



# Synchronicity and the meaning-making psyche

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*Abstract:* This paper contrasts Jung's account of synchronicity as evidence of an objective principle of meaning in Nature with a view that emphasizes human meaning-making. All synchronicities generate indicative signs but only where this becomes a 'living symbol' of a transcendent intentionality at work in a living universe does synchronicity generate the kind of symbolic meaning that led Jung to posit the existence of a Universal Mind. This is regarded as a form of personal, experiential knowledge belonging to the 'imaginal world of meaning' characteristic of the 'primordial mind', as opposed to the 'rational world of knowledge' in which Jung attempted to present his experiences as if they were empirically and publicly verifiable. Whereas rational knowledge depends on a form of meaning in which causal chains and logical links are paramount, imaginal meaning is generated by forms of congruent correspondence—a feature that synchronicity shares with metaphor and symbol—and the creation of narratives by means of retroactive organization of its constituent elements.

*Key words:* congruent correspondence, imaginal meaning, primordial mind, psychoid, retroactive narrative, transcendence

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## Introduction

Towards the end of Jung's paper on synchronicity, there is a passage where he cites several dreams as evidence for the existence of a psychoid archetype. He concludes that the dreams 'seem to point to the presence of a formal factor in nature' (Jung 1952, para. 946). This astonishing claim brought home to me just what Jung means by 'the objective psyche'. Jung does not regard the dreams as the product of the dreamers' own unconscious thought-processes *about* synchronicity: they are not symbolic representations of a psychological process of meaning-making. Jung takes the dreams as factual statements not merely *about* Nature but *by* Nature. They are put forward as evidence for the objective existence of a 'self-subsistent meaning'<sup>1</sup>. In this view, the psyche acts independently of the person who happens to receive its messages—hence the

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<sup>1</sup> In a strikingly disingenuous footnote, Jung contrasts his interpretation with others who may 'indulge in wishful thinking about dreams'. That is, others may be mistaken but Jung is not.

idea of a Self which has infinitely greater knowledge than the Ego. In this sense, the Self is not a subject at all except insofar as Nature itself is a Greater Subject, separate from the meaning-making processes of human subjectivity. The unconscious mind is thus equivalent to the Universal Mind. In short, God. Hence Jung's claim that 'synchronicity postulates a meaning which is *a priori* in relation to human consciousness and apparently exists outside man' (*ibid.*, para. 942).

In this paper I want to forward the contrary view that the meaning in synchronicity is a function of human meaning-making. Rather than seeing synchronicity as a 'principle of explanation' or a phenomenon of 'Nature', I regard it as a phenomenon of human being in the world in which meaning is generated out of the interaction *between* mind and Nature.

I want to focus particularly on the role of congruent correspondence in meaning-making; this occurs in particularly striking form in synchronicity where there is always a congruent correspondence between the inner and outer events. In Jung's paradigmatic case of the scarab, for example, there is a congruence between the scarab in the patient's dream and the scarab Jung finds tapping on the window<sup>2</sup>. I see this congruence as a particular form of a more general process, also occurring in the creation of metaphor and symbol, where the meaning is generated out of the congruence between the two domains: in symbol there is a congruence between the symbol and the symbolized; in metaphor this is expressed as a congruence between the domain from which the metaphor is drawn ('source') and the domain to which it is applied ('target')<sup>3</sup>. In synchronicity, however, it is not merely *images* of the external world which manifest this correspondence but actual objects and events—hence the sense of a meaning that transcends human subjectivity.

Such experiences can generate what Murray Stein (2008) refers to as 'strong transcendence' where there is a sudden shift into a different way of being in the world in which meaning is generated via congruent correspondence rather than logical chains of thought. This 'imaginal world of meaning' may be contrasted with the 'rational world of knowledge' which is the dominant state of consciousness in Western post-scientific cultures. The world of imaginal meaning derives from what is sometimes called 'the primordial mind' in which the categories of space, time and causality become relativized (Robbins 2011). This can reveal profoundly different experiences of the world from rational thought but, at least in post-scientific cultures, such experiences, however 'absolute' or 'transcendental', cannot be considered objective knowledge. In

<sup>2</sup> While a patient was telling a dream in which she was given a golden scarab, Jung noticed an insect knocking against the window pane. He opened the window, caught the insect, which was a scarabaeid beetle and handed it to the patient saying 'Here is your scarab'. Jung comments 'This experience punctured the desired hole in her rationalism and broke the ice of her intellectual resistance' (Jung 1951, para 982; 1952, para 843).

<sup>3</sup> For example, in metaphors of 'explosive' rage (e.g. he 'blew up'), explosions are the source domain and rage is the target domain.

the rational world of knowledge, only knowledge which is publicly verifiable according to scientific criteria of evidence and proof may be regarded as valid. Thus imaginal experience may yield personal knowledge but cannot yield publically verifiable so-called 'objective' knowledge.

For this reason I consider that Jung's attempt to situate synchronicity within the 'objective' domain of publically verifiable knowledge was bound to fail. In order to do so he needed to claim 'objectivity' for phenomenological realities that abrogate such rational distinctions as subjective/objective or mind/matter, thus creating a paradoxical situation where demonstrating the 'objectivity' of synchronicity would rob it of the very features he wished to claim for it, namely a transcendence of these categories into an entirely different world view. It's no use appealing to science for something which necessarily falls outside the scientific domain; rather we need to assert the validity of the imaginal domain as equal but different.

### Types of synchronicity—internal and external signs

First, though, I want to offer some kind of classification for the confusingly heterogeneous situations which Jung offers as examples of synchronicity. Other commentators such as Aziz (1990) and Main (2004) have pointed to the inconsistency of Jung's definitions and the numerous intellectual difficulties which his discussion presents. Here I want simply to distinguish two main classes of synchronicity. The first kind, which is the more 'classic' kind of synchronicity, involves a coincidental external event occurring simultaneously with or shortly after an internal event such as a thought, an image or a dream. The scarab beetle at the window is such an example, as are the cluster of six references to 'fish' that occurred to Jung on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1949 when he was working on fish symbolism in *Aion* (Jung 1952, para. 826). The second kind refers to various 'parapsychological' experiences such as pre-cognition and clairvoyance. In these, the internal event is *predictive* of the external event. Swedenborg's vision of the Great Fire of Stockholm in 1759 is a spectacular example of this. While in Gothenburg, Swedenborg reported to several witnesses that a fire was at that moment raging in Stockholm. His report was confirmed in every detail when the news from Stockholm arrived later the following day (as reported by Kant in a letter of 10<sup>th</sup> August 1963, cited in Bishop 2000, pp. 18–19).

