



#70 Carl Jung: What are the Archetypes?

Is the mind of a newborn a blank slate, awaiting stimuli and input from the world to obtain structure and form? Or does it have a pre-formed structure which influences how we experience the world? This question has long interested psychologists and philosophers alike. Carl Jung, the 20th century psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, believed the latter to be the case.

There exist, according to Jung, “identical psychic structures common to all” which are heritable and influence the way all humans experience the world. Jung called these structures archetypes and in this video we will provide a detailed introduction to Jung’s archetypes, explaining what they are, how they influence our lives, their relationship to symbols and Jung’s ideas on the connection between religious experiences and the archetypes.

Carl Jung, in addition to being a practicing psychiatrist, was one of the foremost experts on the study of religious and mythological symbology. It was work in both these fields that led him to the discovery of the archetypes. In studying the myths and religions of cultures past and present Jung noticed that many of them shared similar patterns, themes, and symbols. This was interesting in its own right, but what further piqued Jung’s curiosity was that some of these same themes and symbols arose in the dreams and fantasies of patients who suffered from schizophrenia. What could account for such similarities?

Jung proposed that the human mind, or psyche, is not exclusively the product of personal experience, but rather contains elements which are pre-personal, or transpersonal, and common to all. These elements he called the archetypes and he proposed that it is their influence on human thought and behaviour that gives rise to the similarities between the various myths and religions.

To properly understand the role of the archetypes we must first explain Jung’s conception of the psyche. Jung described the psyche as one’s total personality, encompassing all one’s thoughts, behaviors, feelings, and emotions. Jung divided the psyche into three major realms: consciousness, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. These three realms are not closed-off from one another but constantly interact in a compensatory manner.



The conscious realm is simply one's field of awareness, consisting of those psychic contents that one has knowledge of. In other words, any experience that enters one's field of awareness takes on the quality of consciousness.

The conscious realm of the psyche, while extremely important in its own right, is according to Jung, dwarfed in scope by the unconscious realm. The unconscious consists of those psychic contents which one is unaware of and Jung divided it into two main parts: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious, as the name suggests, is particular to each individual. It consists of events of one's life that are deemed insignificant, are forgotten, or are repressed due to their distressing nature.

In addition to the personal unconscious there is a deeper and more fundamental realm of the unconscious which Jung called the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious consists of 'psychic structures' or 'cognitive categories' which are not unique to the individual, but rather are shared by all, influencing our thoughts, behaviors, and the way we look at the world. In other words, the collective unconscious is home to the archetypes. As Jung put it:

“From the unconscious there emanate determining influences...which, independently of tradition, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and even a sameness of experience, and also of the way it is represented imaginatively.” (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Carl Jung)

Jung's student, Erich Neumann, used the analogy of physical organs to help illuminate the concept of the archetypes. Just as a body is structured by organs which are largely formed prior to birth, so the mind possesses psychic organs which structure it, i.e., the archetypes. Furthermore, just as the physical organs in most cases operate without one's conscious awareness, so do the archetypes. And most importantly, just as adequately functioning physical organs are essential for a healthy body, a healthy mind is reliant on the proper functioning of the archetypes, as Neumann explains:

“The archetypal structural elements of the psyche are psychic organs upon whose functioning the well-being of the individual depends, and whose injury has



disastrous consequences.” (The Origins and History of Consciousness, Erich Neumann)

An important difference between the physical organs and the archetypes, is that while physical organs can be directly observed with the senses, the archetypes cannot. The existence of archetypes is revealed by the arrangements they produce in consciousness, namely through the manifestation of symbolic imagery.

It is only through the interpretation of the symbols manifested by the archetypes that one can gain an understanding of the archetypal pattern of the human mind. Edward Edinger in his work *Ego and Archetype*, provides an explanation of what a symbol is, with respect to Jungian psychology, by contrasting it to a sign:

“A sign is a token of meaning that stands for a known entity. By this definition, language is a system of signs, not symbols. A symbol, on the other hand is an image or representation which points to something essentially unknown, a mystery. A sign communicates abstract, objective meaning whereas a symbol conveys living, subjective meaning.” (*Ego and Archetype*, Edward Edinger)

While signs, by this definition, point to definite things which exist in the world, symbols do not stand for things which exist in the physical world, but rather point to the existence of unknown elements of the psyche or patterns of the unconscious. As Jung put it:

