

# METAPHOR, METAPHYSICS, AND SPHOTA: COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS AS CO-CREATOR

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines two metaphors for the collective unconscious used in Carl Jung's writing, Basic Postulates, looking at the metaphysical truisms at their base. Then, it considers the idea of metaphor as a modality by which the collective unconscious is a co-creative force in the depictions offered of it using the symbol of language and drawing on ideas of sacred sphota.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*metaphor, sphota, collective unconscious, archetypes, Carl Jung*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The primacy of image in Jungian thought is without question and the psychology of Jung non-existent without the symbol. In his writing, the symbol modality most often discussed is a form of visual experience, in dream, waking fantasy, hallucination, hypnagogic states, and active imagination. Metaphor is another version of image used with a ubiquity making it nearly invisible and therefore less explored. Usually, we treat metaphor as a poetic device or figure of speech and lose sight of how the words we choose shape our relationship with an idea, but I assert this is influenced by the unconscious, particularly when talking about it. Susan Rowland (2005) addressed several of the kinds of metaphors Jung uses to articulate his concepts, including orientational and ontological depictions. She says, "metaphor is more than an evidential, it is the plastic material by which argument is constructed [1]". Often, when Jung explained the collective unconscious and its contents, the archetypes, he was working to be clearly definitional. Yet, at others, he uses metaphor to deepen the understanding of these concepts, offering a way to convey the underlying tenets. Using metaphor theory, this paper will examine Jung's metaphorical language in Basic Postulates for the collective unconscious and the fundamental metaphysics which must be true for the complicated theory to work as presented. Turning then to Sphota theory, I will explore the premise of metaphor as a modality, similar to dream and active imagination, by which the collective unconscious co-creates its illustration.

## **2. METAPHYSICS AND METAPHOR IN JUNG'S THOUGHT**

Jung did not consider himself a philosopher but rather a scientist, a man of medicine concerned with the betterment of the lives of patients. Yet, in all theories there are implicit philosophical premises which must and should be considered when evaluating it and are often expressed metaphorically. While Jung was a psychologist addressing the nature of the human psyche his concepts are transdisciplinary, and we find them being used in fields as diverse as ecology, physics, and film. For this reason, negotiating our way into the

truths necessary for these notions to be organized principles helps create a structure of their general features.

Metaphysics fell out of fashion as a means of philosophical inquiry during the 19th century cultural turn toward scientific materialism. When the only things that mattered were what we could see and could be tested, wondering if there was any fixity of meaning to words became obsolete and even ridiculed. Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed that to inquire about meaning was itself basically meaningless because, "for a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language [2]". What makes something real, how it works, and how it fits in with other general and abstract ideas are an important part of evaluating Jung's ideas.

Metaphor theory believes how we think and engage with others and the world is shaped by metaphors, which are pervasive, and therefore often invisible, elements in defining our conceptual system. This reliance on imagistic language to understand and describe reality is a parallel premise to Jung's insistence that the psyche is grounded in symbol and image. Metaphor is symbolic language in which one thing is used to explain something entirely different. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, use the example of the metaphor "Argument is War" to demonstrate this idea [3]. An argument is not really a war but using this turn of phrase tells us how we experience it and gives us an image for that experience, it also gives a hint to part of its essential nature. If we were to describe argument as a dance, a different image and feeling about argument predominates, the experience of argument changes and a new element of its reality is exposed. Examining metaphorical language gives us a new vantage point from which to examine a proposition.

## 2. THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

Before we look at the metaphors chosen for this paper, let's get familiar with Jung's definition of the collective unconscious. The philosopher and Jungian analyst John Mills believes the core metaphysics of the collective unconscious may be understood as an "orienting principle underlying all aspects of mental life," a system which provides "structure and ontological order" to life, a "repository" where the past is "inherited, retained, and preserved," this past consists of every human experience from "the prehistory of mankind," as a "highly adaptive, organic biological system, and a "matrix" or "web" of psychic involvements [4].

In a lecture given to the Abernethian Society at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in 1936, Jung described it this way,

"The collective unconscious is a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition [5]".