In both kinds of synchronicity there is a confirmation of the internal event which gives it 'meaning' in a way it did not have before but there are significant differences which can most clearly be brought out by recognizing that all synchronicities include an element which functions as a 'sign'. In the first kind of synchronicity, the external event provides the sign in a way that 'points towards' the internal event and gives it new meaning. That is, the external event provides the synchronistic and unexpected coincidence. In the second kind, it is the internal event, especially 'pre-cognition', which constitutes the sign pointing towards the occurrence of an outer event occurring in a different space-time.

In this case, the internal event is the unexpected coincidence which generates the surprise of something apparently inexplicable. The first kind involves an ‘answer’ from the external world whereas the second kind involves a psychic knowledge of something that could not possibly be known within the bounds of space, time and causality. So in the first kind, there is an uncanny event in the world, as if the world ‘knows’ something it could not possibly know whereas in the second kind, there is an uncanny event in the psyche as if the person experiencing the synchronicity knows something they could not possibly know.

Synchronicities can also be tracked according to two further axes—remarkability and significance. Given that synchronicity is defined as meaningful coincidence, both features are required to distinguish synchronicity from ordinary, expectable coincidence. So we might ask how remarkable is the coincidence and how significant is the meaning? When we look at synchronicity this way, it becomes apparent that remarkability and significance are not directly correlated. Notably, it appears that ‘pre-cognitive’ synchronicities of the second kind are frequently highly remarkable but rarely generate much significance beyond the fact of their occurrence. Swedenborg’s vision of the Stockholm Fire is meaningful only in the sense that the vision was verified. It provided a ‘sign’ but the sign did not become a symbol—it did not point to any meaning beyond itself. Furthermore, although these kinds of synchronicities appear to offer ‘proof’ of a factor operating beyond space and time, they rarely convince anyone beyond the person to whom they occur. For example, Jung probably learned of Swedenborg’s vision via Kant (Bishop, *ibid.*) for whom Swedenborg’s mystical writings were typical of the kind of metaphysical claims Kant’s theory of knowledge was designed to squash. Kant concluded that since proof of Swedenborg’s claims were beyond what could be known, they did not deserve any further consideration (*ibid.*, pp. 241–47). Similarly, when Jung attempted to convince Freud of the power of occult forces by twice predicting a loud report in Freud’s bookcase, Freud was shaken but not stirred from his rationalist convictions (Jung 1963, pp. 178–9)<sup>4</sup>. So while synchronicity may generate meaning for those involved, it does not generate publically verifiable knowledge and therefore is unable to convince those who are sceptical by virtue of operating from a different mind-set.

In what follows, I will refer only to the first kind of synchronicity since it is these experiences which are more likely to generate ‘strong transcendence’ and a shift into non-rational states of mind. The second kind seem to depend more on already operating within the ‘primordial mind’ (for want of a better phrase); it is apparent that some people, of whom Jung was one, have such

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, Jung was using the same approach, with more success, when he produced the scarab beetle for his sceptical patient. Freud was a harder nut to crack. A few days later he wrote to Jung ‘The phenomenon was soon deprived of all significance for me by something else. My credulity, or at least my readiness to believe, vanished *along with the spell of your personal presence* (Freud to Jung, April 16<sup>th</sup> 1909, quoted in Jung 1963, p. 395; ital added)

experiences quite frequently while others never have them at all. The reasons for this remain mysterious: there seems to be a cultural component in that pre-scientific cultures are more likely to accept the possibility of such experiences and may offer training for those who show a natural aptitude for them. This in turn suggests that there is also a personal component (sometimes called 'second sight'), possibly connected with some forms of early trauma (Merchant 2006).

My own experience is restricted entirely to the first kind, of which I will now give an example. In these cases of 'strong synchronicity', the significance of the coincidence can be extremely high, even life-changing, but the remarkability factor may be much smaller. Such experiences generate an uncanny sense of what I can best describe as a feeling that the universe is alive. I think that this is what Jung was attempting to prove by constructing a theory that aimed to argue an empirically demonstrable case for it.

### Strong synchronicity: an experience of transcendent meaning

At the time of this particularly significant coincidence, I was much impressed by the idea that all actions were unconsciously motivated and that anything that happened to a person had a hidden significance for them, as if it was 'meant to be' in some way. These ideas, derived from a heady mixture of both Freud and Jung, were much in vogue in the humanistic psychology world with which I was then involved. In fact, I had been looking forward to going on a week-long residential course of humanistic therapy that was taking place in a small town in Kent called Headcorn. Unfortunately, I had had two wisdom teeth extracted the previous week and the wound had become infected so, to my great disappointment, I was unable to go. After several days in bed, I got the bus from my home in Brixton to see my dentist in Thornton Heath. On the way, I was racking my brains trying to understand what the significance of this illness was—why had I become ill and had to miss this exciting residential course from which I had hoped to learn so much about myself? What was it trying to tell me? What did it mean? Eventually, I became exhausted by this fruitless search for meaning and thought to myself 'God knows what the meaning is!' Struck by this, I considered whether this might actually be true—that is, if there was a meaning, *only God* could know it since it was beyond my own limited human understanding. At that point, the bus stopped and I looked up to see where we were. The first thing I saw was a street sign saying 'Headcorn Road'.

I now knew that this moment *was* the 'purpose' of my illness. I had arrived at Headcorn after all and this was the experience I had been looking for: something that taught me far more than I could ever have dreamed I might get from my residential week in Kent. Headcorn was here and now and so, it seemed, was God, speaking to me out of this unfathomable coincidence.

