The PSYCHE: ITS TRUE NATURE and PLACE in MODERN REALITY

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Introduction

C.G. Jung devoted his personal and professional life to the reality of the psyche. But just what sort of reality is the psyche? Jung believed that the psyche had the same qualities that nature once had: immediacy, spontaneity, numinosity, “otherness”, divinity, intrinsic meaning, and self-disclosing truth. In this way Jung proposed a solution to the age of mythlessness that we all are born into today. While we cannot find divinity (or Meaning) in nature as we once could, we can indeed find it within the unconscious psyche.

Springing from the works of Sonu Shamdasani and Wolfgang Giegerich, I will suggest in this essay that the reality of the psyche is demonstrably not what Jung believed it to be. Instead we will discover that the true nature of the unconscious psyche is completely different from what Jung staked his life on. Jung’s conception of the psyche turns out to be a failed project to rescue myth or natural divinity. We will also discover that the true nature of the psyche is a fabricated reality – not in the sense of a lie, but in the sense of a reality that simulates positive reality! So we could call this reality “simulated reality” as well.

Is this then the end of Jungian Psychology? Far from it!

The true nature of the psyche that Jung in fact manufactured (but disavowed) foreshadows the reality in which we are increasingly embedded through the unstoppable advance of our technological civilization. This reality is commonly called virtual or simulated reality, and we are quite familiar with it although we have not yet comprehended its reach and determining influence on our lives. In fact it is fast becoming our reality today in the modern world.

Once simulated reality is correctly understood we are in a position to find out what the soul’s telos is, working as it does determinatively in the background of our existence.

Discerning the Reality in Which (and As Which We Exist)

Having his pulse on the spirit of our times, Jung came to understand that we are in the precarious situation of a transformation in reality. He referred to this as a movement from the Piscean Age to the Aquarian Age. (Jung, 1965)

The magnitude of such a happening can be appreciated by noting the proliferation of dreams that have a clear apocalyptic character today. He also understood the immense difficulties in comprehending this shift from within it! He likened this difficulty to a fish’s inability to comprehend water.

When we look back into history, (i.e. history from the soul’s perspective), into bygone ages, we can discern the reality in which the people of that time lived. We can do this because we are now on the outside of that reality, whereas the people of that time were on the inside. They inhabited that reality and therefore took it for granted.

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For example we know that during the Medieval and Renaissance periods, by studying the literature, art, poetry, and philosophy of those periods, it was simply a matter of fact that reality consisted in (Tillyard, 2011):

... an ordered Chain of Being... in the process of its various transformations...
Angels: the Stars and Fortune: the Analogy between Macrocosm and Microcosm: the Four Elements: the Four Humours: Sympathies: Correspondences: and the Cosmic dance – ideas and symbols which inspired the minds and imaginations... of the Renaissance. (Back Cover)

We discern this Chain of Being, not from what various people were saying about it, (where it becomes a content of discussion, say) but rather how people lived their lives from its determinative effects (their tacit assumptions about life, the syntax of their speech rather than the content). Dante’s Divine Comedy was written from within this cosmology, unquestioned by Dante. This Chain of Being may be called the Aristotelian cosmology to mark its great antiquity. (Barfield, 1962)

A Psychological Glance into Our Technological Civilization

Since the early 1800’s, there seems to have been a rupture in this reality. One powerful indicator of this rupture is the discovery of history as history. Most cultures seemed to include a historical perspective but only since the late 1700’s did we begin to examine the nature of history and to develop theories of history. (Giegerich, 2007) It seems that consciousness now lay on the outside of history, no longer within it. A subjective stance was now in place that is over and against the flow of history and indeed nature, as our sciences demonstrate convincingly to us. The Chain of Being was broken, and the Aristotelian cosmology was overcome and remains so today.

The world in which and as which we exist today is called positive reality. This philosophical term points to a reality we inhabit in which subjective consciousness stands alone in a universe of positive facts, i.e. facts that have no depth, interiority or consciousness of their own (which alone guaranteed a Chain of Being). (Comte, 1988) They are surface only. This reality is the ground that has led to the extraordinary success of science as a discipline of knowing. We have learned to manipulate matter in its positivity down to the level of atomic structure, leading to our present technological civilization. Such manipulation is of course also the conduct by which we can truthfully assert that this is our present reality. Just as with the Aristotelian Cosmos, our daily conduct, not what we say about ourselves or the world, is the guarantee of the actuality of the reality we inhabit today. So an individual may claim today that she still believes in or perceives divinity in nature, but her actual conduct in which she daily manipulates matter to her own ends (driving car, shopping at malls, watching television etc.) transparently demonstrates the logical obsolescence of such ideas.

