

Philosophical, religious and scientific influences in Jung's psychology

by Ann Casement

Jung's major theoretical contributions were influenced by other thinkers reaching as far back as the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, Jung's favourite Greek philosopher. For instance, Jung's theory of opposites, central to his psychology, derived from Heraclitus's concept of enantiadromia, a psychological law denoting "running contrariwise" which hypothesizes that everything eventually turns into its opposite. Heraclitus also posited that all things are in a state of flux which links to the concept of process.

Plato's theory of Ideal Forms is the forerunner of Jung's theory of archetypes, inherited patterns in the psychosomatic unconscious or psychological DNA. This is Jung's way of linking two sets of opposites: psyche and soma, instinct and image. Meister Eckhart (amongst others) is another important influence on this signature concept of Jung's.

From Aristotle, Jung derived the all-important category of teleology—the doctrine of final causes. This was an extension of Plato's theory of forms which provided the blueprint that guides the object to its final state or telos. The underlying pattern that is there in Aristotle's teleology is replicated in Jung's view of the individuation process.

Western philosophy, particularly German Idealism and Romanticism, impacted Jung's thinking in the following ways: Kant's view of the "moral order within" is echoed everywhere in Jung's work, while one might say that his "starry heavens above" are more evident in Jung's ideas than in his own. Kant's epistemology was another huge influence, in particular what he termed the noumenal or thing-in-itself which can be seen in Jung's theory of archetypes.

Hegel synthesized Kantian reason and morality with Herder's ideas on desire and sensibility and was an important, if largely unacknowledged, influence on Jung. Even more was the Hegelian dialectic that is to be seen at work in Jung's concept of the transcendent function and his alchemical writings which were the focus of his work from the late 1920s until his death. In the psychological alchemical process, neurosis is

transformed into selfhood as metaphorical gold is extracted from the base matter of unconscious contents.

Later in the 19th-century, two German philosophers, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with their ideas of the Will and the Übermensch, contributed hugely to Jung's development of the unconscious and the Self.

Jung worked with the Nobel Laureate quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli on his theory of psychoid archetypes, which can be described as psycho-physical patterning structures irrepresentable in themselves and only experienced through their manifestation in psychic or material reality; and synchronicity, an acasual connecting principle creating meaningful coincidence.

Important influences on Jung from the medical and psychology worlds include Wilhelm Wundt (word-association experiments), William James (psychology of religion, collective unconscious, typology), Pierre Janet (the autonomy of unconscious contents), Théodore Flournoy (non-pathological and creative components of the subconscious), Sigmund Freud (libido reconfigured by Jung as psychic energy), and Eugen Bleuler (schizophrenias).

Spirituality is the leitmotif that runs throughout Jung's writings and in his quest for the dark or shadow side of the Godhead he turned to Eastern and Western religions, and to esoteria such as Gnosticism, Kabbala and Manichaeism.

By 1914, Jung had already formulated what may be called his structural theory. This included his work on the unconscious, emotionally-stressed complexes, the psychological types of the introvert and extravert, the psychological mechanisms of introversion and extraversion, and the non-sexual concept of libido. He was also developing a phylogenetic or evolutionary notion of the unconscious which he later termed the collective unconscious and the notion that dreams were not wish-fulfillment but, instead, had a compensatory function in relation to consciousness.

The year of 1913 was pivotal in Jung's life. He began a self-experiment that became

known as his “confrontation with the unconscious” (Hoerni 2009: viii). During this time his fantasies (later to be known as active imaginations) recorded in the so-called Black Books began to be transcribed through the medium of artwork and calligraphy into his Liber Novus which has always been known as the Red Book.

Liber Novus may be thought of as Jung’s spiritual autobiography wherein he develops the notion of individuation and of the Self, and the subject imagos of the persona, shadow, anima/animus, and the mana personality. He worked on Liber Novus until 1930 when it abruptly ceases so that it has remained an unfinished manuscript corpus. At the front of the book is a statement in which he states these years were the most important time of his life and the ‘numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then’ (Jung 2009). Jung derived the term numinous from the German theologian, Rudolf Otto, who applied it to fleeting experiences of a religious or spiritual nature that are awesome, mysterious or tremendous.

Liber Novus remained unpublished until 2009 when it was finally launched in New York City in October of that year. In 1959, Jung added a brief Epilogue in which he acknowledges that his acquaintance with alchemy in 1928 took him away from Liber Novus. My own thinking here is that Liber Novus acted as an esoteric, or private, container for his theology, albeit one from which he leaks into his subsequent work; whereas alchemy became the exoteric, or public, container for some of the fantasies worked on in Liber Novus. Jung’s late work Answer to Job is the culmination of his writings on theology.

References

C.G. Jung, S. Shamdasani, J. Peck and M. Kyburz: The Red Book

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