

On the Nature of the Psyche

C.G.Jung

May 6-11, 2020

Jung wants to be two things at once. On one hand a hard nosed scientist committed to objectivity and on the other hand a free-ranging speculative thinker tolerant of subjectivity and whose preferred medium is the essay not the painstaking scientific report. The reconciliation of opposites turns out in fact to be a central core of his philosophy of psychology, and only through this reconciliation can the wholeness of an individual be achieved. The attitude is Gnostic as illustrated by the vision of God being both good and evil.

Mind and matter more specifically thought and thing are further classical examples of oppositions. If mind is derivable from matter, which in modern science appears to have become the consensual approach, we talk about a bottom-up materialistic approach; the opposite is of course termed idealism, a matter of a top-down approach starting with the immediate and yet complicated (the thought¹), is now considered a bit bizarre, albeit of some historical interest. Jung tries to have it both ways, matter of mind being irrevocably intertwined without any taking precedence. Thus Jung takes strong exception to the claim that the psyche is just a mere epiphenomenon of the brain but has to be taken seriously as a phenomenon on its own terms. Furthermore he reminds the reader that a strict materialistic view-point is fraught with logical inconsistency (due to self-references to be discussed below) and refers to its antinomial character. That reality is basically of mystical nature and reason irrationally founded, which natural science has a hard time acknowledging, as it would cut the branch on which they are sitting. On the other hand he is also desirous of being scientific and materialistic, speculating on how to measure the energy content of libido, and to find the analog of entropy in the psyche. One such suggestion is the 'dulling of affect' observed in schizophrenic patients².

In common with many philosophers taking the cue from Kant he sees science as a product of the mind, more precisely the psyche, rising out of an irresistible urge (clearly of psychological origin) to make sense of the world. He thus opposes physics with the psyche.

¹ In the idealistic tradition the individual soul is the most knowable, and hence it is natural to take this as a point of departure. However, Jung takes exception to the immediate knowability of the soul, and takes its lack instead as the departure for psychology as a science

² He carries on physical analogues by maintaining that when nature is left to itself, meaning energy flowing along gradients, no work is done. The same thing with man dwelling in a natural state, does no 'work' either. Thus deviating from natural inclination, moving along least resistance, involves no effort. Work is a matter of transcending nature. Life itself is a transformation of energies, in particular mental life. Primitive man is more attuned to nature, according to Jung, hence less liable to perform work. A waterfall is beautiful, but when harnessed to a power station not. Yet the latter performs useful work which we will appreciate for much longer than the momentary delight at the magnificent waste an unharnessed fall will provide during a holiday walk.

The former is the object, or at least one of the objects under the attention of the latter. The psyche makes the scientific investigation of the real physical world out there possible, because the investigations by the psyche can be conferred to another medium, namely the physical world, and then back again³. But this is not possible to apply to the psyche, there is no outside medium to which it can be transferred, and thus Jung despairs of its study ever becoming scientific, in fact it would be a contradiction in terms. While physics is objective⁴, psychology, or rather the study of the psychic, is always thrown back to itself, and its truths tend to be more in the nature of revelations, i.e. conveyed through direct and immediate understanding, rather than through reasoned circumlocution. In particular physics has the resource to mathematics, according to Jung a psychic phenomenon, but the study of the psyche does not⁵. The problem is the classical one of self-reference, the subject and the object being intertwined leading to no end of confusion. Thus the study of physics is an intellectual adventure (the sense of which is of course psychic in nature) which you may or may not pursue, and thus up to your choice. While engaging in the psyche is something which is urgent and compulsive and thus offers no choice, except the negative and provisional one of repression. To be confronted with the secrets of nature may be awesome but fear is not the predominant emotion; while being confronted with the secrets of your psyche is terrifying and painful. The impossibility of studying the psyche scientifically has advantages as well as disadvantages. It gives an alibi to resort to fancy, not to be burdened by the strict and painstaking argument, logically as well as empirically; on the other hand imagination thrives on constraints, paradoxically an imagination freed of constraints is restricted and underdeveloped doomed to run in circles in preassigned grooves. Thus one cannot expect that our knowledge of the psyche will become as extensive and surprising as that of the physical world but restricted to what the psyche will allow us to know. In fact one may wonder whether it will ever transcend that of religious contemplation. Thus an intellectual poverty compensated by emotional intensity.

I have been using the terminology of the study of the psyche rather than psychology. The latter has two faces, one face geared towards the physical world and closely connected to physiology; the other facing the soul. William James tomes on Psychology are of the first kind, the interest of Jung of the second kind⁶. On the turf of consciousness they meet. The consciousness of the unconsciousness is of course of a very old datum, and James

³ This is reminiscent of Poppers conception of the mind making up theories to be tested by confrontation with an external reality, namely the physical world of matter, the results of which are bounced back leading to new thoughts in an unending cycle.

⁴ And as Popper stresses, the objectivity of physics in particular as a scientific discipline, lies in its potential to falsification.

⁵ Objective reality requires mathematical models according to Jung and psychic entities cannot be quantitatively measured as there are no measuring rods for the purpose.