To achieve this degree of mastery over matter, nature had to be emptied out of Meaning, or, disenchanted! So our age has also been called the Age of Meaninglessness, bringing with it of course intense anxieties, a fact that Jung well knew (Jung, 1980):
Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. Thunder is no longer the voice of a god nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man’s life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbors a great demon. Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to thing, like stones, springs, plants and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious. (par.585)

This emptying out of Meaning from all things requires that the *imaginai nature* of objects is destroyed. The *imaginai nature* of an object is the vehicle in which and by which we can perceive depth, interiority and meaning, truth and beauty of that object – its interiority, its soul dimension. Destroy that and we are left with surface only, positivism.

Our technological civilization is the vehicle that is accelerating this process.

**Simulated (Virtual) or Fabricated Reality in Technology**

At this time millions of people are *logging on* in order to participate in virtual or simulated reality (*Second Life, Sim City, interactive games* etc.), a product of our technological civilization. They enter a realm of pure image and interact with other images, as an image (avatar). Now we do this also on a daily basis when we dream or when we read a book. You could say that the empirical *I* becomes the fictional *I*, much like Alice is portrayed in Wonderland. So what is different with this technological wonderland? When Alice dropped into Wonderland, she left the categories of thought that belong to empirical reality behind and became fictional herself, evaluating this new reality within its own terms (remember her long conversations with the caterpillar and Humpty Dumpty for example). In fact when she did at the end employ an empirical category of thought, “O, you all are just a pack of cards!” she moved her out of fictional reality back into empirical reality where she became a little girl once more. But while she was inside the fiction, each character opened up to its own interiority and depth, its own truth.

When we enter *Second Life* for example, this does not happen. Instead we enter as the *empirical I*, carrying with us all our empirical categories of thought. We know and do not forget that the avatar we meet on the street is a construction, like our own avatar, an “object”, like empirical objects, only in the form of an image *positivized*. These images have no inner depth, or interiority. Any imaginal nature has been destroyed altogether. In other words we do not relate to a user’s avatar in the way Alice relates to the imaginal figures of Wonderland. No one asks a Celtic warrior avatar about his initiation: his battles, his losses, his wisdom etc. Images are treated as empirical objects, related to by the empirical ego, *from within the fantasy*, with its empirical categories of thought.

This is exactly analogous to lucid dreaming in which the fictional ego
“wakes up” within the dream into its status as empirical ego and applies its categories of thought to what it then sees: “O, these are all just symbols or dream images. I can do anything I want. I'll try flying etc.”

This is the psychology of simulated or fabricated reality! Fabricated reality is a reality that simulates positive reality in the realm of image itself (the imagination). Images are regarded with categories of thought that properly belong to empirical reality, but regarded as such from within imaginal reality itself.

**Jung’s Unconscious Psyche: Fabricated Reality**

Now that we have some sense of just what kind of reality “fabricated reality” is, we can turn to Jung’s discovery (or invention, as we shall see) of the unconscious psyche which occurred over a course of several years. He encountered imaginal figures who taught him the reality of the psyche, among other things. All this of course is recorded in the newly published Liber Novus, edited by Sonu Shamdasani, a prominent historian of psychology, particularly Jungian psychology. (Jung, 2009)

Through these frequently painful encounters with imaginal figures, Jung was convinced that he had discovered a new reality which had the qualities of self-presentation, immediacy, authenticity, divinity, spontaneity, Meaning. Being so convinced, Jung was then able to embark on a lifelong project of rescuing Meaning, or restoring Myth to an age which suffered from its loss. (Giegerich, 2003)

He felt he was in a position to do so since he believed that he had found those missing imaginal qualities that nature once was, turning up again within the human unconscious psyche. Those qualities were, once again: immediacy, autonomy, self-disclosure of depth and truth, and Meaning. To put it mythically, the gods that disappeared from nature turned up again within the depths of the human psyche and so we may recover Meaning by turning to the unconscious psyche. Jung committed himself to this project for his entire life.