He goes on to say that the contents of the personal unconscious are forgotten and repressed, personal in nature, but the collective unconscious content has never been conscious, and are inherited, "Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of complexes, the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes [5]"

Later he says the collective unconscious is a "second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals [5]". From this definition, we come away with some key conceptual acquisitions. First, the psyche is

multi-layered and not merely personal. Second, one layer is best understood by what it is not. Third, one part of the psyche is considered suprapersonal. Fourth, both parts of the psyche are containers with contents. Fifth, the suprapersonal psyche, universal and identical in all persons, must exist outside the temporal conditions of time and space. Sixth, the suprapersonal psyche influences the personal psyche. We are left with an understanding that the collective unconscious is a substance in Jungian theory. In this sense substance is tied to the *ousia*, Greek for ‘being’, and *substantia* in Latin, “something that stands under or grounds things [6]”. These philosophical substances are the fundamental objects of reality in a conceptual system. Keeping these points in mind, let’s now examine the two metaphors used by Jung to describe the collective unconscious.

## 2. FIRST METAPHOR

Basic postulates was first published in the *Europaische Revue* during July 1931 and included in the text *Modern man in search of a soul* in 1933. In it, Jung lays out the epistemological basis for his reasoning on the psyche. He criticizes scientific materialism and makes comparisons between “primitive” spiritual life and the foundational beliefs in analytical psychology. The unconscious is addressed and presented as a psychic function prior to ego consciousness.

Finally, Jung concludes that “psychic reality still exists in its original oneness” and can be experienced at that level of consciousness once the belief is discarded that only one side exists and the other is repressed [7]. About midway through, he describes the collective unconscious in two very different metaphors. In the first he says,

“If it were possible to personify the unconscious, we might think of it as a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at its command a human experience of one or two million years, practically immortal [7]”.

We start by parsing out the language into types of metaphors beginning with Jung’s ontological premise about entity by employing the terms collective and combining. After making clear we are not able to personify the collective unconscious, he appears to go forward in so doing anyway. Yet, the phrase collective human being, makes it clear there is an ontological dissimilarity to a person. In this sentence, it appears Jung uses “collective” to connote a gathering together or aggregate of entities rather than one entity which may be an aggregate of parts. Similarly, collecting any number of parts increases the size of an entity. Therefore, however, substantial the collective unconscious may be, Jung clearly shows it’s larger than any one psyche. His second ontological metaphor is the use of the phrase “combining the characteristics of both sexes”. Here, Jung sets the first parameter for the aggregate. “Combining” is a bringing together or amalgamation of diverse qualities. It’s a union of those things Jung believes are distinct between the sexes. It is safe to presuppose that through merger the qualities would lose any intrinsically “gendered” values. This synthesis of characteristics allows the outline of the collective unconscious to take shape as an androgynous-like substance. It also balances the first part of the sentence by returning us to a human perspective, even while manifesting in a container not purely human in nature. Jung’s ontological metaphors give us a sense of a substance created from multiple others yet with familiar human qualities.

Jung moves then to an orientational metaphor which itself changes our conceptual direction away, again, from any human comparison with the idea of transcending the most

common human experiences. By “transcending youth and age, birth and death” the collective unconscious is above or beyond participation in or encounter with temporal existence. The space/time argument inherent here is similar to the one made in the I-Ching to the very first hexagram, representing heaven, where the way of the universe [Tao] is, “a law running through end and beginning,” and time is considered nonlinear and a nonobstructive [8]”.

As if to demonstrate this ancient maxim, Jung immediately reverses direction by stating the collective unconscious has at its “command a human experience of one or two million years. To be in command is to be in a strong position, in domination. Not a participant in the human life but having some authority in relation to it that once again is directional as it transcends, is outside or above, time. While authority does not directly signify a first cause, there is room to suggest that something with command can affect a causal relationship to some degree. Jung’s choice of “one or two million years” is telling since the earliest ancestor in the Homo genus is a few million years old. Furthermore, it’s illustrative of the constantly changing nature of both the human psyche and the collective unconscious directly tied to it. While the experience available to the collective unconscious is vast, it appears to be only as long as the earliest version of homo species possible. This links the origin of it near the development of our ancestors. No clarification about causation is provided in this metaphor, the collective unconscious as first cause of human consciousness or humans as first cause for it. Although the idea that it transcends all time related activities, “youth and age, birth and death”, places it in a position to be a creator now, regardless of its first cause.

