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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE DEFINITION OF SYNCHRONICITY

INTRODUCTION

After spending several months contemplating the meaning of synchronicity, I find that I am still having difficulty in defining the concept. It is clear to me from my readings, and from our class discussions, that I am not alone in this difficulty, and I have begun to wonder “Why is it that a concept which generates such interest, and which refers to experiences that so many people seem to have, is so systematically elusive?” I want to explore the elusiveness of synchronicity as a concept by looking at how it functions in the relationship between the modern and the pre-modern views of the world.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING SYNCHRONICITY

Generally speaking, we make sense of abstract ideas by placing them in relation to a collection of other ideas the meaning of which we can, for the moment at least, take for granted. It is not clear how to do this for synchronicity.

We cannot define synchronicity in terms of any one conventional discipline. It certainly doesn't belong in physics as that discipline is normally understood. Nor does it really belong in the sphere of general academic psychology.

There is no academic discipline for which synchronicity is an object of concern. Not only is synchronicity outside the boundaries of any particular conventional academic discipline, it is actually outside of the entire meta-structure of academic disciplines that contains both physics and psychology as we usually understand those terms.

More generally, we might say that synchronicity is a concept that has no place within the modern view of the world. It is a concept that is relevant to the modern world, that was developed in response to the needs of the modern world, and that is of interest to people who have been educated in the modern world. But it comes into the modern world almost as a *koan*, as a kind of indigestible pill. If we are going to digest it, we need to define it, but we can't define it in modern terms. What are we to do?

SYNCHRONICITY AND THE PRE-MODERN VIEW OF THE WORLD

One way of attempting to define synchronicity is to imagine a world within which the notion *can* be defined. If we can imagine our way into a world where synchronicity seems naturally comprehensible, this may help us in working with the notion in our modern context. Without trying to get too precise (in his seminal essay on the subject, Jung defines synchronicity in

approximately 20 slightly differing ways¹) we can safely say that synchronicity refers to meaningful coincidences between inner states of mind and outer events to which they are not causally related. Let us imagine our way into a world – a pre-modern, traditional world – in which synchronicity makes perfect sense. Before modern times, it was taken for granted that the subjective domain was primary, and that the principle cognitive task of human beings was to understand the subjective mode of operation of reality. The following thoughts might serve as a rough outline of a pre-modern sensibility.

Any attempt to understand reality as a whole must necessarily start at the beginning. That is, it is not so much the specific operations of things that will be considered, but rather the absolute cause and beginning of things. Rational meditation on the absolute beginning of a universe which includes living, purposive and conscious beings leads naturally to the supposition of a cause which is at least living, purposive and conscious, i.e. to a Divine.

For creatures of the Divine to understand the universe that they inhabit, they need to understand the *intentions* of the Divine. That is, if we take the living, conscious, intentional power of the Divine seriously, we are naturally led to attempt an understanding of reality in terms of final causes.

In a world in which the Divine is taken seriously, the Divine must be imagined as conscious, as purposeful, and as able to create. If that is the case, then

¹ De Quincey, Christian, *The Challenge of Jung's Synchronicity: It's Meaning and Implications for Science and Philosophy*, unpublished, 1997.

those creatures most embodying those divine characteristics are closest to the Divine. Human beings, then, are the highest representatives of the Divine within the physical universe.

All physical manifestation serves the Divine purpose, therefore those aspects of the physical world that are further from divine perfection serve those aspects that are closer to divine perfection. The physical world, therefore, exists for the purpose of supporting human manifestation.

The natural world exists for the purpose of supporting the human drama. In effect, the physical world can be imagined as the stage-setting for the drama that we, as humans, enact. In this context, we will feel that we understand the physical world as a whole when we understand how it serves human ends – and the ends that we will refer to are not those of mere physical survival, but rather those of moral and conscious evolution towards an understanding of the Divine, towards service of the Divine, towards a more Divine being.

For pre-modern thought, therefore

- the objective basis of experience is understood in terms of Divine purpose
- Divine purpose is understood by analogy with human purpose
- The world is as it is because God made it that way to serve the purposes that it evidently serves.