Now, some fifty years later we can ask some questions about this project of Jung’s:

1. Did he succeed in his project of recovering Meaning for our Age and
2. Was he correct i.e. does the unconscious psyche have those qualities that he claims? Jung’s success in influencing the larger culture can be best evaluated by his own statement, near the end of his life (Shamdasani, 2003):

   *I had to understand that I was unable to make people see, what I am after. I am practically alone... I have failed in my foremost task, to open their eyes to the fact, that man has a soul and there is a buried treasure in the field and that our religion and philosophy are in a lamentable state...why indeed should I continue to exist?* (351ff)

Jungian psychology today has little to say to the larger culture which pretty much ignores it. I say this even knowing that significant figures from within the field (Hillman, Sardello, Bosnak, Samuels, Tacey etc.) are making valiant attempts to “turn towards the world”, away from the private temenos of the clinical setting.
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The most significant outgrowth of Jungian psychology that is gaining attention in politics, particularly environmental politics is ecopsychology. This movement is saying all the right things, raising hopes for a restored, re-animated relationship with nature, thus developing a psychological basis for the environmental movement, a basis that stands or falls on Jung’s conception of the unconscious psyche (Tacey, 2010):

_The basic premise of ecopsychology is that we have a deep-seated layer of our psyche in which we remain “at one” with the world. This layer has been covered over by civilization, education, and modernity, but it is rescuable from the dark dungeons of the past, or from what Jung would call the deeper reaches of the unconscious._ (337)

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully develop the arguments that show that the unconscious psyche as conceived by Jung and indeed by the psychology of his time is a _fabricated reality, not_ a discovery of a natural object as Ellenburger also believed. The arguments are laid out convincingly in Sonu Shamdasani’s scholarly work: _Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology_. (op. cit.) In this book he says:

_Psychic Reality is par excellence, the fabricated real. This is but to extend William James’ remarks... that its (i.e. the psyche’s) most remarkable ‘property’ was is capacity to present itself according to whatever theory one held about it._ (11)

On this same page he gives citations that further articulate how the fabricated real is constituted.

Wolfgang Giegerich takes up this idea of the fabricated real more fully in his review of Shamdasani’s book. (Giegerich, 2004) This review also bears careful reading and he summarises just what the fabricated real is:

_The question emerges for us how and why the unconscious did come to be conceived as a natural object (thereby opening up the project of rescuing god, or Meaning). The precondition was the great revolution from the metaphysical to the positivistic, scientistic stance at the beginning of the 19th century... the unconscious is the return... of the memory of and longing for metaphysics under the conditions of positivity._ (209)

In 2009, Shamdasani et al published Jung’s _Liber Novus_, the _Red Book_. This book gives us amazing insight into the very formation of Jung’s conception of the unconscious psyche. This would then be the definitive source that could settle for all time the question of the true nature of the psyche. A review by Giegerich appeared soon after in _Spring Journal_. (Giegerich, 2010)

This review establishes conclusively the nature of the psyche as the fabricated real. A certain preparation however, is needed in order to know how to approach this article and indeed the _Red Book_ in order to grasp Giegerich’s arguments and finally his conclusion.
When we dream and then wake up, the usual response on the part of the waking or empirical ego is to identify with the stance of the dream ego, and then to base one’s understanding of the dream on that particular stance. Furthermore, many people base subsequent action in the world on the dream ego’s stance in the dream. However, It would be a fatal methodological mistake of the part of any psychologist of the soul to also take up the stance of the dream ego as the only one to consider when working with the dream:

*Psychologically it is a grave mistake to privilege one element of a dream, fantasy, or psychic experience, for example the I, taking it literally by setting it up as a given existing outside the fantasy...* (372)

In other words, when we approach a dream or indeed the Red Book as a soul phenomenon, we must regard equally every aspect of the fantasies in order to understand them psychologically.

The results of doing just that are startling indeed and Giegerich’s long article is very persuasive in that it shows that “empirical” Jung identified solely with the I that appears within the fantasies, when he drew his conclusions about the nature of the psyche. But if we pay equal attention to what Jung himself says *as the internal other*, i.e. as the other also appearing within the fantasy, a completely different picture emerges. I’ll focus on just one aspect that demonstrates the nature of fabricated reality.

