

Theurgy from the Perspective of Evolutionary Neuropsychology

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I. Introduction

I will argue for two theses. First, that much of the practice and phenomenology of theurgy can be understood from the perspective of contemporary evolutionary neuropsychology. Second, that this understanding implies the psychological value of contemporary theurgical practices.

II. Theory

Let's begin with the science. Evolutionary psychology studies psychology from an evolutionary perspective, that is, as a system of behavioral adaptations that have contributed to the flourishing of *Homo sapiens*. To this end, it relies on comparative studies between humans and other animals, especially our closest primate relatives. While much of this work relies on the data of individual and social behavior, evolutionary neuropsychology seeks to understand the neurophysiological processes that subservise these behaviors. In this, comparative studies between human and non-human nervous systems are also informative. Evolutionary psychology is sometimes controversial — often for ideological reasons — but its basic premise is straight-forward: humans are animals, and like other animals their behavior has evolved through time.

The connection between evolutionary neuropsychology and analytical psychology is less obvious and less appreciated, but essential for its relevance to Neoplatonism. The nexus is the *collective unconscious*, one of the key concepts of analytical psychology as developed by Jung. He identified it with the unconscious structures regulating behavior that are common to humankind, that is, to innate psychological adaptations, which he compared to instincts. The structure of the collective unconscious is just as much a property of *Homo sapiens* as are the instincts and the anatomy of the brain, and so the collective unconscious is also called the *objective psyche*. Therefore evolutionary neuropsychology and analytical psychology are studying the same phenomena, but from different perspectives. Evolutionary neuropsychology takes an *exterior* perspective, studying overt behavior and neurophysiological processes, while analytical psychology takes an *interior* perspective, investigating the phenomenology of conscious experience and inferring from it the structure of the collective unconscious.

One of the most familiar concepts from analytical psychology is that of an *archetype*, a term that Jung borrowed from Neoplatonism. Archetypes refer to

relatively independent components or modules of the collective unconscious that correspond to relatively independent behavioral adaptations. Jung explicitly described them as the psychological aspects of human instincts. That is, an archetype refers to a typical pattern of motivation, perception, thought, and action that affects conscious experience when an innate behavioral adaptation — or instinct — is activated.

Jung also explicitly compared the archetypes to Platonic Ideas. They are innate psychological structures — or ideas — that are universal — because common to all humans — and eternal, because they do not change, at least on the timescale of human history. They are not fixed images, but dynamical Forms, which are invariant, but regulate the unfolding of psychodynamical processes in time. In this they are somewhat like mathematical equations of motion or computer programs that control interactive processes. They are static structures that constrain or influence dynamical processes

We know from analytical psychology, but also from evolutionary psychology, that many of the archetypes regulate human relationships. They regulate our interactions with our children, parents, mates, and those outside of the family group. They regulate love and sex, aggression and defense, dominance and submission, cooperation and communication, and so on. Unconscious processes cast us into various roles and project complementary roles on the people in our lives. These archetypal roles appear in the universal characters of myth and legend, such as the Father, the Mother, the Innocent Child, the Sage, the Hero, the Wise Maiden, the Seductress, the Priest, the Magician, the Trickster, and so on. They also populate the pantheons of many religions, and archetypal structures and relationships are the root of mythology.

In sum, the archetypes are dynamical Forms or Ideas, eternal and unchanging, universal and transcendent over individuals, commonly experienced as divine Beings. These and many other common characteristics, which time prevents me from mentioning, convince me that the archetypes correspond to the *noêta* and that the collective unconscious corresponds to the noetic hypostasis.

More accurately, the noetic realm corresponds to the abstract structure of the human genome, which indirectly encodes the archetypes, whereas the projections of the *noêta* into the soul and body correspond to psychodynamical processes and the neurophysiological processes that subserve them. The abstract genetic code is in itself an inanimate object of contemplation and understanding, and therefore *noetic*. The developed abstract structures in the brain, which implements archetypal behavior in a living individual, are regulators of psychological activity, and therefore *noeric*.

Jung distinguished the collective unconscious, which is common to all humans, from the *personal unconscious*, which is particular to each individual. Analytical

psychologists explain that repeated activation of an archetype in an individual's life generates a network of associations that adapt the archetype (and the underlying instinct) to the individual's biography and life circumstance. Jung called these structures of the personal unconscious *complexes*. Contrary to popular usage, there is no implication that complexes are pathological, and in fact Jung stresses that they are normal components of a healthy psyche, for they are necessary to adapt universal archetypes to particular lives.