“Whenever we speak of [symbolic] contents we move in a world of images that point to something ineffable. We do not know how clear or unclear these images, metaphors, and concepts are in respect of their transcendental object...(However) there is no doubt that there is something behind these images that transcends consciousness and operates in such a way that the statements do not vary limitlessly and chaotically, but clearly all relate to a few basic principles or archetypes.” (*Psychology and Religion*, Carl Jung)

It is important to point out that the archetypes do not manifest the exact same set of symbolic images for each person. Rather, the archetypes provide the structure, not the specific form of the symbolic image. The specific form the images take differ from culture to culture and even individually. However, as Jung stated in



the passage just quoted the symbolic manifestation of the archetypes “do not vary limitlessly and chaotically”. Therefore, as one takes note of, and reflects on the symbols as they are manifested in consciousness, knowledge of the archetypal structure of the mind can be obtained. Erich Neumann describes the role of the symbol in producing knowledge of the archetypes in the following way:

“The form of representation peculiar to the unconscious is not that of the conscious mind. It neither attempts nor is able to seize hold of and define its objects in a series of discursive explanations, and reduce them to clarity by logical analysis. The way of the unconscious is different. Symbols gather round the thing to be explained, understood, interpreted. The act of becoming conscious consists in the concentric groupings of symbols around the object, all circumscribing and describing the unknown from many sides. Each symbol lays bare another essential side of the object to be grasped, points to another facet of meaning. Only the canon of these symbols congregating about the centre in question, the coherent symbol group, can lead to an understanding of what the symbols point to and of what they are trying to express.” (The Origins and History of Consciousness, Erich Neumann)

To provide an example of the types of symbols which are manifested by the archetypes we will look at the archetype Jung called the Self. The Self is the central archetype and its role is in unifying the other archetypal structures of the psyche. According to Jung, the importance of the Self archetype coincides with the fact that it is the source of many of the symbols found in religions and myths. Edward Edinger, in *Ego and Archetype*, reveals the wide array of symbols manifested by the Self:

“[The Self is] expressed by certain typical symbolic images called mandalas. All images that emphasize a circle with a center and usually with the additional feature of a square, cross, or some other representation of quaternity, fall into this category...There are also a number of other associated themes and images that refer to the Self. Such themes as wholeness, totality, the union of opposites, the central generative point, the world navel, the axis of the universe. . .the elixir of life – all refer to the Self, the central source of life energy, the fountain of our being which is most simply described as God. Indeed, the richest sources of the



phenomenological study of the Self are in the innumerable representations that man has made of the deity.” (Ego and Archetype, Edward Edinger)

What is interesting to realize is that Jung believed that the various representations of deities in myths and religions, both past and present, were at root symbolic manifestations of the Self archetype. However, Jung did not in any way mean this as a reduction of god to a product of man’s mind, rather as he wrote:

“This is certainly not to say that what we call the unconscious is identical with God or is set up in his place. It is simply the medium from which religious experience seems to flow. As to what the further cause of such experience may be, the answer to this lies beyond the range of human knowledge. Knowledge of God is a transcendental problem.” (The Undiscovered Self: The Dilemma of the Individual in Modern Society, Carl Jung)

Throughout Jung’s life he struggled with the question as to what the ultimate source of the archetypes was. At times he suggested they arose in an evolutionary manner and were subject to change over long periods of time. The following passage reflects this view:

“Man “possesses” many things which he has never acquired but has inherited from his ancestors. He is not born as a tabula rasa, he is merely born unconscious. But he brings with him systems that are organized and ready to function in a specifically human way, and these he owes to millions of years of human development.” (Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Volume 4, Carl Jung)

However, Jung also had sympathy with the idea that the archetypes may be similar to the Platonic forms existing as a type of immutable, transcendental entity. As Jung wrote at one point:

“Whether this psychic structure and its elements, the archetypes, ever ‘originated’ at all is a metaphysical question and therefore unanswerable.” (The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Carl Jung)



Whatever their ultimate source, Jung believed that the archetypes play an immense role in the lives of all individuals. By becoming increasingly aware of the archetypal patterns through the symbols they manifest in the psyche, the individual experiences an expansion of consciousness. Such an expansion, Jung believed, was of paramount importance, for as he put it:

“Man’s task is...to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious. Neither should he persist in his unconsciousness nor remain identical with the unconscious elements of his being, thus evading his destiny, which is to create more and more consciousness. As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.” (Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Carl Jung)