⁶ Jung wonders how we can separate the psychological from the merely physiological. Jung refers to *partie inférieure* and *partie supérieure*. The former is of a compulsive nature, subject to hormones and various 'drives' the latter is subjected to the will and is amenable to great modification. As a consequence Jung wonders whether not psyche has to be conscious, because how can you associate will with anything unconscious? This can of course be debated.

describes the fuzziness of the borders of actual consciousness. Not only the fact that many motoric processes seem automatic and in no need of continual conscious vigilance, such as walking, but many skills can be performed machine-like and hence felt as external, if well-integrated, to your body. Furthermore not only that, even parts of your mind seems external to you. When you speak your mother tongue you are most of the time not conscious about choosing words, you feel the meaning of what you want to say and the words do usually present themselves automatically. In a language you do not command you become conscious of the effort and each word has to be retrieved from memory by an act of will. Memory itself is an example of the unconscious as you cannot be conscious of all the things in your memory at once. Memories have to be dug up by conscious intent, which at times can require painful effort and hence be felt as frustrating sometimes even futile. A classical description of the process may be found in St-Augustine's Confessions. Your memory is in many ways an appendix to you, part of you certainly, but yet external, in fact having the character of a possession. You have privileged access to it and you can retrieve its contents in a more intimate form than which is conveyed by sharing it. Yet you need access to it, you have to explore it as you do external terrains. Then memory as you normally think of it is but one sort of memory, a verbal one, to be more precise. There are other types of memories, such as motoric memories, to which you have no conscious access at all and seems hence both more distant to you, as it is consciously inaccessible, yet more intimate as it is part of you in a way that cannot be separated and viewed as a thing. All of this is part of a more objective and physiological psychology, and the kind that is amenable to introspection and thus very congenial to a writer such as James⁷.

The great step taken by Freud was to take ancient wisdom seriously and attribute to dreams significance. Thereby he was not concerned with the astrology of dreams, interpreting them as conveyors of predictions about the real external world (as was masterly done by Joseph in the service of the Pharaoh), but as windows to a rich internal reality, namely the unconscious. Of course he had more recent predecessors in the 18th and above all 19th century, but no one went to such lengths of presenting an involved theory, a theory that promised a scientific basis for what up to then had been seen as ancient superstition and an affront to the legacy of the Enlightenment. Jung was one who took this very seriously and became a Freudian disciple rising to the status of a Crown Prince to the undisputed leader of the Psychoanalytic movement until there was an inevitable fall-out resulting in an unhealable split. It was all inevitable as Jung's personality was unable to submit itself in the long run to that of Freud's. In many ways Freud carried the day, while Jung became a voice on the fringe, considered too woolly and mystic. However, when the fascination with Freud cooled and his prestige was eroded, Jung was largely unaffected due to his marginality. One important part on which they parted company was on the issue of sexuality. To Freud this was the paramount issue lying at the core of the unconscious, while to Jung this was an unfortunate reduction⁸, he instead claiming a much larger and

⁷ His two volumes on psychology seem not to be based on any clinical experimental work, although he does refer to those which have been done by others, but solely to introspection which makes it so attractive to the reader as we can readily as fellow human beings test what he writes, likewise by sympathetic introspection.

⁸ Among other things he criticized Freud for the use of sexuality, which as a purely qualitative concept,

richer rôle for the postulated unconscious.

According to a conscious perspective, the fringes of the unconsciousness can be perceived if dimly, as in the margin of your visual field, where perception is only possible of movement. It is reasonable to assume that there are deeper layers of the unconscious beyond not only the direct perception of the conscious gaze but also beyond its ability to conceive. One example are the instincts, observed in animals, especially more primitive ones. They are hard-wired into the organism, to use anachronistic terminology, and control and generate automatic behavior, which is seen from outside as mechanical and rigid and devoid of any conscious intention. Man has instincts to, but for obvious reasons we are not aware of them. Obviously the way we learn to walk is not conscious, nor the way we learn to talk. To that we can add a wealth of other examples, such as making sense of sense data (contrary to many classical philosophers there is no such thing as an unmediated sensory impression). This is in no way unscientific according to modern standards where the classical empirical notion of a clean state has been thoroughly discredited. Any organism is the result of evolution, including its learning processes⁹. Now Jung goes further and postulates in addition to instincts also so called archetypes, which he refers to as the polar opposites of the former¹⁰. What those are is not so easy to define and describe, in fact it may be impossible to know, and Jung refers to the elusiveness of 'Das Ding an sich'. What can be known are the indirect effects of those, i.e. their representations such as various symbols. Those are the conscious components, but the unconscious components cannot be consciously apprehended, thus remain in the dark. In fact, as hinted at above, due to the lack of objective models (i.e. mathematical) for the psyche, no claims for the unconscious can be scientifically verified. The phenomena of instincts and archetypes Jung refers to as components of the collective unconsciousness, an unconsciousness common to all of mankind, and as such impersonal, and as far as mankind is concerned, universal. This idea naturally appears as mystical because it indicates that people can communicate in hidden subterranean ways. He also, with less fanfare, talks about a collective consciousness, which appears as more of a figure of speech analogous to the sense as public opinion. The explanatory purpose of the notion of the collective unconsciousness is to explain art, and closely related to art, religion. Freud was no stranger to similar explanations when it came to religion and art, but stayed within the psychological framework, in particular explaining religion as some form of collective neurosis. Jung goes beyond that, wary of the possibility of reducing art and religious convictions to psychological factors; instead he gives the collective unconsciousness an independent ontological status a source of enlightenment as legitimate as the external natural world. One may be reminded of Kant's saying, that two things inspired his awe, namely the starry sky above him and the moral sense within. From where do we get our moral sense as well as our aesthetic? Jung would answer from within buried deeply and solidly in an unconsciousness that belongs to us all.

