

## Ontology of the Shadow

This paper advances ideas from Stanislav Grof's perinatal theory to establish an ontological foundation for Jung's concept of the Shadow and his archetypes generally. The paper is in two parts: first a philosophical critique of Jung's theory, and second a presentation of Grof's theory. Grof's theory lays the ontological foundation of the Shadow archetype in the concrete details of the human birth experience and thereby explains the great force of the Shadow in the world.

### 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)

This criticism has two points, first that Jung's theory does not lend itself to any empirical test, and second that the ontological locus of the archetypes is ambiguous.

The first criticism is not particularly cogent in its application to Jung, because it is similar to criticisms leveled against classic metaphysical doctrines in philosophy, such as Platonic idealism.

As a fundamental doctrine Plato asserts the reality of universals, which he calls forms or ideas (Greek: *eidos* or *idea*), as essential not only for knowledge but intrinsic to the very nature of things. Subsequent to Plato Western philosophy has proposed numerous answers to the question of how these universals operate in the world and in human experience. One of the most powerful has been the Cartesian-Newtonian concept of primary qualities, which has been critical in the development of modern science. Pointedly in light of MacIntyre's criticism, although modern science promulgates empirical methodology pervasively, it does not apply it to the concepts of materialism and primary qualities.

Alfred North Whitehead has developed a metaphysics (Whitehead, 1929) that is an alternative to scientific materialism but takes into account all the critical discoveries of modern science. Whitehead's system stipulates universals as real potentials essential to the quantum processes modern science recognizes as fundamental in the nature of things. Whitehead also provides alternate perspectives on the nature of time and space that fully account for relativity and supersede substance-based Cartesian logic.

Viewed as potentials that extend Plato's concept of forms,<sup>1</sup> Jung's archetypes find ready support from Whitehead's metaphysical system. The way Whitehead extends Plato's doctrines to encompass the discoveries of 20<sup>th</sup> century science paves the way for Jung into the realm of modern science. Understanding archetypes as extensions of Plato's ideas enhances their application to the realm of psychology. Bringing Whitehead to support and amplify Jung fully answers MacIntyre's first criticism.

MacIntyre's second criticism of Jung, that his ontological claims are ambiguous, needs a different rebuttal. Psychology in many respects does not much care about metaphysics, because it largely arose as a reaction against philosophical speculation. When psychology, however, takes spiritually seriously in the way Jung did, as opposed to explaining it away, metaphysics has a claim to assert, and MacIntyre's criticism obtains.

Although Jung's approach "is deliberately and consistently *psychological* rather than metaphysical," he profoundly interested himself in spiritual questions and immersed himself throughout his life in the religious and metaphysical literature of the world (Daniels, 2005, p.179). Jung, therefore, must answer some metaphysical questions.

Consider the following passage from Jung:

How else could it have occurred to man to divide the cosmos, on the analogy of day and night, summer and winter, into a bright day-world and a dark night-world peopled with fabulous monsters, unless he had the prototype of such a division in himself, in the polarity between the conscious and the invisible and unknowable unconscious? (Jung, 1939, p.187)

The philosopher must ask the metaphysical question: What is the ontological status of the prototype of division between dark and light whose existence Jung postulates in the human psyche? How does it come to be in the psyche?

---

<sup>1</sup> 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).

Stanislav Grof's work resolves the ontological ambiguity of the archetypes. It also offers an explanation for the multifarious character of the Shadow in the world and for the force with which it manifests.

## **II. Grof's Perinatal Theory: Ontological Foundation of the Shadow Archetype**

Stanislav Grof's perinatal theory places the empirical, ontological ground for the shadow in the original human experience, the birth process. Placing the Shadow's locus in the human birth process renders it ontologically unambiguous and thereby refutes MacIntyre's second criticism. More importantly for psychology, however, the variety of experiences a baby can have during the stages and vicissitudes of the birth process foreshadows many possible archetypal manifestations, both dark and light, in subsequent life events. (Additionally it should be noted that "birth" is shorthand for the archetype understood more comprehensively as "birth-death-rebirth.")

### **A. Singularity of the birth archetype**

Grof profoundly compliments Jung for opening psychology to the transpersonal realm and thus providing the first scientific means of understanding the content of extreme psychic experience. Grof maintains, nonetheless, that despite identifying the birth archetype, Jungian psychology does not seem to recognize that certain specific characteristics distinguish the archetype from all others. Jungian psychology, Grof also says, does not effectively deal with the psychosomatic components of the birth experience. This later deficit comes 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.<sup>2</sup>

Human birth begins individuation physiologically, psychologically, and socially. These

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.)

aspects weave matter and archetype together in an ontological fabric. The being (Greek: *ontos*) of archetype and of human individual emerge coincidentally in 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. Those archetypes range from light to dark, from liberation to shadow.

