

# ARCHETYPAL SYNCHRONISTIC RESONANCE: A NEW THEORY OF PARANORMAL EXPERIENCE



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## Summary

This article proposes a new theory, archetypal synchronistic resonance (ASR), to explain ostensible paranormal experiences that can be neither accepted as literally construed nor dismissed as mere artifact or error. Drawing on ideas from Jung, ASR holds that ostensible paranormal experience is the result of archetypal-synchronistic functioning. To illustrate this theory, the authors analyze several mutual, emotionally potent, apparently synchronistic experiences involving the Stoic philosopher and Roman statesman Seneca and the concept of reincarnation. The authors discuss phenomenological features of the theory's resonance component and bring to light nontrivial parallels between ASR and Maslow's account of *peak-experience*,

between ASR and Otto's description of the *numinous*, and between ASR and Frankl's construal of *super-meaning*. The authors conclude with a discussion of a competing "error-theory" of the phenomenon, which holds that putative paranormal experiences are products of *apophenia*, the mistaken attribution of intent or meaning to events that in fact are meaningless or purely chance occurrences.

**Keywords:** *archetypes, Jungian psychology, synchronicity, reincarnation, paranormal phenomena, paranormal experience, parapsychology.*

## INTRODUCTION AND CLARIFICATION OF THESIS

Ostensible paranormal experiences have been the subject of continuous scientific investigation since the founding of the British Society for Psychical Research in 1882. During this extensive period, certain categories of analysis have emerged to become salient within both the professional discipline and popular culture. These are exemplified by such standard nomenclature as *extrasensory perception, telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, survival of the human personality after death*, and (in particular, with regard to this article) *reincarnation*.<sup>1</sup>

Scientific evaluation of paranormal claims has reached something of a stalemate in recent decades. On the one hand, parapsychologists and psychical researchers have been unable to convince either themselves or the scientific community at large that there as yet exists an adequate theoretical model for explaining the anomalous phenomena they endeavor to study.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, after many decades, honest skeptics have found themselves in the frustrating position of being unable to explain away as artifact or error the many statistically improbable findings that have been observed under well-controlled conditions and documented in the parapsychological literature (Mishlove, 1980).<sup>3</sup> Conspicuous in its absence hitherto has been any sustained attempt among researchers to break free of this impasse in a way that theoretically integrates both honest skepticism and anomalous evidence. This article seeks to fill that gap.

We postulate that conventional explanations of paranormal experience, from both skeptical and traditional parapsychological camps, are so deeply and inextricably embedded within incongruent conceptual systems or paradigms—each being predicated on an incommensurable set of unspoken (unconscious) assumptions, such

as epistemological norms and ontological commitments—that the aforementioned stalemate will continue indefinitely in the absence of a reasonably thorough process of conceptual analysis, clarification, and eventual revision. The following pages, we hope, are at least a small step in that direction.

This article offers a new approach for resolving this stalemate. It considers ostensible paranormal experience from a naturalistic, depth-psychological perspective. Drawing on some of the ideas of Carl G. Jung, we propose a model which we have dubbed "archetypal synchronistic resonance" (ASR).<sup>4</sup> As we discuss it in the subsequent pages, we highlight how ASR illuminates many of the more baffling experiential aspects of paranormal experience. We also point out some affinities that ASR shares with Abraham Maslow's account of the "peak-experience" and Viktor Frankl's description of the experience of "super-meaning." Furthermore, we address an anticipated objection to ASR—a competing "error theory" that holds ostensible paranormal or synchronistic experience to be the manifestation of the psychological phenomenon known as *apophenia*, the paranoid attribution of esoteric meanings to random occurrences or inherently meaningless events.

## DEFINING KEY CONSTRUCTS

It is reasonable to ask what ASR means and what its distinctive phenomenological features are. The experience's *archetypal* aspect refers to the activation of primordial ideas or universal models (e.g., hero, mother, anima, persona, shadow, rebirth, etc.) that are hypothesized to be native endowments of the prepersonal or collective unconscious, according to Jungian psychological theory (Jung, 1990). Psychological archetypes, according to Jung (1990), are "unconscious but nonetheless active—living dispositions, ideas in the Platonic sense, that preform and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions" (p. 79). He points out that archetypes are not, strictly speaking, inherited ideas but rather "inherited *possibilities* of ideas" (p. 66). Therefore, being innate idea-forming dispositions of the psyche (or basic organizing structures of the unconscious), archetypes are not learned or acquired but rather *actuated* or *released* in response to relevant stimulating events.

