype itself, a ground without a ground (*Ungrund*) that materializes from the autochthonous schematic organizations of immediate internal experience that makes the postulation of a collective unconscious—the hypostasis of soul—redundant (Mills, 2019).

This brings us back to a radicality of unconscious discourse that has become eclipsed by contemporary approaches in psychology that favor conscious experience over archaic ground or genesis. Although Goodwyn tends to dance around the issue of agency, intentionality, and the teleology of an archetype, his emphasis on the self-directed auto-learning of archetypal process adds another dimension to the unconscious dynamic structures of the psyche we should seriously consider in this ongoing debate.

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