### 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:

| <b>Physiological Stages</b>   | <b>Archetypal themes</b>          |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| 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 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 experience such as transcendent caesarean rescue.

It is the dark aspects of the birth experience that establish the Shadow's ontological origin, and the experiential intensity of birth that provides the Shadow's force. The following figures<sup>3</sup> and comments give an idea about the cartography of the Basic Perinatal Matrices. The illustrations avail the power of art to emphasize the force of the Shadow.

---

<sup>3</sup> Images provided by Stanislav Grof.

### 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.



Figure 1

### 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.



Figure 2 In the Womb



Figure 3

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 give rise to multiple archetypes of torture.

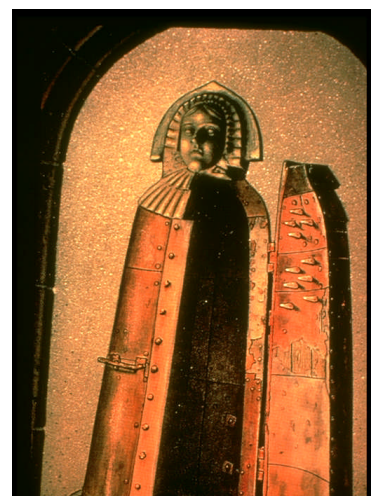


Figure 4 The Iron Maiden

### 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 an critical struggle for survival, crushing mechanical pressures and often a high degree of anoxia and suffocation.



Figure 5 Passage through the Birth Canal

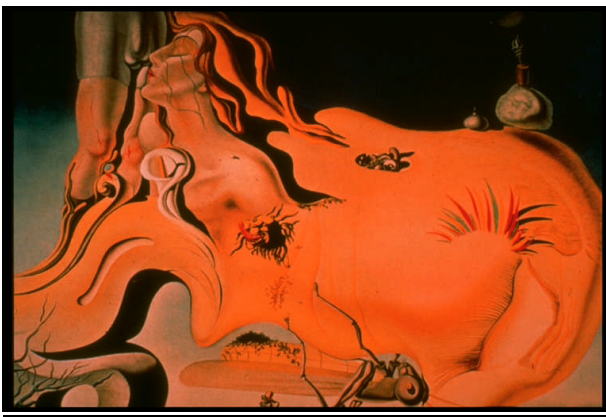


Figure 6 *The Great Masturbator*, Salvador Dali.

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.

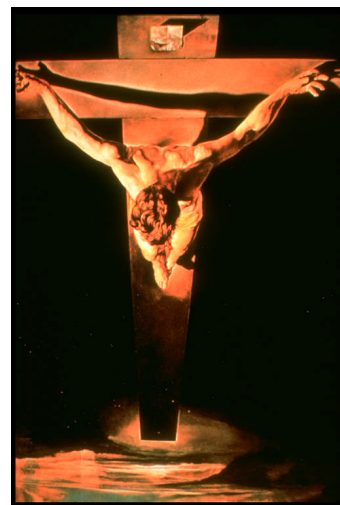


Figure 7

### 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.



Figure 8

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

The following drawings, done immediately after experiential sessions, summarize the final stages of the birth process with symbolic, archetypal images:



Figure 9

Vaginal pressure prison and torture yields to...



Figure 10

smoothly flowing energy, then...



...support and protection of  
the Great Mother.

Figure 11

### III. Conclusion

Many of the dark archetypes that manifest the Shadow can be seen as rooted in the human birth experience. The experience may involve moments of toxicity, despair, struggle, crushing pressure, sexual arousal, and encounters with blood or even scatological materials. The experience thus potentially lays a ground for behavior that ranges from individual acts of aggression to all the horrors that tribes and nations enact in war. On the other hand, the birth experience may equally involve moments that root positive archetypes, such as hero, nurturing deity, and liberation, providing ground for human charity, love, and altruism. Shadow and light divide and mingle on the common ontological ground of human birth.

Contrary to Freud's mechanistic determinism, Grof represents the birth experience as the ontological ground on which the archetypes are sown, an organic ground that is the original instance of human experience. The archetypes manifest in the Shadow with a power that reflects the force and intensity of human birth experience.

The development of depth psychology can be presented in three stages, using the classic philosophical theme of universals and particulars:

- 1) Freud discovers the unconscious and bases individual psychology on it.
- 2) Jung brings the archetypal universals to light and opens psychology to the transpersonal realm.
- 3) Grof reveals the ontological process whereby universals become actualized in the particular individual.

Because the archetypes infuse deeply in birth's intensity, the evil of the Shadow appears as a living presence in human action.

---

Daniels, M. (2005). *Shadow, Self, Spirit*. Imprint Academic: Charlottesville, Virginia.

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

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

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

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

Whitehead, A.N. (1929) *Process and Reality*. The Macmillan Company: New York