At this point, we wish to note that Jung's concepts of archetype and collective unconscious need not be conceived in idealist, mystical, or non-naturalistic ways. For, given his strong developmental

and heritability language, it is not hard to see how Jung's concept of archetype might be preserved within the framework of a psychology informed by evolutionary theory. Indeed, some contemporary Jungians reconstrue or redefine archetypes, using terminology from evolutionary psychology and the Lorenz-Tinbergen ethological theory, as "innate releasing mechanisms"—namely, modules of instinctive behavior that remain dormant or inhibited until the organism is exposed to the relevant "sign stimulus" (Stevens, 2000, 2003). From a Darwinian standpoint, if this ethological construal is correct, then archetypes qua innate releasing mechanisms must have conferred survival advantages of some sort on our evolutionary ancestors who presumably passed them on to us (Stevens, 2000). In other words, the existence of archetypes conceivably has a natural and scientifically warrantable explanation (Stevens, 2000, 2003; Van Eenwyk, 1997).

The personal accounts that shortly follow involve a situation in which at least one operative archetype is the *hero* (the hero in this instance being the ancient Roman philosopher, statesman, and playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who is someone long admired by both coauthors). According to Jungian theory, the hero represents the urge for "individuation"—that is, the inborn drive to become a distinctive, integrated self against the onrush of conflicting, fragmenting impulses (Edinger, 1992).

As we shall see, another archetype implicated in the reported experience below is the *rebirth* archetype, which involves the myth of someone, usually a god or hero, dying and subsequently being restored to life, often in a glorified form. Jung notes that this archetype has concrete expression in many ancient cult rituals that enact the death and rebirth of a mythic hero, such as Osiris, Adonis, Mithras, Demeter, Quetzalcoatl, and Jesus Christ. The archetype evokes from the ritual participants a vivid identification with the hero, such that his or her death and rebirth symbolically becomes their own (Jung, 1990). Jung (1990) theorizes that the rebirth archetype symbolizes the process of individuation as a natural transformation of the personality, an inherent law of psychological development: "Nature herself demands a death and a rebirth. . . . There are natural transformation processes which simply happen to us, whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not" (p. 130). More abstractly considered, the rebirth archetype is an instinctive prefiguration of what is both continuous and restlessly self-transcending in the human psyche (Jung, 1990).

We postulate that archetypes, such as those mentioned above, serve as the central organizing components of a given paranormal experience. The elusive means by which this organization occurs is denoted by Jung's (1976) term *synchronicity*. In his paper "On Synchronicity," written in the mature years of his theorizing, he defines synchronicity as "a *meaningful* coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved" (p. 505). In his subsequent development of this concept, he described it as an "acausal" connecting principle, namely, a subjectively significant relationship between two or more events or states of affairs that appear to be causally independent of each other from the standpoint of current scientific or objective analysis (Jung, 1973). He attributes much of the enduring appeal and influence of archaic divination systems such as the *I Ching* and astrology to this principle (Jung, 1976). All systems of divination, according to Jung, endeavor to discern an occult or empirically hidden conjunction between the macrocosm and the microcosm—the subjective and objective worlds—the awareness of which reportedly enables one to see into the future or into invisible realms of being (Jung, 1973). He speculates that synchronicities

prove that a content perceived by an observer can, at the same time, be represented by an outside event, without any causal connection. From this it follows either that the psyche cannot be localized in space, or that space is relative to the psyche. (Jung, 1976, p. 518)

In addition, there is a mysterious, cognitively jarring, awe-inspiring quality that distinguishes synchronistic experience from most other types of observed conjunctions (Jung, 1976). To witness a synchronicity is to experience being caught up in—or perhaps even overwhelmed by—the presence of a meaningful orderedness that surpasses comprehension. Felt as a shock whose origin is alien and unfathomable, the synchronistic experience resembles in this respect Rudolf Otto's (1959) description of the experience of the *numinous*: "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (p. 10).