As Giegerich shows (398 ff), Jung repeatedly, from within the fantasies, meets the figures appearing to him with a denial of their reality: within the fantasy where the I is merely one figure among others in the same fiction, Jung says, “surely you are symbols”, “I am convinced that *Izdubar* is not at all real in the ordinary sense but a fantasy...” As Giegerich says, “Jung enters his fantasies with the categories of external reflection, namely with the distinction between fantasy and reality. Inside his fantasies, he views them from the outside and doubts the reality of their figures. It is as if a novel tried to pull the rug out from under its characters as only imagined, or as if we, while dreaming, turned around to the wild animal or to the murderous criminal chasing us and said to them, “you are only symbols”. (402)

This means that Jung developed the capacity to enter his fantasies as the empirical I, able to view, from within his fantasies, *other figures as positive objects!* In this way he was able to simulate outer positive reality, *from within the fantasies.*

This move is necessary for his project of rescuing Meaning.

If we now recognize the failure of such a mission, as Jung himself seemed to recognize near the end of his life (see quote above), we are in a much better position to appraise Jung’s accomplishment in the light of the technological developments that we see today, as I describe at the beginning. The unconscious psyche is a fabricated reality, an internalization of our spiritual heritage, under conditions of positivity. Giegerich shows how Jung internalized the images of the natural or mental cosmos that formerly surrounded us, thereby constructing an “inner” that simulates empirical reality. It was a long, extraordinarily painful process, to the point of torture and madness. It involved a kind of turning inside out of reality, or rather a turning outside in.
More Than a Game

To appraise Jung’s real accomplishment, rather than clinging to his failed mission, we are now in a position to ask where in the world we see a process of turning the outside world into an “inner” world, under conditions of positivity. I have already mentioned the games millions of people play today on the Internet. We could also mention television, which is also a giant engine for this process of fabricating a reality that is a simulation of outer reality and into which we enter, again under conditions of positivity. The world no longer needs the human being to be the locus of this fabricated reality, as in Jung’s time. The new locus lies in technological civilization itself. And we are all participating in it.

What is the soul’s telos in all this, if we accept that the soul is indeed behind all such developments, as it most certainly was with Jung, who by the way never lost his faith in that fact, even though he learned later that his project was a failed one? Understanding the soul’s telos requires a thorough knowledge of the historical processes that display the soul’s movement, knowledge of what constitutes a soul phenomenon today and the capacity to enter modern soul phenomena today, as psychologists, in order to release the essence of those phenomena, their truth.

In the remaining space here, I can offer hints of the soul’s telos, in the form of quotes taken from Giegerich’s essay (Giegerich, 2007)

*Television has the job of establishing simulation as the new form of truth and reality. What is simulation? It is Schein, show, display, mere appearance as an end unto itself, that is, an appearance that by definition does no longer want to be the appearance of something.* (304)

*Television watching is the ritual by which consciousness is constantly trained in the new, real idea that the real place of the world is the private home or, in more general terms, that the real place of reality as such is cyberspace, and that virtuality or simulation is the new form of truth. And Television is the Great Transformer. It brings about the transmutation of the real world. It already revolutionized politics, it changed sports, it is affecting the judicial system.*... (308)

A study of history from the soul’s point of view reveals that this realization of simulated reality is the culmination of a soul movement that has lasted thousands of years, i.e. since a reflecting consciousness came into being (Ibid, 213 ff). But such discussion also lies beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps a final quote may serve to give us courage not to withdraw too easily from such disturbing conclusions about the soul’s telos today (Giegerich, 1996):

*Inasmuch as owing to our longstanding stubborn refusal we are very, very far removed from understanding what is happening to us in this process, for the time being we cannot even dream of a real comprehension. It is probably a task for generations to work towards a situation where this process has fully come home to consciousness. So what ‘not withholding our feeling appreciation and thinking attention from this process’ would mean for us today most immediately is that we allow ourselves to be affected, indeed, wounded, by it:...*
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that, even though it pains us, we let it into our hearts, opening ourselves to it. The task is to (keenly and intelligently, not emotionally = sentimentally!) suffer the fundamental loss this process inflicts upon us and to allow it to work on us, as a kind of chisel that objectively and factually, not merely subjectively, works off our inflated egocentricity and subjectivism, our personalistic mode-of-being-in-the-world and along with it the entire 'anthropological fallacy': The consciousness, or real Notion, of the 'objective psyche' must be realiter and objectively acquired through a slow process of painful experiences. It must be more than an "idea" or "representation" in our mind that we subscribe to. It must conversely have inscribed itself into us. We come to a real knowledge only by having 'learned the hard way'. Subjective understanding and agreeing is not sufficient. The statute of Zeus, pâtei máthos (which might be rendered as 'conscious through suffering'), is still valid today.

References