could not explain value in psychological contexts, as not being quantitative. More devastating is his critic that sexually is by Freud given such a wide meaning that it can be used to describe and explain anything.

⁹ This is of course also the case of modern AI, which are not the products of huge data exclusively but have an underlying structure provided for the processing of the data itself.

¹⁰ Jung use the metaphor of a spectrum. Instincts he places in the infra-red part and archetypes at the ultra-violet, they both being off the visible part, i.e. being unconscious.

Thus art and religion are not aberrations but objective entities, at least as far as mankind is concerned. One may go even one step further. If mathematics is supposed to be a human invention on par with art, objective as far as the individual is concerned, and subjective when mankind is, its source has to be found likewise in the collective unconsciousness. It may be tempting to explain the Kant's synthetic a priori in those terms. and indeed Kant claimed that Euclidean geometry was of that kind, but mathematics has gone beyond that. However, this would just be an example of a trivial illustration, if there would be any fertility in the concept we have to dig much deeper.

The self, in Jung's sense is something huge, while the ego is quite small. According to the Freudian vision the more the ego makes the self conscious, the better the mental health. Thus man's mission to increase his knowledge and take control over his destiny is mirrored in the individual's quest to conquer his subconsciousness. But when it comes to the collective unconsciousness the task is no longer to be achieved, what remains is to bring up fragments which if controlled by the ego leads to artistic creation. The encounter with the collective unconsciousness and to profit from it and not to be crushed and destroyed is termed individuation, of maintaining boundaries between the individual and the vast psychic cosmos. In this book at least Jung has not much to say about this.

Jung has a tendency to oppose nature and spirit seeing the latter as transcending the former. The collective unconsciousness may be seen as the raw nature of man's psyche, to which we are as little free to disregard as nature itself when it comes to our physical environment, yet to dwell in it is primitive, and primitive people do not lead more satisfying lives than civilized people, pace all sentimental talk to the contrary; in the same way individuation should be seen as transcending psychic nature and putting it to use of the ego. But the collective unconsciousness itself has also been subjected to evolution and rises itself above mere animal instincts. The child, as is now generally accepted, comes as no blank slate but is filled, not with inherited ideas but with the possibility to form special ideas. In other words it comes equipped with certain pathways which reflect the accumulative experience of previous generations (thus very much in the spirit of evolutionary design). Now this awareness of the spiritual drive within is the source of the God concept, which Jung does not see as an aberration and a psychic disease. Our conception of God is not 'an das Ding an sich' but a human conception and a such, according to Jung, a legitimate object of scientific study. Jung sees the concept of God as intrinsically contradictory and thus paradoxically, in particular he does not see this as a cause for rejection, on the contrary a deep psychological need, if you want, for reconciling opposites. The concept of God goes deeper than mere logical consistency. The spiritual drive itself can, Jung admits, be counted among the instincts, be it, one surmises, on a rather high meta level. Thus a belief in God is instinctual, if at a higher level, which, one hastens to add, makes it easy to misunderstand it. The very desire to understand and get control can thus be seen as a celebration of God, which, incidentally, as an explanation has traditionally been proposed. Thus the study of nature, rather than being anti-religious, is religious in the highest degree. Increased knowledge and understanding is, when all is said and done, an enhancement of consciousness, also at the collective level. While a man in his youth can due to the biological strength of his organism afford to expand himself indiscriminately, something good may come out of it, as he gets older he has to husband his strength and

pay much more attention to the collective consciousness, also known as civilization and culture.

Finally Jung's views on Hegel may be of some interest. He refers to the victory of Hegel over Kant as the gravest blow to reason. He deplores his dangerous impact on not only the German mind but also the European mind in general on his insidiousness as a psychologist. After all he projected great truths out of his own subjective sphere into a cosmos of his own creation. In short he dismisses Hegel's philosophy as a psychological disease caused by the intrusion of an unconscious that the philosopher was unable to control. He refers to his peculiar high-flown language as a symptom reminiscent of the megalomaniac language of schizophrenics¹¹.

May 11-14, 22, 24, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹¹ William James remarks that in any grammatical text we invariably look for meaning, and that some people even go so far as to apply that to the writings of Hegel.