Jung concludes this sentence with the words, “practically immortal” sealing this first metaphorical description with a virtual reality. Here is a substance which is very close to being unable to decay and yet some condition must exist which makes it possible for it to end. One can venture this condition stems from its relationship to the human, just as the description dissected also shows a turning toward, and away, from the human.

As a result of examining the first of our two examples, we find the description of the collective unconscious is itself metaphorical for the condition of enantiomeria, or the propensity of things to change into their opposites. Jung’s style of writing here provides the sensation of a tide, being drawn to shore and then pushed away, as the words chosen both draw us into and press us away from the familiar human psyche. His ebb and flow gives the sensation of running in both directions simultaneously, of the energy of change on its edge between one thing and its opposite.

## **2. SECOND METAPHOR**

Our second example differs in length and word choice but is separated from the first by only four others. It says, “The collective unconscious, moreover, seems to be not a person, but something like an unceasing stream or perhaps ocean of images and figures which drift into consciousness in our dreams or in abnormal states of mind [7]”. Jung doubles down on the claim the collective unconscious is not a person by representing it as performative in nature, within a non-human container.

As an “unceasing stream or ocean”, the collective unconscious becomes perpetual, eternal and continuous, unlike the individual human psyche during an individual point in time but reminiscent of the constantly changing nature of the psyche and collective unconscious over time as expressed in the prior metaphor. Represented as a stream or ocean, this idea is reinforced. Water on earth existed long before life. These two forms of water are also in

constant motion, unlike a lake or pond. In terms of the ocean image, Jung leads us to believe that this constant moving flow of images and figures, notably he includes both words leaving the impression there is a difference between them, is out of the control of the environment in which it occurs and yet deeply affected by it, as the ocean is by the moon. Today, we can see a comparison between the cultural effect on the ocean temperature and the increasingly frightening consequences for the earth due to human behaviour and the effect of human denial of the power of the unconscious on the individual psyche.

The next part of the metaphor provides a modality by which this stream/ocean of images/figures interacts with the individual psyche. If you've ever sat next to a stream and watched as leaves drift by, at times getting stuck against the sides until the force of the water frees it, or the ocean as waves toss seaweed and shells on the shore rolling them forward and backward over and over, you can appreciate how Jung imagines the collective unconscious communicates images and figures with the psyche. In this example, its nature is represented as random and rather undirected, yet unstoppable and to which we and the images are at its mercy. In this sense, Jung moves far from a personified picture.

Finally, the example ends with the phrase, "states of mind" denoting two, dreams and abnormal, and inferring a third, consciousness. The idea of mind continues to be complicated in modern science and philosophy. Here Jung makes it known that he considers even the times when the person is less aware of their world and experiences, less able to communicate and reason, just as much a part of psyche as the ego-directed state of awareness. Furthermore, the word "state" is also a verb and an adjective. The fluidity of the meaning of the word challenges the commonly held notion that the psyche is a stable condition and is in reality more like the fluidity of the water. With water, there is the surface, which is visible, and the depths, which when entered are virtually a foreign landscape. In the same way, when the mind dreams or enters an "abnormal" state, it too is in a country not its own, at times confusing and but entirely unfamiliar.

## 2. COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS AND SPHOTA

How well do these metaphorical descriptions of the collective unconscious match with the definitional one? John Mills gives a useful synopsis of Jung's metaphysics, which he calls a "metaphysics of experience [4]". In both examples, we see that Jung remains consistent to his definitional portrayal of the collective unconscious as multi-layered and suprapersonal, operating both as a container and as a substance, universal and identical in all persons, and existing outside the temporal conditions of time and space while still influencing the personal psyche.