In this imaginal universe, our best hope of understanding Divine intentionality is through an understanding of human intentionality. When human beings want to achieve a purpose, they do so by formulating and executing a plan. The plan, the projected, imagined and worked-towards configuration of events, is the formal cause, the archetype. If we imagine the universe as created by a conscious Divine being, then we come to understand the universe by divining Divine intentions. And those intentions manifest in specific divine plans, the archetypes.

Within this overall finalistic and formalistic understanding there will, of course, be islands of technique – making fire, making pottery, etc. And these islands of technique will employ some pragmatic understanding of material and efficient causes. But these small areas of technical knowledge will not disrupt the overall finalistic and formal understanding because:

- They will be relatively isolated from one another - i.e., there will be little incentive to bring together the various technical islands into an overall understanding of materiality. This separation will be encouraged because:
 - the division of knowledge and labor will be jealously guarded for the privilege that it confers and,
 - each specific understanding will be justified by its own, *ad hoc* collection of formal causes somehow related to Divine intention.

- In general, specific technical discoveries will be experienced (both by their originators as well as by the ‘public’) as divine gifts imparted for specific divine purposes.

It makes no more sense to try to understand the world of human experience in terms of physical matter than it does to try to understand a play in terms of the stage settings. After all, the stage settings are put there by the author to further the plot. It is absurd to imagine that the stage setting *caused* the plot.

In this pre-modern world, synchronicities will seem perfectly natural. The entire physical world will be imagined as a creation of the Divine, created precisely for the purpose of some drama that is taking place between the Divine and Its creatures. So we might, for example, imagine the physical world as a kind of school in which humans learn certain kinds of lessons. The general run of everyday reality is a sufficient school most of the time, but sometimes the teacher needs to intervene more forcefully. That he does by means of synchronicities – or in this context we might call them miracles. Synchronicities serve a divine purpose (final cause) and do so according to a divine plan (the archetype, formal cause).

In a pre-modern world, all physical reality is a meaningful expression of divine purpose, meaningful both to the Divine playwright as well as to the characters in the drama. Synchronicity is operative both in the ongoing regularities of physical existence which set the background for human

existence as well as in the specific coincidences that accompany particular dramatic crises. The synchronicities, the dramatic miracles of life, serve as reinforcements for the overall world view much as scientific experiments serve as reinforcements for the modern world view which we will discuss shortly.

In a pre-modern world, where the physical universe is imagined as a conscious creation, the tools we would use to understand physical reality are more like the tools of literary criticism than they are like the tools of modern physics. When, in a play, the weather corresponds to the mood of the scene, minor events prefigure significant plot developments, subplots reflect the same themes as the overall composition and so forth, we look for the explanation in the mind of the playwright. We take it for granted that *meaning* drives the unfolding of the plot and of the scenery. In a pre-modern universe, the entire world is viewed as a play with God as the playwright. Synchronicities are natural high points in the unfolding drama.

SYNCHRONICITY AND MODERNITY

The modern sensibility is radically different from the pre-modern one. In the modern mind, the physical world is imagined as a closed system of automatic, rule-governed interactions among mathematically defined entities. *Meaning*, as a manifestation of conscious purpose, desire and plan is systematically excluded from the explanatory apparatus. In the context of the modern world

view, what is important are not miracles, but rather the background against which miracles take place.

While the traditional world view starts at the beginning, with questions of ultimate origins and purposes, the modern world view starts with concrete details that are ready to hand.

Whereas a traditional world view asks about intentions of a conscious creator, a modern world view proceeds by measurement and experimentation to identify regularities in the experience of materiality that are mathematically describable and regularly repeatable (the experimental method).

The modern world view assumes its characteristic appearance when those features of reality that are amenable to experimental treatment are assumed to be the all pervading and all constituting essence of physical reality and when physical reality is assumed to be the only reality there is (materialistic reductionism).

In this context, the only understanding that is effective is understanding of material and efficient causes. Any imputation of formal or final causes to material systems is held to be fundamentally irrelevant as it is not amenable to experimental treatment.

The pre-modern world view leaves room for islands of technique which resemble modern technological procedures, but it denies that these

understandings are the nucleus of a total description of reality. The modern world view leaves room for synchronicities or miracles *as experiences*, but it denies that they point towards any Divine origin of physical reality. In fact, they are denied any objective ontological status at all through two strategies.

