

Whitehead and Grof: Resolving the ontological ambiguity of Jung's archetypes metaphysically and practically

To resolve criticism about ontological ambiguity concerning Jung's archetypes this paper draws on Whitehead's metaphysics and Stanislav Grof's perinatal theory concerning psychological discoveries about the human birth process. Opening connections between Jung and Whitehead not only resolves criticism about Jung, it also develops practical support for Whitehead's metaphysical scheme. Additionally, the clinical extension of Grof's perinatal theory provides an experiential avenue for practical investigation of the process by which an actual occasion becomes, which process is central to Whitehead's metaphysics.

I. Philosophical Critique of Jung's Theory

Alasdair MacIntyre voices a representative philosophical critique of Jung:

... the linchpin of Jung's theorizing, the concept of the collective unconscious, is so formed that it appears that whereas the existence of the collective unconscious was advanced as an explanatory hypothesis, the question of whether the collective unconscious exists cannot be answered by any possible observation or experiment....

At the root of the problem lies an ambiguous set of ontological claims. Jung insisted that the contents of the psyche are as real as what exists in the external world. He clearly meant by this more than the obvious, which nobody would be disposed to deny, for example, that there are recurrent patterns of symbolism. But what he meant beyond this remains unclear. Sometimes he seems to have treated the archetypal images as autonomous agents and the collective unconscious as a realm where they dwell. However, his insistence on the inapplicability of the ordinary canons of logic in these matters makes it difficult to press the questions which this seems to raise. (MacIntyre, 1996, p. 296)

MacIntyre's criticism can be addressed in two ways. First, we can make it clear that Jung's archetypes reflect Plato's *Ideas*¹ through the mirror of psychology, and consequently their status is an ontological, not an empirical issue. Whitehead has spoken to this issue extensively, stipulating universals as real potentials that are critical ingredients in the process of becoming.

Jung's theory benefits from coming under the rubric of Whitehead's metaphysics. Jung's theory in turn enriches the model Whitehead has developed that derives the notion of energy in physics from the complex emotional and purposeful energy of living creatures, alternative to the materialist explanation that complex human energy can be reduced to the simple kind of energy that powers machines. This model, according to Abner Shimony, offers "the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the

world” and makes “the unification of physics and psychology somewhat less remote” than does the materialistic model.²

A second way of addressing MacIntyre’s criticism of Jung avails the work of Stanislav Grof concerning the psychology of the human birth process. Grof’s work offers a practical insight into the process whereby universals, in this case in their aspect as archetypes of human becoming, are ingredient in the process of becoming. Based on his extensive clinical experience, Grof’s perinatal theory has developed a major new perspective for depth psychology about events around (*peri*) birth (*natal*).

II. Grof’s Perinatal Theory

Stanislav Grof’s perinatal theory establishes an empirical and ontological ground for archetypes in the first human experience, the birth process. The variety of experiences a baby can have during the stages and vicissitudes of the birth process accounts for many possible archetypal manifestations. Placing the locus of archetypes in the human birth process offers a practical response to MacIntyre’s criticism, and it complements Whitehead’s metaphysical position.

A. Singularity of the birth archetype

Grof acknowledges the importance of Jung’s identifying the role of archetypes in human psychology, and he extends its significance by emphasizing that certain specific characteristics distinguish the birth archetype from all others and by calling attention to psychosomatic components of the birth experience. This psychosomatic aspect comes especially to the fore in experiential psychotherapy, where “one always encounters an amalgam of actual detailed birth memories and concomitant archetypal themes.” (Grof, 1985, pp. 191-2)

B. Character of the birth experience

Human birth is unique in comparison to the other animals both physiologically and anthropologically. The size of the brain and the evolutionary narrowing of the pelvis required for upright walking make birth difficult and lead human mothers to ask for help during childbirth.³

Birth begins human individuation physiologically, psychologically, and socially. These aspects weave matter and archetype together in an ontological fabric. The being of archetype and of human individual emerge coincidentally in the multifarious uniqueness of the birth process, and the birth archetype is panoply for a proliferation of archetypes. Birth is even just one attribute of the archetype, which is fully birth-death-rebirth: The baby dies to the maternal universe of the womb and is reborn in the world.