Finally, the *resonance* component of ASR refers to the person's experience of likeness, affinity, identification, or otherwise deep empathic familiarity with another (who may be separated from him or her by vast stretches of space or time). Phenomenologically, this resonance quality can be unpacked in greater detail, and we

will do so after presenting some personal examples of paranormal experience.

## REINCARNATION/REBIRTH

Reincarnation or rebirth doctrines figure prominently in many world religions and spiritual traditions. Indeed, in several established varieties of Buddhism, Hinduism, indigenous folk tradition, New Age mysticism, and neo-pagan and Goddess religion movements, endorsement of some or other rebirth or reincarnation notion arguably plays a foundational role in their respective constructions of the self and its world (Garrett, 2005; Harris, 1990; Smith, 1991).

In the scientific, parapsychological literature (Stevenson, 1967), the term *reincarnation* is used as an explanatory concept to account for well-documented instances in which young children appear to have verifiable memories concerning the experiences of deceased individuals. In some instances (Stevenson, 1997), these children are actually discovered to have birthmarks corresponding to the death wounds of the remembered, deceased individuals. This article does not address the type of evidence produced by Stevenson and his colleagues.<sup>5</sup> However, we claim that, in principle, even that strong evidence could be explained within the framework of ASR.

The West has witnessed something of a proliferation of interest in reincarnation during the past few decades. It appears to be a topic that has readily captivated the modern spiritual imagination, regardless of the validity of reincarnation concepts and doctrines. One has only to scan the self-help and spirituality sections of the local bookstore to see ample evidence of this popular interest. Certain books on the subject of reincarnation, such as Brian Weiss's (1988) *Many Lives, Many Masters: The True Story of a Prominent Psychiatrist, His Young Patient, and the Past-Life Therapy that Changed Both Their Lives*, even attain bestseller status from time to time. We suspect that at least part of the widespread appeal of the reincarnation idea stems from its roots in the mind's archetypal functioning and atavistic fantasies about indestructible life.

*Reincarnation* is an anglicized term of Latin derivation that literally means "reinfleshment" or the re-embodiment of a nonphysical

self, soul, or personality that has somehow survived the death of its previous bodily machinery (de Purucker, 1958). In subtle contrast, *rebirth*, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, means "a second or new birth" (and, in figurative use, a "renaissance, revival, or recurrence") but does not logically require or imply the existence of a discarnate self or soul. Some traditions to which we alluded in the preceding paragraph, such as Theravada Buddhism, that disaffirm the reality of an ego or soul entity capable of "reinfleshment" (the doctrine of *anatta* in classical Buddhist thought) may prefer to use the latter English term over the former for this reason (Obeyesekere, 2002; Rahula, 1974; Wallace, 2003).<sup>6</sup> These fine terminological distinctions reveal just a few of the many confusing interpretative and philosophical issues implicated in the rebirth doctrine and alleged rebirth experiences—issues that we hope the following pages will elucidate and make some headway toward resolving.

Although approaching this subject from different backgrounds and theoretical orientations, we share a deep fascination with putative accounts of rebirth experiences and an interest in some of the philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions they entrain. We are admittedly skeptical that reports of the rebirth experience, however sincere, well documented, or internally consistent, are veridical testimony of the transmigration of consciousness from one body to another. At the same time, however, we are convinced that there is something cognitively valuable and edifying to be gleaned from such reports and experiences.

We submit that alleged rebirth or reincarnation experiences—as emblematic of all ostensible paranormal experiences—ought neither to be dismissed as delusory confabulations or defensive self-deceptions nor accepted literally and uncritically. A third alternative is available. We might profitably regard alleged reincarnation experiences as signs of archetypal-synchronistic activation, manifesting in, for example, uncanny impressions of a kinship, resonance, or identification with a long-deceased individual.

Using personal experiences to illustrate this idea, we will next attempt to show how certain concepts from analytical psychology can illuminate some of the latent meanings and values of the reincarnation experience without thereby committing one to belief in the transmigration of souls or even belief in the survival of the personality beyond death.

