

Carl Jung: What are the Archetypes?



Archetypes Explained

- The word archetype comes from Greek; it means the “prime imprinter”. With respect to manuscripts it denotes the original, the basic form for later copies. In psychology archetypes represent the patterns of human life, the specificity of man. (The Myth of Meaning, Aniela Jaffe)
- Archetypes are ‘identical psychic structures common to all’, which together constitute ‘the archaic heritage of humanity’.
 - Essentially, [Jung] conceived them to be innate neuropsychic centers possessing the capacity to initiate, control, and mediate the common behavioral characteristics and typical experiences of all human beings. Thus, on appropriate occasions, archetypes give rise to similar thoughts, images, mythologems, feelings, and ideas in people, irrespective of their class, creed, race, geographical location, or historical epoch. An individual’s entire archetypal endowment makes up the collective unconscious, whose authority and power is vested in a central nucleus, responsible for integrating the whole personality, which Jung termed as the Self. (Jung – A Very Short Introduction, Anthony Stevens)
- The structural elements of the collective unconscious are named by Jung “archetypes” or “primordial images.” They are the pictorial forms of the instincts, for the unconscious reveals itself to the conscious mind in images which, as in dreams and fantasies, initiate the process of conscious reaction and assimilation.
 - These fantasy [images] undoubtedly have their closest analogues in mythological types. We must therefore assume that they correspond to certain collective (and not personal) structural elements of the human psyche in general, and, like the morphological elements of the human body, are inherited.” (Jung)
 - The archetypal structural elements of the psyche are psychic organs upon whose functioning and the well-being of the individual depends, and whose injury has disastrous consequences:
 - “Moreover, they are the infallible causes of neurotic and even psychotic disorders, behaving exactly like neglected or maltreated

physical organs or organic functional systems.” (Jung) (The Origins and History of Consciousness, Erich Neumann)

The Symbol and the Archetype

- As [the archetypes] are unconscious quantities, they themselves remain irrepresentable and hidden, but they become indirectly discernible through the arrangements they produce in our consciousness: through the analogous motifs exhibited by psychic images and through typical motifs of action in the primal situations of life – birth, death, love, motherhood, change and transformation, etc. The archetype per se stands like a “producer” behind the archetypal motifs, but only these are accessible to consciousness. (The Myth of Meaning, Aniela Jaffe)
- Man needs a world of symbols as well as a world of signs. Both sign and symbol are necessary but they should not be confused with one another. 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. A symbol has a subjective dynamism which exerts a powerful attraction and fascination on the individual. It is a living, organic entity which acts as a releaser and transformer of psychic energy. We can thus say a sign is dead, but a symbol is alive.
 - Symbols are spontaneous products of the archetypal psyche. One cannot manufacture a symbol, one can only discover it. Symbols are carriers of psychic energy. That is why it is proper to consider them as something alive. They transmit to the ego, either consciously or unconsciously, psychic energy which supports, guides, and motivates the individual. The archetypal psyche is constantly creating a steady stream of living symbolic imagery. Ordinarily this stream of images is not consciously perceived except through dreams or through waking fantasy when the conscious level of attention has been lowered. However, there is a reason to believe

that even in the full waking state this stream of symbols charged with effective energy continues to flow beyond the notice of the ego. Symbols seep into the ego, causing it to identify with them and act them out unconsciously; or they spill out into the external environment via projection, causing the individual to become fascinated and involved with external objects and activities. (Ego and Archetype, Edward Edinger)

The Archetypes and Evolution

- “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. Just as the migratory and nest-building instincts of birds were never learnt or acquired individually, man brings with him at birth the ground-plan of his nature, and not only of his individual nature but of his collective nature. These inherited systems correspond to the human situations that have existed since primeval times: youth and old age, birth and death, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, mating, and so on. Only the individual consciousness experiences these things for the first time, but not the bodily system and the unconscious. For them they are only the habitual functioning of instincts that were preformed long ago.” (Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Volume 4, Carl Jung)
- Jung considered the archetype to be an inherited part of the psyche, initially developing through repeated experience of prehuman and human evolution. This conception of characteristics acquired through individual experience and passed on to subsequent generations was originally conceptualized by Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (1744-1829). This view apparently influenced Jung’s early formulation of the heritability of the archetype. While Lamarck’s view has been discredited, and has been supplanted by Darwinian natural selection and Mendel’s laws of inheritance, Jung’s conception of the heritability of the archetype can be explained in terms of natural selection. The fear and fascination with

snakes, for example, appears to be a universal human reaction, which Jung believed may be due to an archetypal pattern which formed through countless aeons of human experience of fear and fascination with snakes, so that the emotional reaction arises in each person's initial encounter with a snake. Alternatively it could be that a mutation involving a fear of snakes proved useful to the species. In the view of natural selection, genetic mutations which enhanced survival meant that the mutations would reproduce and supplant previous generations. Thus archetypes emerged, in this view, in a seemingly random way, but proved useful for the survival of the species. A genetic structure that ensured the survival of an infant (e.g., attachment/bonding, the genetic programming for motherhood, i.e., the mother archetype) would be passed on to succeeding generations and thus becoming universally accessible to a mammalian species, helping to ensure its survival. (Jung and Shamanism in Dialogue, Michael Smith)