- Many synchronicities are dismissed as subjective distortions. In general, the status of consciousness in the modern world view is highly problematical. Leaving aside the details of these difficulties here, it is sufficient to note that the modern mind generally considers perception to be a process that is subject to error, and that errors in conscious perception tend to be made in directions that are influenced by desire. Thus many synchronicities are dismissed as illusions – instances in which people are interpreting their experiences so as to conform to desire rather than to fact.
- Those synchronicities which are intersubjectively verifiable are dismissed as ‘chance.’ The basic argument here is something like this:
 - The physical world is a closed system. Consciousness, if it exists at all, is epiphenomenal to material process and is not a causal factor in the arrangement of physical events.
 - Consciousness is nonetheless interested in the configuration of physical events, and assigns meanings to those events (how this is

possible in a modern, material universe is not clear, but this difficulty tends to be ignored).

- Built into the operation of physical reality is a principle which guarantees maximal exploration of combinatorial possibilities of events (chance).
- Under the operation of chance, it will sometimes occur that real, outer events happen to correspond to subjective inner intentions even though no causal sequence is involved in this correspondence.

SYNCHRONICITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We have now outlined certain crucial features of the modern and the pre-modern world views. Jung proposed the notion of synchronicity at a very particular time in the interaction of those two views.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a time of increasing triumph for the modern view. The attitudes, the beliefs, the viewpoints and the institutions that accompany and feed materialistic reductionism had been steadily consolidating their hold on the European imagination, and Europe had been steadily consolidating its hold on the world during this entire period.

Early in the twentieth century, the structures of modernism began to crack. The cataclysm of W.W.I marked the early stages of the breakdown in an unmistakable literal manner. It can also be traced intellectually through the

breakdown of classical physics, the rise of non-representational art, the development of widespread unhappiness on the part of the intelligencia, and the consequent rise and popularization of modern depth psychology.

Jung is, of course, one of the towering figures in the unfolding story of the breakdown of the modern world. In the course of treating his patients, Jung came to understand that their neurotic symptoms could not be ameliorated as long as they maintained the narrow, reductionistic rationalism which they had acquired in the course of their education. In other words, Jung began to understand that the symptoms exhibited by his clients were symptoms of modernism itself.

Jung realized that this dysfunctionally narrow rationalism was not only strangling his clients, but was having devastating effects on the culture as a whole. His work in its various aspects – his vast broadening of the notion of the unconscious, his subtle rehabilitation of alchemy, his cautious encouragement of an expanded appreciation for Eastern modes of thought – was consistently directed towards opening up space for features of our experienced reality which had been excluded by the modern view.

On the other hand, Jung was doing his work in the early part of the twentieth century, when the grip of modern, reductionistic rationalism on the educated culture was even stronger than it is today.

The point I want to make is that Jung's introduction of the synchronicity principle was as much therapeutic and political as it was scientific.

Therapeutically, Jung was aware that many of the neurotic symptoms of his patients as individuals and of the culture as a whole followed from the narrow definition of reality characteristic of modern reductionism. In particular materialistic reductionism, while it leads to glaring success in the manipulation of matter, paints a picture of reality which makes it almost impossible to assign a subjectively satisfying *meaning* to individual or collective human existence. For his therapeutic work, Jung needed a way to introduce objective meaning into respectable intellectual dialog.

Politically, Jung was aware that reductionistic materialism was the orthodoxy of the reigning institutions of the time, and held an unshakable hold on the imagination of the educated public – particularly as that imagination applied itself to an understanding of causality in general and of material phenomena in particular.

By positing the existence of a new 'connecting principle', Jung was able to create a space in the ongoing intellectual conversation of his day (and of ours) for a discussion of some neglected features of our experience – features which point to the possibility of a subjectively satisfying meaning for our existence. By making synchronicity into an *acausal* connecting principle, he was able to

leave the reigning orthodoxy and its strict causal notions relatively unthreatened.

CONCLUSION

We have now looked at both the modern and the pre-modern views of the world, and we are in a position to define synchronicity *functionally* as an attempt by Jung to introduce into the modern dialog a type of thinking more properly characteristic of a pre-modern world view. When we understand synchronicity in this way, its systematic elusiveness makes more sense. In fact we *cannot* grasp it in modern terms. We cannot fully grasp the notion of synchronicity without grasping the entire world view out of which it emerges, and without grasping the specific historical circumstances which led to its particular formulation.