## THE SYNCHRONICITIES THAT INSPIRED THIS ARTICLE

*Mishlove's Initial Synchronistic Resonance With Seneca*

In the late 1980s, Jeffrey Mishlove was put into a hypnotic trance by Dr. Martin Rossman for the purpose of demonstrating the principle of the "inner healing advisor." This session was videotaped for the *InnerWork* series produced by Mishlove's production company, Thinking Allowed Productions (Rossman & Mishlove, 1988). On returning to normal consciousness, Mishlove described the imagery he experienced. He stated that he encountered a man wearing a toga who identified himself as the Roman Seneca referred to previously. After a detailed discussion (in the trance state), Mishlove asked this figure how he should proceed to work with him as a "healing advisor," and Seneca responded by saying, "Study my life." At this point in Mishlove's life, he was consciously aware of only miniscule details regarding the life of Seneca some 2,000 years earlier. Rossman, the hypnotist, had made no specific suggestions pointing toward Seneca (nor any other specific figure) as Mishlove's "inner healing advisor."

Interestingly, Seneca's last moments allegedly exhibited some of the features of an archetypal hero transcending death—in this case, a moral hero bravely facing his imminent end and overcoming his attachment to life rather than a savior or god-man magically resurrected. Seneca lived during the reign of Emperor Nero, whom he had tutored and advised in statecraft during the early years of the young emperor's reign. After retiring in 62 C.E., Seneca eventually lost favor with Nero and in 65 C.E. was accused of being involved in a conspiracy against the emperor (an event known as the Piso Conspiracy), for which he was ordered to either commit suicide or suffer a more degrading and (in Roman eyes) shameful execution by the centurion's sword (Hadas, 1958). Good Stoic that he was, Seneca is said to have accepted his sentence graciously and severed the arteries of his arms without protest.

Tacitus reports the last scene:

Seneca calmly requested tablets for making a will, and on the centurion's refusal turned to his friends and declared that as he was prevented from showing gratitude for their deserts he would leave them his only, but fairest, possession, the pattern of his life; if they heeded this they would win reputation for good character and the reward of steadfast friendship. (cited in Hadas, 1958, p. 7)

Tacitus depicts Seneca in this scene as a man who heroically retains his philosophical integrity, his compassionate concern for his friends, even his deportment and civility up to the bitter end.

On reading this passage, Mishlove noticed that the message he received from the Seneca figure in hypnosis, "Study my life," resonated synchronistically with Tacitus's account of Seneca's last words. He does not remember reading this passage at any point prior to his hypnotic experience with Dr. Rossman. Mishlove did make a point of studying the life of Seneca. On subsequent occasions, also, Mishlove was surprised to hear from two independent, purported psychics that they believed him to have been Seneca in a past lifetime.

*Engen's Synchronistic Resonance With Seneca*

Eighteen years later, in the summer 2005, Brendan Engen had one of the most unusual experiences of his life. His wife, who is interested in the idea of reincarnation, bought him a "past life" reading with a trance-medium as a present for having graduated from his doctoral program in clinical psychology. The medium supposedly "channels" various extradimensional entities that offer spiritual and practical guidance to his clients. Engen was intrigued by the gift but was doubtful that this telephone appointment would offer anything beyond entertainment value. As it turned out, the reading left a powerful impression and was thought-provoking. The entity allegedly "channeled" by the trance-medium made a number of interesting claims about Engen's past and present lives. He reported that in one of Engen's "past lives" he had lived in a rural area near Rome a little less than 2,000 years ago and that he had been a devoted student of the Stoic Seneca.

A remarkable feature of this report is that Engen had had, long before meeting this medium, an abiding interest in the prose writings of Seneca and other ancient Stoic philosophers. In fact, several years earlier, he had written, for a graduate seminar, a paper that compared ancient Stoicism to some of the ideas and philosophical commitments of modern cognitive therapy. One might say that Seneca functioned for Engen as an archetypal hero.<sup>7</sup> However, Engen had not mentioned this particular connection during his telephone appointment with the trance-medium. This, also, was an instance of synchronistic resonance.

Engen was also told by the trance-medium that he would "meet Seneca again" in the future or, rather, meet the person who had been Seneca. He was, in fact, told that this person was Mishlove. Engen had enjoyed watching episodes of Mishlove's *Thinking Allowed* interview program on public broadcasting, but he had had no prior contact or correspondence with Mishlove and knew very little about him at that point.