Jung's Evolving Ideas on the Archetypes Later in His Life

- In the course of the years Jung constantly attempted new formulations of the "idea" of the archetype and its projected "model" that would be truer to reality. . . The final and crucial corrective, advanced in 1946, was the at first sight the astonishing assertion that the "archetypes ... have a nature that cannot with certainty be designated as psychic". [Jung] drew this theoretical conclusion from the fact that the real nature of the archetype as a content of the collective unconscious remains unknowable, that it is a "metaphysical" entity and as such not susceptible of any final or unequivocal definition. From then on he described it as "psychoid" or "quasi-psyhic". "Psychoid" is an adjectival concept expressing the possibility of something being as much psychic as non-psyhic. Whereas the archetypal model had up till then been described as an antinomy between instinct and spirit, its antinomy now reaches the most extreme tension imaginable between "spirit and matter" or "spirit and world". Previously Jung had been concerned with archetypal configurations in the realm of human thoughts, feelings, intuitions, etc. and in the realm of instinctive and organic life. The concept of the psychoid archetype added an altogether new dimension, for the possibility of an archetypal

“imprinting” of the physical and inorganic world, and of the cosmos itself, had also to be taken into account. Jung went even further and saw in the psychoid archetype the “bridge to matter in general”. The rigorous separation of psyche and world is abolished. In 1951 he wrote: “The deeper ‘layers’ of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat farther and farther into the darkness. ‘Lower down’, that is to say as they approach the autonomous functional systems, they become increasingly collective until they are universalised and extinguished in the body’s materiality, i.e., in chemical substances. The body’s carbon is simply carbon. Hence ‘at bottom’ the psyche is simply ‘world’.” (The Myth of Meaning, Aniela Jaffe)

- In the course of time Jung broadened his concept of the archetype. He recognised that it had also to be seen as the unconscious creative foundation of abstract ideas and scientific theories. “The greatest and best thoughts of man shape themselves upon these primordial images as upon a blueprint.” It was the physicist Wolfgang Pauli who took up this theme and pointed out the influence of archetypal ideas on the inception of scientific theories. “As ordering operators and image-formers ... the archetypes thus function as the sought-for bridge between sense perceptions and ideas and are, accordingly, a necessary presupposition even for evolving a scientific theory of nature.” (The Myth of Meaning, Aniela Jaffe)

Ideas by Other Thinkers Similar to Jung’s Archetypes

- Many other disciplines have produced concepts similar to the archetypal hypothesis, but usually without reference to Jung. For example, the primary concern of Claude Levi-Strauss and the French school of structural anthropology is with the unconscious infrastructures which they hold responsible for all human customs and institutions; specialists in linguistics maintain that although grammars differ from one another, their basic form – which Noam Chomsky calls their deep structures – are universal (i.e. at the deepest neuropsychic level, there exists a universal [or ‘archetypal’] grammar on which all individual grammars are based); an entirely new discipline, sociobiology, has grown up on the theory that the patterns of behavior typical of all social species, the human species

included, are dependent on genetically transmitted response strategies designed to maximize the fitness of the organism to survive in the environment in which it evolved; sociobiology also holds that the psychosocial development in individual members of a species is dependent on what are termed epigenetic rules (epi = upon, genesis = development; i.e. rules upon which development proceeds); more recently still, ethologically oriented psychiatrists have begun to study what they call psychobiological response patterns and deeply homologous neural structures which they hold responsible for the achievement of healthy or unhealthy patterns of adjustment in individual patients in response to variations in their social environment. All these concepts are compatible with the archetypal hypotheses which Jung had proposed decades earlier to virtually universal indifference. (Jung – A Very Short Introduction, Anthony Stevens)

- To a limited extent Jung's archetypes resemble Plato's Ideas. For Plato, 'Ideas' were pure mental forms existing in the minds of the gods before human life began and were consequently above and beyond the ordinary world of phenomena. (Jung – A Very Short Introduction, Anthony Stevens)
- At this point one might be tempted to ask how the world managed to get on so long without Jung's concept of the archetype. It did not. Jung did not lay claim to having discovered the concept – it is a very ancient one. In his essay, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," Jung traces the history of the concept back to antiquity. He informs us:
 - "... the term archetype occurs as early as Philo Judeaus, with reference to the *Imago Dei* (God-image) in man. It can be found in Irenaeus, who says: "The creator of the world did not fashion these things directly from himself but copied them from archetypes outside himself." In the *Corpus Hermeticum*, God is called. . ."archetypal light." The term occur several times in Dionysius the Areopagite, as for instance. . ."immaterial Archetypes" and. . . "Archetypal stone."
 - The term "archetype" is not found in Saint Augustine, but the idea of it is. . . He speaks of "*ideae principales*, which are themselves not

formed, but are contained in the divine understanding.” “Archetype” is an explanatory paraphrase of the Platonic *eidōs*.”

- And Jung concludes, “so far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned, we are dealing with archaic or – I would say – primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times.” In the literature of the late 19th century, which Jung read during his student years, the concept of the archetype was implicit if not mentioned by name. In the field of comparative religion, scholars Hubert and Mauss, referred to “categories of the imagination.” The anthropologist Adolf Bastian, a hundred years ago, predicated “elementary” or “Primordial” thoughts. And Immanuel Kant stated that all human cognition possesses a priori sources of cognition, which seem to transcend the limits of all experience. Jung wrote that from these references it should be clear that his idea of the archetypes – literally a pre-existent form – does not stand alone but is something that is recognized and named in other fields of knowledge. (Boundaries of the Soul, June Singer)