Dreams, hallucinations, and hypnagogic states are all modalities by which, Jungian psychology believes, the collective unconscious expresses itself or is expressed. I believe metaphor is another modality in use, under some conditions. Writers experience moments while trying to convey a subject or idea when a fully formed imagistic depiction, or metaphor, appears suddenly and unbidden in their mind. It is given to them from something other than their consciousness. In these moments, according to Guy Beck, author of *Sonic Theology*, the Hindu idea of sacred sphota illustrates "the mysterious manner by which meaning is conveyed in sentences" offering an attitude of reason to the "intuitive perception of the Absolute [9]". Here, sound allows for meaning as it is crafted by the utterance itself.

The Sanskrit root of sphota is sphut, meaning, "to burst forth or when applied to language a bursting forth of illumination or light [10]". In the two examples of Jung's metaphors used

here, there is an essence of that bursting forth energy, the blossoming of understanding meaning from the enigmatic but non-personal psyche. The metaphors erupt on the page, and we might infer they did as well in his mind. We get the sense that Jung's ability to express the idea of the collective unconscious was a result of a sudden unfolding of meaning via the images provided from the subject in question. Described by Harold Coward as the "transcendent ground in which the spoken syllable and the conveyed meaning find themselves unified [10]", sphota represents the stream of images and figures, the immortality of meaning and its elevation above the human conditions of life and death yet intimately involved in their lives found also in the depictions of the collective unconscious in Jung's metaphors.

Vak, one of the earliest goddesses and the mother of speech and language, is also linked with the goddess of learning, Sarasvati. The mantra about Vak and language is recited when students first meet their guru or great teacher [11]. The primacy of language in the elevation of the spirit to an understanding of the eternal is linked even in mythology.

In Sanskrit, the meaning of words also comes from something intrinsic, and 'shed light' on what they denote rather than create meaning which is then imposed upon the subject referred to. Beck says, "Probably the simplest and clearest image for the meaning of sphota is that of a light bulb flashing on when one understands an idea [9]". This is similar to the metaphor writers and artists often use when describing those numinous moments when the idea, story or other creation appears fully formed as if channeled from something beyond their own psyche.

In the teachings of Lao Tzu and Confucius a somewhat similar idea exists about image where, "every event in the visible world is the effect of an 'image', that is, of an idea in the unseen world [8]". The I-Ching is a visual system with metaphorical depictions of meaning. Jung's description of the collective unconscious is quite similar to the first of the 64 trigrams. Ch'ien is the trigram with 6 unbroken lines, the most solid state, and it represents "primal power [8]". It stands for creation but is persistently moving into the second trigram of receptivity. It is "unrestricted by any fixed conditions in space" and therefore always in motion and time is considered "the basis of this motion" (Ibid). A metaphor used to express the maxim is "There appears a flight of dragons without heads [8]". Dragons are symbolic for "the electrically charged, dynamic, arousing force that manifests itself in the thunderstorm [8]". As headless forces of change, they are above the psyche but have an energetic effect on it. Here again we find a metaphor, expressed in the symbolic language most likely to "burst forth" in a certain culture, where the idea of something similar to the collective unconscious is represented. This is another example of metaphor used as illustrative of a complicated concept, which due to its similarity in its precepts to others echoed around the world, through time, and now in Jung's description appears to be a modality of the co-creative nature of the collective unconscious.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

After investigating these two metaphors for the metaphysical qualities they are expressing, what questions are we left with? First, neither metaphor answers the question of first cause or progenitor. This question is left to other writings, and future depth psychologists. There are equally persuasive arguments for cause in both directions, collective unconscious and psyche. One might even venture to wonder if they are equally co-creative of each other. Another aspect in need of further study is the premise, made by this author, that there is a co-creative and participatory nature of the collective unconscious. More examination

of this idea by considering other similar metaphorical depictions, both in depth psychology and across cultural writing, can help either support or discredit the notion. Either way, the powerful ability for metaphor to expose a concept in a revelatory manner, creating new access points and deepening our understanding of its meaning, remains apparent.

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