The archetype of birth not only is grounded ontologically in the birth process, but the intensity of the process manifests in the force and power of archetypes under its panoply.

C. Basic Perinatal Matrices

The following table compares the four physiological stages of the birth process Grof distinguishes and compares them with associated major archetypal themes:

Physiological Stages	Archetypal themes
I. Intrauterine existence before the onset of delivery.	I. The Amniotic Universe
II. The period of uterine contractions preceding opening of the cervix.	II. Cosmic Engulfment and No Exit
III. Passage through the birth canal.	III. The Death-Rebirth Struggle
IV. Emergence.	IV. The Death-Rebirth Experience

In addition to these major themes, each stage presents other possibilities of existential circumstance that instantiate diverse archetypal phenomena. Stage One may comprise an oceanic, amniotic heaven or, for the baby of a sick or addicted mother, a toxic hell. Stage Two begins distinction of baby from mother, presenting the possibility of claustrophobic, no-exit experience that fortifies horror stories and endogenous depression. Stage Three comprises numerous possibilities, including violent struggle, synergistic aggression and retribution between baby's and mother's bodies, and the hero's journey through the valley of the shadow of death. In Stage Four the baby finally dies to the uterine world in a burst of light and inhales the breath of life, perhaps along with physiological detritus. Abnormalities of birth and medical interventions broaden the archetypal dimensions with experiences such as transcendent caesarean rescue. Grof designates the coincidence of physiological phenomena and archetypal ingressions each of these stages as a particular "perinatal matrix." The following briefly characterize these matrices:

First Perinatal Matrix: The Amniotic Universe

Experiential identification with the blissful existence of the fetus: a sense of unity with the entire cosmos. For the fetus of a sick or addicted mother, however, the womb can become a toxic hell.

Second Perinatal Matrix: Cosmic Engulfment and No Exit

At the onset of biological birth the uterus begins to contract, and the cervix has not opened yet. Each contraction restricts the supply of arterial blood and thus oxygen supplying the placenta. It involves overwhelming feelings of increasing anxiety and awareness of an imminent vital danger. Symbolically this can be cosmic engulfment – no exit, Hell.

While under the influence of this matrix, a person can feel overwhelmed, desperate, despairing – a helpless and passive victim subjected to overwhelming destructive forces with no hope of escape.

The influence of this matrix can also give rise to multiple archetypes of torture.

Third Perinatal Matrix: The Death-Rebirth Struggle

This matrix corresponds to the second clinical stage of childbirth. The uterine contractions continue, but the cervix is now dilated and allows gradual movement of the fetus through the birth canal. This involves a critical struggle for survival, crushing mechanical pressures and often a high degree of anoxia and suffocation.

In experiences associated with this matrix sexuality may be connected with apprehension of danger and death, anxiety, aggression, self-destructive impulses, physical pain and sensations of biological material (blood, mucus, feces, urine). This matrix forms a natural basis for development of the most important types of sexual dysfunctions, deviations, and variations.

Religious and mythological symbolism in this matrix may evoke experiential connection with the painful sacrifice of crucifixion or dismemberment. One may identify with Christ or other deities who suffer death and rebirth, such as Osiris, Dionysus, Attis, Adonis, Persephone, Orpheus, or Wotan.

Fourth Perinatal Matrix: The Death-Rebirth Experience

Following the extreme build-up of anxiety, pain, pressure, and sexual tension accompanying passage through the birth canal comes sudden release and relaxation. After long darkness, the child discovers the light. Cutting the umbilical cord renders the child an independent organism.

Re-experiencing this matrix may yield concrete memories of birth specifics not otherwise known to a person. People sometimes correctly identify details about labor, anesthesia, the nature of intervention, and details of postnatal care later verifiable.

III. Conclusion

Jung's introduction of Plato's ideas into modern psychology through the concept of archetypes is the most important clinical and intellectual advance in depth psychology since Freud originated it. Although Jung as a psychologist was not particularly concerned with ontological issues, his lack of concern did leave him open to philosophical criticism regarding those issues. Fortunately, Jung's inadvertence is easily repaired by bringing archetypes under the rubric of potentials in Whitehead's metaphysic of becoming.