Engen was bemused by his reading from this medium and was definitely of two minds about it. His more objective or rationally inclined and tough-minded nature dismissed the medium's report as emotionally stimulating but factually unsupportable, even unfalsifiable, and therefore unworthy of further attention and reflection. Yet his more tender-minded, imaginative self was enchanted by these mystical claims, entertained the possibility that it might be true. He wondered if he really had been this student of the Stoic Seneca in a "previous incarnation" and would meet this teacher again. He wondered if he were presented with some important "karmic lessons" from that previous life, as the medium had claimed, that he yet needed to fulfill to develop spiritually. He wondered if rebirth is real in the most robust sense of the word, and this life and this world he now knew are not the last. These and relevantly similar possibilities left Engen in a state of perplexity.

Confident that he had had an experience that was vaguely meaningful although still largely enigmatic, Engen decided to contact Mishlove by e-mail and inquire as to his thoughts about the reading and its contents. The day following the reading, Engen found Mishlove's e-mail address through an Internet search. He composed and sent an e-mail to Mishlove introducing himself and detailing the above account; he was particularly interested to see whether Mishlove had felt any affinity with Seneca and, if so, how he interpreted that affinity in light of the trance-medium's claims. Because the content of the e-mail was admittedly odd and Engen was a complete stranger to Mishlove at that point, he did not expect a response.

### *Synchronicities Between Mishlove and Engen*

Mishlove received Engen's e-mail while he was at a conference in Madrid, Spain, about to take a brief vacation in Cordoba, the city of Seneca's birth. This was the third synchronicity in this series. Describing his deep parallel interest in Seneca, Mishlove noted that

he has felt a spiritual connection with Seneca for nearly 20 years. Mishlove added that he was familiar with the trance-medium and his claims but that he similarly remained deeply skeptical and made mention of his own rendering of such affinities. He pointed out that he was much more comfortable with a Jungian interpretation than with thinking of reincarnation in a literal way. He added that receiving Engen's e-mail just as he was embarking on a journey to Cordoba seemed a confirmation of the synchronistic perspective. Thus began an interesting correspondence between the authors on the topic of rebirth and ASR that continues to this day.

As fate would have it, Engen experienced a fourth synchronicity just a day or two after receiving Mishlove's first e-mail. He traveled to Walnut Creek, California, from his home in San Francisco and browsed through a bookstore before meeting friends at a nearby restaurant. While there, he found and purchased a used book entitled *The Looking-Glass God*, by Nahum Stiskin (1972), which compared conceptions of divinity in Shinto, Taoism, and contemporary Western philosophical theology, a topic that seemed strangely interesting. Opening and examining the book more closely some time after his purchase, Engen was quite startled to discover the following inscription from the previous owner on the frontispiece page: "Jeffrey Mishlove / MIND'S EAR / Received 5-12-73." Interestingly, this book had been previously owned by Mishlove and somehow ended up in a Walnut Creek bookstore and ultimately in Engen's hands—and all this very shortly after making first contact with Mishlove by e-mail!<sup>8</sup>

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS AND EXISTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

After examining and comparing their own "reincarnation experiences," the authors have noted several distinct experiential aspects. That is to say, an alleged rebirth experience can be said to be "resonant" in the following ways.

The experience is *inspiring*, mobilizing intense interest in the experience. One may feel a vital connection to the past figure and be highly motivated, perhaps even compelled, to learn as much one can about the past figure with whom one feels the resonance. There is often an onrush of excitement and enthusiasm about the experienced resonance, such as we described several pages above.

The experience involves a sense of *uncanny familiarity*. Often a feeling of déjà vu, which one cannot adequately account for in terms of one's background, memories, and current self-knowledge, is powerfully triggered on learning details (even apparently insignificant ones) about the past figure with whom one is resonant, such as the person's name, major life events, professional trade, and so on. For example, long before Engen had his reading with the trance-medium and gave any thought to rebirth concepts or the other topics addressed in this article, he felt a particular interest in and affinity with those portions of Seneca's writing that he addressed to Lucilius (e.g., his essay on providence, his *Letters on Morality to Lucilius*, which are epistolary essays on practical ethics, and his *Natural Questions*, which are philosophical treatises on nature and statements of his version of Stoic physics and cosmology).

It also conveys a related quality of *intimacy at a distance*. In addition to the inexplicable déjà vu feeling noted above, there is also the perception of a "good fit" or "match" between one's own life and personality and that of the resonant figure from the past. As one continues investigation into the life of the resonant figure, one may discover some interesting parallels between one's own life history and that of the past figure in terms of personality dispositions, values, key life traumas, ambitions, talents, career and professional attainments, relationships, or even facial architecture and physical appearance.