This was a classic synchronicity where an internal psychic state is closely correlated with a highly unlikely coincidence in a way that produces a strong

sense of meaningful significance. (There are only two Headcorn Roads in the whole of London). As Hogenson defines it, it was

a juxtaposition of a psychic state and a state in the material world that resulted in the emergence of meaning and a transition in the individual's state or understanding of the world.

(Hogenson 2005, p. 280)

### Transcendent meaning and the 'objectively' real

The crucial element of this experience is the occurrence of an event in the external material world that is synchronous with my internal state of mind. The 'sign' in this case is literally a street-sign, the appearance of the Headcorn Road street-sign that is directly congruent with Headcorn in Kent. This is just the kind of substitution by congruent analogy that occurs frequently in dreams—hence Bolen's description of synchronicity as a 'waking dream' (Bolen 1979, p. 37ff, cited in Aziz 1990, p. 82). When, as in this case, such signs point beyond themselves to an unknown reality they may also be considered symbols, in Jung's sense of symbols as representations of something unknown. Here, the symbol represents the unknown meaning which only 'God' knows. I might well have regarded the street-sign as 'a sign from God' (and therefore a symbol of God's presence) but since my internal state concerned the unknowability of God, that would have been a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, it certainly evoked a sense of awe and wonder that I described earlier as the feeling that 'the universe is alive'. I regard this as a quintessential element of synchronistic experience that is self-validating and therefore *true* but entirely beyond any kind of proof.

The importance of the external object in evoking this experience is brought out with great depth and clarity in Murray Stein's remarkable paper on 'Transcendence: The Hidden Fourth', presented at a conference on 'The Self and the Sacred' in 2008. Stein emphasizes that

this type of object is a symbol that transcends the psyche in that it introduces a factor that stands on its own outside or beyond the realm of subjectivity . . . It is radically and completely independent of the psychic matrix . . . It reaches out beyond the psyche, and through its synchronistically orchestrated presence it implies the movement of a transcendent factor breaking into the time-space-causality framework. It brings one to a belief in objective meaning.

Now Stein goes slightly further here than I would myself in that, for him, such experiences 'are in the hands of something else, and its timing is orchestrated by a power or principle that is beyond human control or knowing'. To my mind, this begins to substantialize and hypostatize a transcendent factor that I do not think 'exists' in any objective way, albeit the experience of there being one is nevertheless overwhelming and incontrovertible. My own experience had a quality to it that was, as Stein says, 'absolutely, utterly and unquestionably real, not only something *seeming* real'. And I agree that this is the impact created by

the experience of the external world ‘contributing in’ to what had seemed to be a purely psychic state. So if, for Stein, such experiences bring him to beliefs that I do not entirely share, I would certainly not want to argue about it. Indeed I would regard such arguments as futile, irrelevant and potentially disrespectful unless he were to claim that his experience of such synchronistic events *proved* the existence of ‘objective meaning’. For then he would be transgressing the boundaries between personal meaning and public knowledge. The confusion here is around the meaning of ‘objective’. In this context, ‘objective’ refers to a sense of intentionality in the world that is ‘other’ than personal or subjective and cannot be reduced to anything else—hence the emphasis on the causal inexplicability of the events. In that sense the experience is ‘objectively’ real but not in a way that can be subject to the ‘objective’ verification of public knowledge.

Prior to developing his theory of synchronicity, Jung had relied on the make-shift that such experiences were psychically real but the psychologist could not say anything about their ‘objective’ reality. This was precisely what he was trying to get beyond with the theory of synchronicity and the postulation of a psychoid archetype that was more than psychic. However, rather than taking either of these paths, I would prefer to say that the transcendent experience of something ‘outside or beyond the realm of subjectivity’ is *phenomenologically* real in a way that *includes* the external world, not just the psyche. But this requires a shift in epistemological perspective away from a rigid subject/object, mind/matter perspective towards a phenomenological view that regards such distinctions as limited at best and profoundly misleading at worst (see Brooke 2009). This enables us to escape the imprisoning argument over whether such experiences are ‘objective’ by defining reality in a way that is neither subjective *nor* objective. Real does not therefore have to be objective but nor is it confined to the terrain of ‘merely subjective’ (psychic). ‘Strong synchronicities’ of this kind create a shift into a different way of relating to the world and therefore a different way of *being in the world*.

### Questioning remarkability

Accounts of synchronicity frequently emphasize the factor of remarkability in order to demonstrate the inexplicable acausality of the events. For example, in his account of the scarab beetle at the window, Jung asserts that ‘nothing like it ever happened to me before or since’. The attentive listener will have noticed that I slipped one of these assertions into the account of my own synchronicity: There are only two Headcorn Roads in the whole of London. But what if there were five or ten or thirty? How many Headcorn Roads would there need to be for the event to cease to be a meaningful coincidence? Here the psychological factor is indeed the primary one—I *experienced* it as unlikely and surprising and only years later looked up the London A-Z to see how many Headcorn Roads there were. Had I discovered there were many of them, it could have made no difference to what I experienced at the time. I think this goes some

way to showing that the apparent impossibility of the external event is merely the pretext for the shift in consciousness that accompanies it. Similarly, it was not the scarab beetle itself but Jung's use of it with his patient that convinced her of the limitations of her rationalistic view of the world. In this perspective, the meaning arises out of the *interaction* between a subjective inner event and an outer objective one. So it is only the event that is objective, not the meaning. Acausality is actually not the *sine qua non* of the meaning and, in turn, this means that being able to explain coincidences as 'not really remarkable' only detracts from the *theory* of synchronicity as publically verifiable knowledge, not from the *experience* of such events as having transcendent meaning. The key element here is the factor of surprise which Martin-Vallas (2009) has linked to the concept of Kairos as 'a sudden emergence, most often coming as a surprise... that breaks into the bubble or the spiral of objective temporality' (p. 451).<sup>5</sup>

### Selective attention

Many coincidences that are put forward as examples of synchronicity can also be explained in terms of selective attention, notably the virtually ubiquitous phenomenon that coincidences seem to increase whenever one is thinking about synchronicity. For example, while preparing this paper, I was glad to have the opportunity to edit a paper on the time factor in synchronicity that had been submitted to the *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. By chance, my monthly book group had chosen to read *The Time-Traveller's Wife* at a meeting where I had not been present so I found myself reading it at the same time as I was editing the paper. I then watched the first episode of Brian Cox's series on *The Wonders of the Universe* which turned out to be all about time. And when I mentioned this to the author of the paper, she added that *The Time Traveller's Wife* was one of her favourite books and she had only just bought a copy for a friend<sup>6</sup>...