Stanislav Grof's perinatal psychology deepens the ontological grounding of Jung's archetypes by showing how the human birth process fosters instantiation of archetypes in original, fundamental human experience. Understanding the singularity of the birth process in this respect gives it to compare suggestively with the process of becoming that is the central concept in Whitehead's metaphysic. Whitehead invites this comparison because he has identified complex energy, emotional and purposeful, as inherent in the subjective form of an actual occasion. This characterization of subjective form readily elicits psychological consideration.

Viewing the process of becoming from a psychological perspective opens an avenue to empirical investigation of the process of becoming characterized also by Whitehead as "perpetual perishing." In Grof's clinical perspective the process of becoming and perishing becomes a manifestation of the birth-death-rebirth archetype.

Grof encourages experiential exploration of process by means of the technique he has developed called Holotropic Breathwork. Holotropic Breathwork is a method for nonspecific amplification of mental and psychic process. In a Holotropic Breathwork session one can sink below the presentationally immediate mode that dominates ordinary experience to apprehend archetypal ingression in the realm of non-abstract, non-ordinary experience that depth psychology typically calls "unconscious."

Holotropic Breathwork thus offers a practical means for realizing the experience Whitehead calls "Peace." (Whitehead, 1933, pp. 367-9) Peace represents the experiential understanding of perpetual perishing.

¹ In a discussion of the concept of archetypes, Plato's concept of the Idea, a primordial disposition that preforms and influences thoughts, is found to be an early formulation of the archetype hypothesis. Other investigators such as Hermann Usener are also noted to have recognized the existence of universal forms of thought. Jung's contribution is considered to be the demonstration that archetypes are disseminated not only through tradition, language, or migration, but that they can appear spontaneously without outside influence. It is emphasized that an archetype is not predetermined in content; rather it is a possibility of representation which may be actualized in various ways. In this aspect the archetype is likened to the instincts; both are predetermined in form only, and both are only demonstrable through their manifestations. Commentary in *CW v. 9.1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (p. 75-80).

² "Whitehead ... regards the matter aspect [of the world] as an abridged version of the mind-aspect. 'The notion of physical energy, which is at the base of physics, must then be conceived as an abstraction from the complex energy, emotional and purposeful, inherent in the subjective form of the final synthesis in which each occasion completes itself' [Whitehead, A. N. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933] p. 239.] Despite [the] obscurity of Whitehead's exposition ... it offers ... the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the world

Perhaps the great metaphysical implications of quantum mechanics—namely, nonseparability and the role of potentiality—have made the unification of physics and psychology somewhat less remote. Perhaps we are confronted with structural principles, which are applicable as much to psychological as to physical phenomena." Shimony, A. *Search for a Naturalistic World View, Vol. II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 320-1.

³ Many women know from experience that pushing a baby through the birth canal is no easy task. It's the price we pay for our large brains and intelligence: humans have exceptionally big heads relative to the size of their bodies. Those who have delved deeper into the subject know that the opening in the human pelvis

through which the baby must pass is limited in size by our upright posture. But only recently have anthropologists begun to realize that the complex twists and turns that human babies make as they travel through the birth canal have troubled humans and their ancestors for at least 100,000 years. Fossil clues also indicate that anatomy, not just our social nature, has led human mothers—in contrast to our closest primate relatives and almost all other mammals—to ask for help during childbirth. Indeed, this practice of seeking assistance may have been in place when the earliest members of our genus, *Homo*, emerged and may possibly date back to five million years ago, when our ancestors first began to walk upright on a regular basis. (Rosenberg, K. and Trevathan, W. The Evolution of Human Birth, *Scientific American*, November 2001.)

Works Cited

Grof, S. *Beyond the Brain*. State University of New York Press: Albany, 1985.

Jung, C. "Answer to Job." In *Collected Works 11, Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 1952.

_____. "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype." In *CW 9, Part 1: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1939.

MacIntyre, A. "Jung." In P. Edwards (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, v.4 (pp.294-6). Simon & Schuster Macmillan: New York, 1996.

Whitehead, A.N. *Adventures of Ideas*. The Macmillan Company: New York, 1933.

_____. *Process and Reality*. The Macmillan Company: New York, 1929.