The rebirth experience is also commonly experienced as *edifying*. The past figure with whom one feels resonant may appear, say, in spontaneous fantasies or in dreams, as something of a healing guide, spiritual teacher, or wise counselor, in the same way that Seneca figured in Mishlove's fantasy during the hypnotic session mentioned earlier. Alternatively, just studying the figure's life or extant works may prove personally instructive and relevantly action-guiding ("Study my life . . .").

Finally, the experience is *numinous* in the sense described earlier (Otto, 1959). That is, there is an impression of directive forces immeasurably larger than the self at work, whose meaningfulness is real but inscrutable. However, this numinous aura need not imply the presence of a personal god, protective spirit, anthropomorphic intelligence, or other supernatural entity; in such moments of numinous encounter, one may even regard the aforesaid theistic and supernaturalistic constructs as obsolete and distorted—merely historically and culturally conditioned phrasings of a natural ecstatic experience or peak experience (Maslow, 1970). In fact, the numinous

object often has a disturbingly impersonal, non-humanlike quality whose source eludes our categories or our powers of conceiving it. For instance, it might strike the person experiencing it as an impersonal truth, principle, realm of being, or "suchness" (Maslow, 1970). One may sense that one is in the midst of "something I know not what," for which one can find no suitable philosophical or theological reference points and that can only be put into figurative or symbolic (archetypal) or otherwise highly abstract language. In short, one may find oneself frustratingly confined to poetic or metaphysical phrasings in one's best attempts to communicate the experience. We are reminded of Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2001) admonishment that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.

The preceding description of the ineffability of the numinous element in the paranormal experience is redolent of logotherapist Frankl's (1986) discussion of "super-meaning"—that is, the meaning of the world or of existence considered *as a whole*. Frankl explains,

We cannot begin to question the "purpose" of the universe. Purpose is transcendent to the extent that it is always external to whatever "possesses" it. We can therefore at best grasp the meaning of the universe in the form of a super-meaning, using the word to convey the idea that the meaning of the whole is no longer comprehensible and goes beyond the comprehensible. (p. 31)

His account suggests that when we experience the numinous, we are (usually unconsciously) bumping up against a "super-meaning," namely, a meaning that cannot be defined or grasped because its referent encompasses the very source of meaning itself. Frankl points to the therapeutic, redemptive, and indefatigably hopeful existential implications of such an encounter:

It is self-evident that belief in a super-meaning—whether as a metaphysical concept or in the religious sense of Providence—is of the foremost psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic importance. As a genuine faith springing from inner strength, such a belief adds immeasurably to human vitality. To such a faith there is, ultimately, nothing that is meaningless. Nothing appears "in vain"; "no act remains unaccounted for" (Wildgans). The world appears to manifest something akin to a law of the conservation of spiritual energy. No great idea can vanish, even if it never reaches public circulation, even if it has been "taken to the grave." In the light of such a law, the drama and tragedy of a man's inner life never have unfolded in vain, even when played out in secret, unrecorded,

uncelebrated by any novelist. The "novel" which each individual has lived remains an incomparably greater composition than any other that has ever been written down. Every one of us knows somehow that the content of his life is somewhere preserved and saved. Thus time, the transitoriness of the years, cannot affect its meaning and value. Having been is also a kind of being—perhaps the surest kind. And all effective action in life may, in this view, appear as a salvaging of possibilities by actualizing them. Though past, these possibilities are now safely ensconced in the past for all eternity, and time can no longer change. (p. 33)