These clusters are interesting because they show the way we selectively attend to features of the environment that have congruent correspondence for us. They also show similarities with the organization of complexes around a central core or 'hub', suggesting that such network clusters create a field of congruent meaning which 'attracts' analogous events (Cambray 2009, pp. 41-42). Yet, rather than involving any acausal factor operating in Nature, they suggest

<sup>5</sup> See also Cambray (2009), pp. 88-90.

<sup>6</sup> The author is Angeliki Yiassemides whose paper appears elsewhere in this edition of the JAP. Jung's experiences with 'fish' references on April 1<sup>st</sup> involve a similar cluster, more notable only for including 6 events as against the 3 or 4 in the cluster I've mentioned and because the fish symbol was more significant to him than time is to me, although I gather that time has a similar significance for Yiassemides. This again points to the subjective (personal) element in the creation and attribution of meaning.

that many synchronicities arise through unconscious selective processes that highlight the myriad potential coincidences that may occur below the level of our conscious attention. Our environment is so complex and multi-faceted that, in a sense, coincidences are there waiting to happen for those who attend to them.

Scanning the environment for congruent correspondences occurs even more strongly in the states of high affective intensity commented on by Jung for which Hogenson has coined the term 'symbolic density' (Hogenson 2005). To be honest, I'd been looking for some such synchronistic sign for months when I happened on Headcorn Road. All the previous ones were trivial by comparison and have slipped back into unconscious forgetfulness.

### Colliding trajectories in complex human systems

I now want to describe a kind of coincidence which is both remarkable and striking enough to cause goose-bumps and a sense of 'spookiness' but does not produce a further level of symbolic meaning or transcendence. Although not strictly speaking an example of synchronicity, my favourite example of this kind was told by Bono, the lead singer of U2 (see Hall 1999).

Bono had gone to sleep listening to a Roy Orbison song called 'In Dreams' and woken up with a song in his head that he was convinced must also be on the same album. In fact, it was a melody of his own. He spent the day working on the song and, after a concert that night, was still playing it to the rest of the band who remarked on how Orbison-like it was. At that point, their tour manager arrived to tell them that Roy Orbison, whom none of them had ever met, was at the stage door and would like to meet them. Likewise Roy Orbison had never seen the band before and, after complimenting them on their performance, he turned to Bono and said, 'You wouldn't happen to have a song for me, would you?' The song became 'Mystery Girl' and was the title track of Orbison's last album before his early death, a year or so later. Remarkable, yes, and the collaboration between Bono and Orbison was clearly 'meant' to be—but, as far as I could tell from Bono's account, that was the end of it. There did not seem to be any *inner* meaning or significance—it was *merely* a remarkable coincidence.

This story, while having synchronistic elements, is not actually synchronicity in my view because it lacks the all-important element where one element is a sign of the other. Had Bono dreamed of *meeting* Roy Orbison or had Roy Orbison had a premonition that Bono *would* have a song for him, it would have qualified as one of the many examples of pre-cognition which Jung includes in synchronicity. In that case the dream or the premonition would have been retrospectively recognized as a 'sign' of the meeting. Nevertheless, the effect of the coincidence (even if not fully synchronistic) is to create the sense that the two elements were already linked before they occurred. Now in one sense this is true in that the two events are indeed interconnected but the chain of connection is exceedingly

complicated with a multitude of elements which would go back over two decades to the original composition of Roy Orbison's song. Unbeknownst to either of them, Bono and Roy Orbison were each on a trajectory which would lead towards their meeting and working together which, once it had happened, would not seem that unlikely an eventuality. That is to say that all our lives involve a great multitude of interconnected events whose consequences are far more numerous and complex than we can possibly comprehend. That's enough on its own for the goose-bumps, even if there's nothing spooky about it. (The band ribbed Bono for having conjured Roy Orbison up with his magical powers).

Colliding trajectories like this might well be subject to explanation in terms of complex adaptive systems but this might actually be an argument for excluding incidents of this kind from synchronicity on the basis that both events involve the interconnected intentionality of human actors. By contrast, those synchronistic events where the 'sign' comes from material objects or events (scarab, road-sign, fish etc) include no possible intentionality in relation to the human participants. It is this 'contributing in' of the material world that creates the sense of non-human intentionality at work in the universe characteristic of 'strong synchronicity'. And, in turn, it is much more difficult to see (at least for me) how such coincidences might be connected in any conceivably measurable system, no matter how complex. Unlike, say, a weather system which provides at least some definition of the relevant events in the system, how would one define and measure the relevant (and irrelevant) events in a system that includes, say, dentists, bus-drivers and the names of roads in London on the one hand and philosophical questioning amongst participants in humanistic psychology courses in the 1970s on the other? Clearly the only system that really links all these things together is me. This might well be an argument for 'symbolic density' conceived as *a state of mind* which increases the likelihood of experiencing this kind of transformative symbolic meaning in the world (Hogenson 2005). Hogenson has recently confirmed that this is indeed his view and that he is 'skeptical of synchronicity as an actual phenomenon' (2011) by which he means (in my words) that he is sceptical of Jung's claims that meaning exists in the world at large independently of human consciousness (personal communication, 2011). Even so, it remains to be seen how such qualitative states of mind could be rendered in terms of the mathematical quantities required to demonstrate their obedience to a power law distribution (see Hogenson 2005) and it is to be hoped that Hogenson may be able to clarify this in subsequent publications.