We can imagine synchronicity as a kind of Trojan Horse. The wily Jung, perceiving that the ramparts of Modernity were too high and too strong to be breached by a direct attack, presented synchronicity as a kind of gift from the pre-modern world. But our attempts to assimilate this gift lead to an understanding of the pre-modern world view and, perhaps, to an eventual downfall of Modernity itself.

We thus see that the elusiveness of synchronicity is not an intrinsic function of that to which the concept points. It is rather an artifact of the particular

composition of the modern world view and of the circumstances in which the concept of synchronicity has entered the post-modern dialog about reality.

It may be that the post-modern dialog about reality has moved far enough since Jung's time that the notion of synchronicity can be reconsidered and reformulated.

This paper has left me with two tentative suggestions which might contribute to such a reformulation

Firstly, As it is now formulated, the notion of synchronicity seems too broad to be actually workable. This paper has suggested that synchronicity is actually a shorthand way to refer to the entire style of explanation employed in pre-modern views. Thus it includes both formal and final causation, and it also includes such as explanatory notions 'seriality'², 'correspondence'³, 'prefiguration'⁴ and 'affinity'⁵. In general, subjectivity as we experience it, is highly complex and multi-dimensional. Thus a pre-modern world view, which takes the meaningful, conscious intentions of a creative consciousness as the ultimate basis of reality, will employ a wide range of explanatory principles. The modern world view, which is rather impoverished by comparison, uses just one explanatory principle – the one which Jung calls

² Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 9.

³ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15

‘causality’. Thus there is some justification for saying that the modern world view uses causality whereas the pre-modern world view uses synchronicity and thus a comparison between them is meaningful. But I believe that this creates confusion because causality is actually on a different logical level than synchronicity. In other words, comparing causality to synchronicity is rather like comparing apples to vegetables. I have a sense that it would be very valuable to break out the various constituent principles that are condensed in synchronicity and to compare them to causality in detail.

Secondly, I have noticed that most treatments of synchronicity are more or less trying to fit synchronicity into a modern framework. Peat, for example, in *Synchronicity: The Bridge Between Matter and Mind*⁶, spends a good part of the work trying to find room *in matter* for the operation of mind-like principles. This approach is prefigured by Jung himself, who, at the end of his essay, places synchronicity in the context of a kind of mandala where it makes a fourth with space-time, energy and causality⁷.

It seems quite valid to say that the extreme forms of the modern world view do, indeed, operate in terms of the trilogy of space-time, energy and causality. If we look closely at those terms, we see that space-time is a kind of possibility grid. It defines a background against which processes can be measured. Energy, in this context, is a name for process. It is what we call

⁶ Peat, F. David, *Synchronicity: The Bridge Between Matter and Mind*, Bantam Books, 1988.

⁷ Jung, Op. cit., p. 98.

that which happens within the space-time grid. Evidently the space-time grid does not entirely specify the exact shape which the energetic processes occurring within it will take. Because we can imagine that the energy might manifest in ways other than that in which it does actually manifest, we need a third term – causality – to complete the specification of the system. Causality, in this framework, is a set of rules by which energetic processes occurring within space-time are governed. It is indeed difficult to imagine that this triplicity is complete. But the glaring omission here is not ‘an acausal connecting principle’ analogous to causality, what is missing is rather that which perceives and describes space-time, energy and causality – consciousness itself.

Because synchronicity is a form of ‘meaningful connection’, and because meaning can only be adequately defined in terms of consciousness, there is an evident connection between synchronicity and consciousness. But Jung’s fourfold mandala obscures this connection. Looking at this diagram, one might be led to believe that causality and synchronicity are two different connecting principles that both operate within the confines of the physical universe (space-time and energy). But while this is true of causality (by Jung’s definition), it is clearly not true of synchronicity. Causality is, as it were, contained in physical space. Synchronicity operates in a space of consciousness. I am not saying here that I can get a handle on the mysteries posed by this interaction. But I am suggesting that Jung’s presentation of

causality and synchronicity as parallel, analogous concepts obscures fundamental differences between them that cannot be even hinted at in terms of Jung's mandala diagram. It might be interesting to start from a pre-modern view, and attempt to account for causality within that view. This is a task that I will leave for subsequent papers.