### THE PROBLEM OF APOPHENIA

Frankl's (1986) therapeutic endorsement of a faith for which there is "ultimately, nothing that is meaningless" (p. 33) and Jung's (1976) assertion that alleged synchronicities show that "the psyche cannot be localized in space, or that space is relative to the psyche" (p. 518) have met with plausible criticism. Recent psychological research suggests that reported experiences of synchronicities, such as those recounted in the authors' reports above, might be more economically explained as basic errors of interpretation rather than veridical perceptions of occult conjunctions. These erroneous interpretive processes constitute a psychological phenomenon known as *apophenia*—that is, the mistaken ascription of meaningful connections to coincident occurrences that are unrelated or merely accidental, even in cases of statistical improbability (Brugger, 2001). As a rival to ASR, these critics would propose an "error-theory" of apparent synchronicities, according to which paranormal experience is the result of an invalid construing tendency, something like a design flaw in human cognition. This error theory, they would claim, has the decided advantage of being more conceptually parsimonious because it does away with the need to posit any transcendental meanings, said to belong to a world of nonphysical dimensions while at the same time supervening on observable cause-effect relationships.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the all-too-human tendency to construe subjectively significant coincidences as synchronistic may in fact reflect nothing more mysterious than a "glitch" or breakdown in reality testing. An illustration of this kind of processing glitch is found in the life of Bishop James A. Pike (1913–1969) who, shortly after the suicide of his son, reported picking up meaningful messages in such things as a stopped clock, the angle of an open safety pin, or the juxtaposition of postcards lying on the floor (Christopher,

1975). Pike judged that these common household items were conveying actual messages about the time that his son had shot himself (Christopher, 1975). Additional salient examples are readily found in clinical settings with persons undergoing a paranoid psychotic episode. For these unfortunate individuals, the most innocuous of phenomena—for example, the position of a cup on a coffee table, an upholstery pattern, the sound of street traffic—can readily take on diabolical and terrifying significance. Is it possible that the ostensibly synchronistic experiences of the authors were mere apophenic "glitches"?

We hold that it is indeed possible. Visionary states and other vivid episodes of archetypal activation provide no guarantee of objective truth, validity, or even psychohygienic value and certainly no conclusive indication of "gnosis," theophany, or revelation, as Jung (2002) himself was well aware. Such experiences are deeply ambiguous, both cognitively and morally. They can obsess, distort, and figuratively hijack human consciousness as much as they enrich and liberate it in other circumstances (Corrington, 1997; Edinger, 2002; Jung, 2002; Neher, 1996).<sup>10</sup> Eisenbud (1992) has documented cases from his psychiatric practice in which synchronicities and other paranormal events have acted in the service of an individual's unconscious self-destructive tendencies. Mishlove has observed similar cases in his own psychotherapy practice.

We acknowledge that mere subjective conviction about allegedly meaningful conjunctions is not evidence of genuine synchronicity, as cases of psychotic delusion and hallucination make apparent. We acknowledge, too, that Jung spoke in this vein not as a psychologist but rather as a philosopher and to that degree took something of a leap of faith because his concept involves not only states of the psyche but also allegedly meaningful correspondences between those psychic states and events in the external world. These concerns notwithstanding, we remain unpersuaded that the phenomenon of apophenia can adequately account for all ostensibly paranormal experiences.

Of course, we are unable to defend this claim on the basis of observational considerations and criteria alone. Yet error theory proponents find themselves in a similar position—unable to discredit all ostensible synchronistic experiences according to empirical decision procedures *tout court*. This state of affairs brings to light the unavoidable theory-ladenness of our judgments about the evidence and, more to the point, about what validly constitutes "evidence" (Feyerabend, 1993; Rorty, 1981). Unawareness of one's

set of background beliefs and guiding assumptions leads theoretical opponents to the kind of figurative stalemates mentioned previously, in which each camp inevitably accuses the other either of begging the question at issue or of excluding relevant evidence in advance of reflective appraisal.

Our assessments of theories are informed not only by a conscious and methodical thinking and deliberating but also by a rich network of implicit, unconscious, "latent" background beliefs—that is, assertions about the way the world is, which we may not, in a given instance, even be aware that we endorse (Haack, 1995; Rorty, 1981). For this reason, it has been observed that debates concerning a particular theory's evidentiary claims can naturally mutate into debates about competing frameworks of background beliefs or competing epistemic systems (paradigms; Kuhn, 1977; Rorty, 1981). One assumptive philosophical issue that figures prominently in the present controversy and could easily escape notice is the immemorial disagreement between *nominalist* and *Platonic/realist* theories of meaning—that is to say, the conflict between the view that abstract ideas, values, and meanings have no independent existence but exist only as names or words (nominalism) and the view that ideas, values, and meanings have reality in their own right and cannot be reduced to denotative speech or other verbal behavior (Platonism/realism).