### Retroactive narratives

However coincidences may or may not be connected in 'fact', they *become* connected by being organized into a retrospective narrative that creates the meaning as an emergent phenomenon, the whole process being stimulated by the

need to ‘make sense’ of what has happened<sup>7</sup>. It is, as they say, no coincidence that synchronicities make good stories—the better the story, the more convincing the impact.

Morin defines emergent properties as

superior qualities emanating from the organizing complexity. They can influence the constituents retroactively thereby conferring on them the qualities of the whole.

(Morin 2004, p. 234)<sup>8</sup>

That is, once the narrative is constructed, the individual elements all fall into place as elements of the whole and assume a significance they did not have before. This seems very similar to the process of ‘*Nachträglichkeit*’ or ‘afterwardsness’ described by Freud and known in French as *après-coup*. The point here is that, in synchronistic coincidence, this process occurs extremely rapidly in direct response to the element of surprise. As Roy Orbison walks in the door and asks for the song, Bono is in the process of re-organizing the preceding events—hearing the song, waking up with his own melody, the band’s comment on its Orbison-like qualities—into a narrative which now includes the *subsequent* events and gives them a meaning they did not have before. This process of retroactive narrative organization is characteristic of all synchronistic experiences but occurs so rapidly that it is difficult to discern. So, for example, as soon as I see the Headcorn Road street-sign, my preceding thoughts about God and meaning become interconnected with it, changing the meaning of both by including them in a supervening context. The largely unconscious process by which this generates a symbolic interpretation—‘ah, *this* is Headcorn and so *that* was the meaning of my illness’—follows on afterwards and gives the narrative a lasting significance, strengthened by the transcendent ‘kick’ of surprise and inexplicability it now incorporates.

It is not that retroactive organization ‘appears’ to give the synchronistic events a meaning—it *does* give them a meaning because that’s what meaning is and does—it’s a way of relating events together to create an emergent property called ‘meaning’. Thus causality is *also* a form of meaning since it too relates events together in a meaningful way—but Jung did not see it that way. He seemed to see meaning as an *alternative* explanatory factor to causality but this is deeply connected with his need to establish some kind of external objectivity for the psyche, lest the psyche be regarded as ‘merely subjective’.

### Universal mind and the psychoid archetype

This quest is apparent in the convoluted efforts Jung makes to establish the existence of a psychoid level in which mind and matter are conjoined in

<sup>7</sup> Cambray refers to the ‘self-organizing features that only manifest as the human narrative capacity is brought into play’ although this leaves an ambiguity with regard to whether it is the narrative that has the self-organizing features (as I believe) or that these already exist in the events themselves and are merely made *manifest* by the narrative.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Claire Raguet for bringing this reference to my attention.

a postulated third which constitutes an underlying unitary reality or *unus mundus*. With this proposal, Jung aimed to re-animate the material world that had been de-souled by Descartes, a division that remains fundamental in Kant's division between (spiritual) noumena and (material) phenomena with which Jung remained so preoccupied (De Voogd 1984). Hence the implication that the unconscious mind is a Universal Mind. In this sense, the guiding spirit behind Jung's project is God Himself—not any longer as a transcendental cause but as a transcendent *meaning*. The theory of synchronicity can thus be understood as an attempt to provide a scientific argument for the necessary existence of God.

The trouble here is that Jung remains caught in a dualist Cartesian way of thinking about mind and matter while at the same time attempting to describe a phenomenological reality that is non-dualist. As a result, he is led to posit a hypothetical psychoid layer which unites matter and mind but then, paradoxically, has to declare it beyond the bounds of knowledge (as defined by Kant) and therefore a 'transcendent factor'. Numerous commentators have pointed out the resulting confusion in Jung's approach (De Voogd 1984; Bishop 2000; Giegerich 1987; Brooks 2011). Perhaps the most pithy critique comes from Pietikainen (1998) who points out that Jung's argument 'amounts to saying that even though the realm of the noumena is inaccessible to us, it is nevertheless accessible to us' (p. 382). Thus the supposedly unknowable 'archetype in itself' can nevertheless be known via its manifestations in archetypal imagery and the 'objective' phenomenon of synchronicity, both of which are claimed as evidence of a psychoid *unus mundus*.

Jung introduces the concept of the psychoid in *On the Nature of the Psyche* in 1947. At first he attempts to pass off the idea as if it refers merely to the border area between the psyche and the physiological body, despite its vitalist pedigree, deriving from Hans Driesch who coined the term (Addison 2009)<sup>9</sup>. Jung subsequently introduces the notion of psychoid processes occurring 'at both ends of the psychic scale':

Psychic processes therefore behave like a scale along which consciousness 'slides'. At one moment it finds itself in the vicinity of instinct and falls under its influence; at another, it slides along to the other end where spirit predominates . . .

(Jung 1947, para. 408)

Furthermore Jung seems to equate the archetype with spirit for two paragraphs earlier he writes

Archetype and instinct are the most polar opposites imaginable as can easily be seen when one compares a man who is ruled by his instinctual drives with a man who is seized by the spirit.

(*ibid.*, para. 406)

<sup>9</sup> Vitalism asserts the existence of some kind of independent life-force in organisms, in contrast to materialism which asserts that life is fully explicable in terms of biochemical processes.

Here Jung seems to be using the old theological (and vitalist) distinction between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ in which spirit was regarded as separate from the material realm and certainly something that exists on a different plane from the materiality of the body. Jung makes this plain when he refers to ‘the [archetypal] image which signifies and at the same time evokes the instinct, *although in a form quite different from the one we meet on the biological level*’ (ibid., para. 414; italics added) thus implying that the archetypal image is not only spiritual but ‘non-biological’. Gone then is the notion of archetypes as part of our biological inheritance. They now have become harbingers of the spirit which has a ‘non-psyche’ aspect: ‘there is probably no alternative now but to describe their nature, in accordance with their chiefest effect, as “spirit”’ (ibid., para. 420). By resorting to this dualism between matter and spirit, Jung has become trapped in a Cartesian problem that he then has to solve by pushing the spirit back into the material world via the postulate of an unknowable psychoid layer that combines matter *and* spirit.

