

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

Abstract

MacIntyre (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 296) voices two representative philosophical criticisms of Jung's theorizing: (1) the existence of the collective unconscious cannot be decided by any possible observation or experiment, and (2) ontological claims about the contents of the psyche are ambiguous. Jung states, "The content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes." (*Collected Works*, Vol. 9.i)

This paper resolves the ontological ambiguity of Jung's archetypes by drawing on Whitehead's metaphysics and Stanislav Grof's psychological discoveries concerning the human birth process.

Jung's archetypes reflect Plato's *ideas* through the mirror of psychology. The first part of MacIntyre's criticism of Jung repeats a criticism leveled against Plato that comes into play since the development of modern science. Whitehead's genius is to reframe Plato's ideas as potentials and bring them into a richly rendered picture of science that is well beyond the misplaced concreteness of simplistic empiricism.

Framing the archetypes as potentials extends their significance beyond Jung's use of them analytically to recognizing their actualization in the human birth process. Grof notes that while Jung identified an archetype of birth, he did not seem to recognize that certain specific characteristics distinguish that archetype from all others. (*Beyond the Brain*, p. 191)

Anthropologically, ontologically, and literally speaking human birth is the embodiment of individuation. Human birth differs from other animals: The size of the brain and the evolutionary narrowing of the pelvis required for upright walking make birth difficult. The bodily and psychic individuation from an all-encompassing maternal universe that takes place in birth represents a particular actualization of universals. The specific circumstances of the human birth process afford instantiation not only of the birth archetype itself but also a host of other archetypes, including those manifest in what Jung calls the Shadow.

Grof distinguishes four stages of the birth process: (1) intrauterine existence before the onset of delivery, (2) the period of uterine contractions preceding opening of the cervix, (3) passage through the birth canal, (4) emergence. 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--or physiological detritus. Abnormalities of birth and medical interventions broaden the archetypal dimensions with experience such as transcendent caesarean rescue.

Stanislav Grof's perinatal theory resolves the ambiguous ontological status of the Shadow and explains how the Shadow's force in the world derives from the experiential singularity of birth. Grof's understanding of human coming-to-be reflects Whitehead's metaphysical characterization of becoming and brings the existential richness of Jung's Shadow to Whitehead's metaphysical account of evil. (*Religion in the Making*, pp. 92 ff)