In a short article, of course, it is not possible to adequately address the deeper theoretical and philosophical issues that motivate this debate, but we think it important to point out that the present dispute is more complex than it might first appear. To be sure, attributing meaningful connections to what are in fact intrinsically meaningless coincidences is a lamentable, even potentially dangerous error of judgment. We believe that it is also important to avoid making the opposite possible mistake—construing connections that are authentically significant and valuable as meaningless or false.

## NOTES

1. The relationship between these topics and the field of humanistic psychology has been explored regularly in the pages of this journal (Criswell, 2000; Feinstein, 1998; Frick, 2001; Keutzer, 1984; Krippner, 1994; Krippner & Murphy, 1973; Levitt, 1999; Parapsychological Association, 1989; Tart, 1992; Taylor, 1991; Teguis & Flynn, 1983; Vaughan, 2002; Walsh, 2001).

2. This conclusion is based on several informal polls taken on e-mail discussion groups of professional parapsychology researchers.

3. As the Pyrrhonian skeptic Sextus Empiricus first pointed out many centuries ago, "dogmatic skeptics," of course, are faced with the logically impossible task of proving a negative (Hallie, 1985). This creates something of an interesting asymmetry in their debates with empiricists, who are armed with data but lack a theory.

4. This particular terminology was developed by Mishlove in his attempt to explain various attributions of reincarnation associated with his person by different psychics and mediums. He was influenced in this effort by Dr. Jean Houston's (1996) explanation of an uncanny psychological connection with the 5th century neoplatonic philosopher Proclus. In addition, Mishlove was also influenced by Dr. John Palmer's (1979) presidential address to the Parapsychological Association, during which Palmer suggested that *synchronicity* might be an alternative explanation with the potential of supplanting traditional parapsychological terminology.

5. In fact, Stevenson and his colleagues would certainly maintain that the personal experiences recounted in this article fall far short of their standards for scientific evidence suggestive of reincarnation.

6. Naturally, the question arises as to what could possibly be reborn, according to such Buddhist thinkers, if not a discarnate soul or self. In a short article, it is not possible to address these issues adequately without venturing too far afield from the article's central issues. Suffice it to say that many Buddhist proponents of the anatta doctrine submit that what is really "reborn" from one life to another is not a substantial self or reified ego but rather a supervenient or second-order pattern of volitional and noetic states and dispositions that are more or less distinctive of a given personality (Thera, 1996). Interested readers are referred to Thera's (1996) philosophically sophisticated and plausible treatment of this question from a Theravada Buddhist perspective (pp. 63-66).

7. With regard to this particular archetypal function, Engen notes that he has been most drawn to (and generally profited most from) reading Seneca's writings on Stoic philosophy during periods of dislocation or existential indecision or periods when he felt himself to be unfocused or scattered. Revisiting and studying Seneca's ideas and his biography often brought renewed order and moral clarity to whatever confusing circumstance he happened to find himself in at the time. From the standpoint of analytic psychology, what Seneca has represented for him at such times was an integral and centered self or a self that had become conscious of its own values, potentials, and realizations against the sway of "psychic entropy"—pathogenic forces of unconsciousness and dissolution (Edinger, 1992; Jung, 1990).

8. Engen later learned that Mishlove had been given this copy prior to interviewing the author about three decades before on his KPFA-FM radio program, *The Mind's Ear*, in Berkeley, California, which is not far from Walnut Creek. As it turned out, mention of the book's rediscovery elicited interesting e-mail correspondence between the authors about Jung's discussion of the "godhead archetype," a psychic content perhaps only vaguely or remotely implicated in the synchronistic experiences that are reported above but relevant to the very principle of synchronicity. For

considerations of space and relevance, the authors do not discuss this archetype in this article.

9. Although initially plausible, arguments from Occam's razor (i.e., the admonition, "Do not multiply explanatory entities beyond necessity in your theorizing") seem either trivial or question-begging in the final analysis; for what constitutes evidential "necessity" is precisely the question at issue.

10. With respect to pathological forms of archetypal functioning, Anthony Stevens theorizes that these actually result from a frustration of the transcendent function—that is, a failure of the ego and the self archetype to align as they were designed to, usually because of intense narcissistic wounding as a child and its associated, psychically unmetabolized and redirected aggression. See Stevens's (2003, pp. 139-171) chapter "On the Frustration of the Archetypal Intent."

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