This suggests that the fundamental purpose behind the introduction of the psychoid was to use its link with the materiality of the physiological body as a way of crossing the Cartesian divide between mind and matter. It is a Trojan Horse for the re-spiritualization of Nature. Thus Jung continues (ibid.):

If so, the position of the archetype would be located beyond the psychic sphere, analogous to the position of physiological instinct, which is immediately rooted in the stuff of the organism and, with its psychoid nature, forms the bridge to matter in general.

So while Jung still insists that the ultimate nature of mind, meaning and matter remain forever unknowable beyond the phenomenal world, this is a Kantian fig-leaf for the real achievement which is to have put spirit back into matter—as if they were divided in the first place. Yet Jung knew only too well that there was more in heaven and earth than in any rationalist philosophy based on the division between subject/object or mind and matter.

### Archaic mind and scientific mind

As well as his own profound experiences of the creative potential of fantasy, Jung was deeply interested and invested in the very different ways of thinking manifested by non-Western peoples who clearly thought and related to the world in a very different way. In his talk on ‘The Archaic’ in 1930, Jung outlined his views about these differences; views which, as Paul Bishop has shown, strikingly anticipate his later theory of synchronicity. Bishop glosses Jung’s argument as follows:

human beings today distinguish sharply between inner and outer reality, between what happens ‘inside’, in the mind, and what happens ‘out there’, in the world. In ‘primitive’

thought, which is a mode of thought to which today we still have access, however, the objective and the psychic coalesce, so that the (artificial) distinction between the inner (the psyche) and the outer (the object) disappears.

(Bishop 2008, p. 507)

And he later concludes that for Jung,

Underneath (or behind, or somewhere obscured by) the ‘contemporary’, the ‘modern’, the ‘civilized’, lies the ‘primal’, the ‘primordial’, the ‘archaic’. And sometimes the latter . . . suddenly intrudes, rhizome-like, into the world of the former.

(*ibid.*, p. 517)

This strongly echoes both Jung’s visionary experiences in 1913–14 and the Kairos moment in which synchronicity breaks into the ordinary schemata of rational thought. It is not merely an alternative way of thinking, it is an alternative way of experiencing our being in the world. Seen from this perspective, there is no need to posit some obscure psychoid realm in which mind and matter are united since for those who occupy this way of being, mind and matter are *already* united in an experiential reality rather than as a quasi-scientific, semi-metaphysical proposition. Bishop again:

The *mana*-inhabited world of the primitive mind is decidedly immanent: ‘invisible, arbitrary forces’ (Jung 1931, para. 113) may be at work in it, yet these forces are (conceived as being) very much in and of this world.

(*ibid.*, p. 513)

Jung’s own frequent experiences of synchronicity and other paranormal phenomena such as clairvoyance, precognition and telekinesis gave him powerful evidence for these forces but it was not the kind of evidence that could hold sway within the court of empirical science. Jung was not content to allow this duality (as opposed to dualism) to co-exist but sought to prove the validity of a pre-dualist way of being in the world from within the dictates of a Cartesian/Kantian dualism. This is why the attempt was bound to fail and this remains the case, despite recent advances in science such as complexity theory since science is necessarily based on different principles—i.e., rational thought rather than imaginal congruence, mathematics rather than poetry. Especially where synchronicity is concerned with transcendent experience, it inevitably falls outside the domain of science.

It may be a different matter in relation to the meaning-making aspects of synchronicity: much of Hogenson and Cambray’s work on linking synchronicity with emergence, complexity and dynamic systems theory refers to *states of mind* and interactive processes occurring in synchronicity rather than offering, as Jung does, explanations which postulate some structural arrangement in the external world that produce the coincidental events themselves (Hogenson 2005, 2009; Cambray 2002, 2006, 2009). In that sense, I do not read their work as supporting Jung’s claim for a connecting principle in Nature, acausal

or otherwise, albeit Cambray believes that synchronistic events are emergent phenomena in themselves and that to distinguish between the external event (coincidence) and its meaning as I seek to do here is to maintain a subject/object division which he eschews (personal communication 2011).

It is also possible to use scientific knowledge in a *metaphorical* way, commensurate with Walter Kaufmann's designation of psychoanalysis as a 'poetic science' (Kaufmann, 1982, p. 109) although this distinction is not always made clear. Wolfgang Pauli suspected that this was what Jung was doing with quantum physics:

When you use physical terms in order to explain psychological terms or findings, I often have the impression that with you they are dreamlike images of the imagination... [Such statements that you make] cannot be understood by any physicist.  
(Meier 2001, p. 57)

Furthermore, Hogenson suggests that, for Pauli

religion and science represent epistemic states, not unlike the wave and particle descriptions of light. Each is a description based on a point of view.  
(Hogenson 2008, p.130)

And, from another perspective, de Voogd argues that Jung's notion of *esse in anima* constituted a much greater challenge to Kant than he seemed to realize (or perhaps was prepared to acknowledge).

The ontology that goes with *esse in anima* ... requires a descriptive model that puts metaphor before concept.  
(de Voogd 1984, p. 225)

### Congruent correspondence and the primordial mind

Such differentiations imply a necessary distinction between an imaginal world of non-verifiable personal meaning and a rational world of publicly verifiable rational knowledge. My suggestion is that the essential difference between these two ways of seeing turns on the means by which associations are made. In the rational world, association is made by means of causal chains of connection and logical sequences epitomized by mathematics; in the imaginal world, association is made by congruent correspondence, epitomized by poetic metaphor. Metaphor works by recognition of congruent elements between the source domain and the target domain which enables the target to be expressed in terms of the source. So, for example, in the metaphor 'sunshine of your love', the congruence between sunshine and love is *warmth* or, more specifically, the pleasure of feeling warm. This might become a symbol in which the sun is symbolic of love or, perhaps more strongly, where the sun symbolizes the source of love through congruent correspondence with the sun as the source of

light and heat where both symbol and symbolized have a common underlying theme of ‘what is needed for life’.

However, congruent correspondence, while closely connected to metaphor, has a broader definition and would include such features as synaesthesia and cross-modal perception which have been linked to the development of archetypal imagination and spiritual intelligence (Hunt 2003). And, as I’ve pointed out earlier in this paper, congruent correspondence is also the very essence of coincidence. So it may well be that we are primed to highlight coincidental features of our environment just because they do involve congruent correspondence and this alerts us to the possibility of meaningful connection. This does *not* mean that the meaning we discover is necessarily an illusion (although it could be) any more than the congruence in metaphor between the source and target domains makes metaphor an illusion. Rather I am suggesting that synchronicity works by the same process by which metaphor operates—the use of congruence between two or more factors to produce a meta-meaning that might be described as ‘emergent’ or even ‘transcendent’<sup>10</sup>. This could also be defined as the emergence of a symbol out of its congruent constituents.

Here I want to make a further link between the so-called archaic or primordial mind and a recent development of Freud’s notion of the primary process by the psychoanalyst, Michael Robbins (2011). Robbins suggests that there is a primary mental activity (PMA) distinct from rational thought that can be seen in fields as diverse as infancy, dreaming, schizophrenia, shamanism, visionary states (he specifically mentions Jung’s *Red Book*) and the creative arts, especially those associated with states of possession. PMA differs from rational thought in many ways such as the non-differentiation of opposites, the absence of negation and, particularly significant in relation to Jung’s theory of synchronicity, the relativization of time and space. In PMA, as in our dreams, many different times and places can coalesce and separate without contradiction and without the ‘secondary process’ awareness that requires their division. However, rather than regarding this form of thinking as either primitive or inferior—i.e., looking at it from the perspective of secondary process rational, differentiated thought—Robbins argues that PMA can be developed in very sophisticated ways, just as rational thought can be and that it is only a Western post-Renaissance bias that regards rational thought as ‘superior’, let alone the only way of relating to the world. In fact, PMA is a characteristic feature of all archaic pre-scientific cultures and is particularly developed in religious ritual and shamanism.

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<sup>10</sup> In ‘strong transcendence’ Stein argues that the mediation of a third in the transcendent function shifts into a further dimension that he calls ‘the hidden fourth’. In this further dimension there is an *experience* of transcendence.

### Jung as shaman: living in the primordial mind

The case of shamanism is particularly interesting in relation to Jung. Aziz cites several examples of the way that Jung integrated synchronicity into his ordinary way of living so that it became a consistent resource. When analysing, Jung would take every natural event such as insects flying in, the lake lapping more audibly than usual and so on as belonging synchronistically to what was being said in the analysis (Hannah 1977, p. 202; cited in Aziz 1990, p. 85); the scarab, it seems, was not such an isolated incident. Similarly, in the course of a disagreement with Henry Fierz, Jung noticed that his watch had unaccountably stopped. Checking the correct time with Fierz, Jung concluded 'You have the right time and I the wrong one. Let us discuss the thing again' (Jensen 1982, p. 21, cited in Aziz 1990, p. 86). These examples show the very creative and imaginative way that Jung was able to make metaphorical associations between different domains, seeing the congruence where others might not. That is, he was a highly skilled adept in the art of congruent correspondence or PMA. So it is not so surprising that when Von Franz remarked to Jung

that his psychological insights and his attitude to the unconscious seemed to me to be in many respects the same as those of the most archaic religions – for example shamanism . . . Jung answered with a laugh 'Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. It's an honour'.

(von Franz 1975, p. 13, cited in Aziz 1990, p. 220)

Nevertheless, this leads to very different conclusions about synchronicity from the ones Jung made himself. Far from being an abstract principle of Nature, it suggests that synchronicity requires a sort of mental skill that creates an openness to the associative thinking of the primordial mind. And, as Jung claimed in relation to synchronicity, in the primordial mode of thought, the laws of time, space and causality do not apply. Jung might have been more successful had he restricted himself to arguing that Kant's categories were too limited—that time, space and causality were definitive only of *one* way of being in the world that relied entirely on rational thinking. They did not take into account other ways of thinking which, by highlighting congruent correspondence, create an imaginal world of meaning in contrast to the rational world of knowledge.

### Conclusion

As analysts, we value this alternative mind-state very highly and make great use of it, through the recognition of 'congruent correspondences' of many kinds, including the interpretation of dreams and fantasy material, the links we make between the present and past and the very notion of 'transference' itself. While most of us do not make as much use of synchronistic congruence with the environment as Jung evidently did, we do use the same kind of thinking whenever we make a symbolic interpretation about an apparently non-symbolic occurrence; we see symbolic meaning where the non-psychologically minded see

only quotidian ‘facts’<sup>11</sup>. We regularly draw as much of the patient’s experience as possible into a symbolic frame, for which the congruent correspondence of metaphor and symbol is a *sine qua non*. Often we do so by immersing ourselves in ‘reverie’ which is very much like Jung’s adaptation of Janet’s *abaissement du niveau mental* and may be regarded as a way of fostering the primary mental activity of the primordial mind. However, at the same time, we are always consistently evaluating these congruent links, shuttling back and forth between this ‘primary mental activity’ and a more rational consciousness, always subjecting the primordial mind to the rational mind (and sometimes vice versa). In this way scepticism becomes the guarantor of primordial mind rather than its destroyer. So while it is possible to think scientifically about the differences between these two incommensurable ways of relating to the world and while it is also possible to use scientific thought within an imaginal, poetic perspective, it is ultimately neither possible nor desirable to attempt to re-unite them. *We need both*.

For this reason, I feel strongly that rather than making scientific knowledge claims for the products of this state of mind, we should be arguing for its intrinsic value as a different way of relating to the world. It won’t get us to the moon but it’s what fills the moon with symbolic meaning and value—and enriches us in a way that literal space travel could never do. Let me conclude then with the remarkable paean to imagination written by Julien Offray de la Mettrie, the first thinker to propose that man, like everything else in the universe, can be understood in purely mechanical terms. Here is what this thorough-going atheist and materialist had to say about imagination in his book *Man a Machine* in 1748:

Thanks to the imagination, to its flattering touch, the cold skeleton of reason acquires living, rosy flesh; thanks to it, the sciences flourish, the arts are embellished, woods speak, echoes sigh, rocks weep, marble breathes and all inanimate objects come to life.

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#### TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Cet article oppose la conception de Jung de la synchronicité comme étant la preuve d’un principe objectif de sens dans la Nature, à une vision mettant l’accent sur la production humaine du sens. Toute synchronicité génère des signes indicatifs, mais c’est uniquement lorsqu’elle devient le « symbole vivant » d’une intentionnalité transcendante, à l’œuvre dans un univers vivant, que la synchronicité génère le genre de signification symbolique qui amena Jung à postuler l’existence d’un Esprit Universel. Ceci est considéré comme une forme de savoir personnel tiré de l’expérience, appartenant au « monde imaginal du sens », caractéristique de l’« esprit primordial » opposé au « monde rationnel du savoir », à travers lequel Jung tenta de présenter ses expériences comme si elles étaient empiriquement et publiquement vérifiables. Tandis que le savoir rationnel dépend

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<sup>11</sup> This is another indication of the unfortunate way in which Jung tried to argue for the existence of parapsychological phenomena by insisting that they were ‘facts’, thus missing the essential point that they depend on *meaning*.

d'une modalité du sens où les chaînes causales et les liens logiques sont prédominants, la modalité imaginale du sens, elle, est générée par des formes de correspondances congruentes—caractéristique que la synchronicité partage avec la métaphore et le symbole—et la création de narrations au moyen d'une organisation rétroactive de ses éléments constitutifs.

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Dieser Beitrag kontrastiert Jungs Erklärung der Synchronizität als Beleg für ein objektives Prinzip der Bedeutungshaftigkeit in der Natur mit einer Ansicht, die den Aspekt der Bedeutungsverleihung durch den Menschen betont. Alle Synchronizitäten erzeugen hinweisende Zeichen. Aber nur dort, wo jene zum 'lebendigen Symbol' einer in einem lebendigen Universum am Werk befindlichen transzendenten Intentionalität werden, erzeugt die Synchronizität die Art von symbolischer Bedeutung die Jung dazu brachte, die Existenz einer Objektiven Psyche zu postulieren. Diese wird als eine Art personalen, auf Erfahrung beruhenden Wissens angesehen, welches zur 'imaginativen Welt der Bedeutung'-Charakteristik des 'ursprünglichen Geistes' gehört, welche der 'rationalen Welt des Wissens' gegenübersteht, in der Jung versuchte seine Erfahrungen zu präsentieren als seien sie empirisch und öffentlich verifizierbar. Während rationales Wissen von einer Form der Bedeutung abhängt, die von Kausalketten und logischen Verknüpfungen bestimmt ist, wird imaginatives Wissen von Formen von kongruenter Entsprechung—ein Merkmal welches die Synchronizität mit der Metapher und dem Symbol gemeinsam hat—und der Schaffung von Erzählungen per rückwirkender Organisation ihrer konstituierenden Elemente erzeugt.

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In questo lavoro viene confrontato il resoconto di Jung della sincronicità come evidenza di un principio oggettivo di significato nella Natura da un punto di vista che generano segni significativi, ma solo quando ciò diviene un 'simbolo vivente' di una intenzionalità trascendente al lavoro in un universo vivente accade che la sincronicità generi quel tipo di significato simbolico che spinse Jung a ipotizzare l'esistenza di una Mente Universale. Ciò viene considerato come una forma di conoscenza esperienziale personale che appartiene al "mondo immaginale dei significati" caratteristico di una 'mente primordiale', come opposta al 'mondo razionale della conoscenza' nel quale Jung tentò di presentare le sue esperienze come se fossero pubblicamente ed esperenzialmente verificabili. Laddove la conoscenza razionale dipende da una forma di significato in cui molto importanti sono le catene causali e i legami logici, il significato immaginale viene generato da forme di corrispondenza congrua—un aspetto che la sincronicità condivide con la metafora e il simbolo—e dalla creazione di narrazioni attraverso una organizzazione retroattiva dei suoi elementi costitutivi.

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Эта статья расходится с мнением Юнга о синхронистичности как свидетельстве объективного принципа осмысленности в Природе—во взгляде автора акцент делается на человеческой способности творить смысл. Все синхронистичности порождают указующие знаки, но только когда это становится «живым символом» трансцендентной намеренности в живой вселенной, синхронистичность порождает тот символический смысл, который привел Юнга к постулированию существования Универсального Разума. Это

считающа́я формой личного эмпирического знания, принадлежащего «воображаемому миру смысла», характерному для «примордиального мира» и противопоставляемого «рациональному миру знаний», которому Юнг пытался представить свои переживания, как если бы они поддавались эмпирическому и общественному контролю. Если рациональное знание зависит от формы значения, в которой каузальные цепочки и логические связи первостепенны, то имажинативный смысл порождает формами конгруэнтного соответствия—это черта, общая для синхроничности, метафоры и символа—и созданием повествования с помощью ретроактивной организации их составных элементов.

En este trabajo compara el concepto de Jung de la sincronicidad como evidencia de un principio objetivo significativo en la Naturaleza con una visión que enfatiza el significar-haciendo humano. Todas las sincronicidades producen signos indicativos pero sólo donde esto llega a ser un 'símbolo viviente' de una intencionalidad trascendente en el trabajo en un universo vivo la sincronicidad engendra la clase de significado simbólico que orientó a Jung para postular la existencia de una Mente Universal. Esto es considerado como una forma personal y de experiencia del conocimiento del 'mundo de imaginal significativo' característica de la 'mente primordial', en contraste con el 'mundo racional del conocimiento' en que Jung procuró presentar sus experiencias como si estuvieran empíricamente y públicamente verificables. Mientras que el conocimiento racional depende de una forma de significar en el que cadenas causales y lazos lógicos son supremos, el significar del imaginal es engendrado por formas de correspondencia congruente—una característica que la sincronicidad comparte con la metáfora y el símbolo—y la creación de narrativas por medio de organización retroactiva de sus elementos constituyente.

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