Since complexes grow out of an archetypal root by processes of sympathy and contiguity, like their parent archetypes they are generally personified. In fact, complexes are sometimes called sub-personalities, and Jung stresses that they can behave like autonomous personalities in the unconscious. For these and other reasons these sub-personalities have much in common with *daimôns*. Both complexes and daimons reside at the level of the soul, are descended from archetypal deities, and mediate between the divine and human realms, that is, between the archetypes and consciousness.

When an archetype is activated by some external stimulus or interior state, it begins regulating motivation, perception, thought, and action to fulfill some adaptive function, such as care-giving, mating, defense, competition, or cooperation. The activation of the archetype is modulated by individual associations, that is, by its surrounding complexes, and the activation of the archetype manifests through complexes that adapt behavior to individual circumstances. All this is simply the archetype and its complexes doing their biological job.

Often this job is to cast you in some role with respect to others, and so you feel a compulsion — or at least a tendency — to act in certain ways and to expect the others to play their parts in an archetypal scenario. In psychological terms, we may say that you are “possessed” by an archetype or complex — that is, by a god or daimon — and that you have “projected” a role on the others, which they may accept unconsciously, thus becoming possessed themselves. Alternately, the other person might consciously or unconsciously reject the projection, resulting in a conflict of archetypes. These might seem like peculiar and pathological situations, but in fact they are quite common, nearly ubiquitous. Whenever we find ourselves falling into stereotypical patterns of behavior, or whenever we find interpersonal relations to have an emotional charge that does not make rational sense, possession and projection are often the reasons.

I think the parallels with Neoplatonism are obvious, and if I had more time I could present much more detailed correspondences. Furthermore, I do not think these parallels are coincidental, but they arise from the fact that when people engage in a systematic phenomenological exploration of the structure of the psyche, they arrive at similar conclusions, for the simple reason that that structure is objective. The ancient Platonists, from at least Plotinus onward, conducted their

phenomenological experiments and assembled them into the theoretical frameworks that we find in Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, and the others. When Jung and his colleagues investigated the objective psyche, they found the same structure, which they expressed in the theoretical framework of analytical psychology. Now we are beginning to integrate their investigations into the scientific theories of evolutionary psychology and contemplative neuroscience.

I expect that some of you are thinking, “This is just a typical crude materialist reduction of sublime spiritual phenomena.” Or that I am claiming that the experiences of contemplation and theurgy are merely psychological, “all in the head” — effectively illusions. However this is not Jung’s conclusion, nor is it mine. He said that as we go deeper into the collective unconscious, it dissolves into neurophysiology, and beyond that, into physics. But this is physicalism only if we deny the reality of subjective experience, which we must not do. Rather, in the most profound depths, the objective psyche coincides with the objective physical universe, in what Jung called the *Unus Mundus*. I would put it only a little differently. The elementary stuff of the universe is psycho-physical, which, as Galen Strawson has argued, is the only consistent way to account for a universe in which both consciousness and physical phenomena exist, that is, for a universe that has mutually irreducible interior and exterior aspects.

Indeed, as the physicist John Archibald Wheeler argued, timeless, eternal mathematical and informational relationships are sufficient to constitute a universe; there is no requirement for a stuff, a *hulé*, for the relations to be about. “I have no need for that hypothesis.” Therefore, even from the perspective of science, The All does seem to be a unified plenum of psycho-physical eternal Ideas, or mathematical abstractions, that define the relations of abstract quantity, space, and time that are sufficient to constitute our world of Becoming.

III. Practice

I would like to turn now to the practical implications of this view, especially as it relates to contemporary Neoplatonic spiritual practices. They relate to the archetypes, which are by definition universal, but manifest in consciousness in the garbs of particular cultures and in the guises of our personal daimons. Jung stressed that the archetypes cannot be observed directly, and are known only indirectly by means of their manifestations in consciousness; we see them in a glass, darkly. However, evolutionary psychology provides an additional, exterior perspective from which to explore the archetypes common to all people. For each species' instincts are adapted to the environment in which it has evolved, which biologists call its *environment of evolutionary adaptedness*. And so we can learn something about the archetypes by looking at the environment of evolutionary adaptedness of *Homo sapiens*. Modern humans emerged in Africa approximately 200 thousand years ago, and for at least 95% of that time we have been hunter-gatherers. The human genome has not changed very much over the last five or ten thousand years, since agriculture was invented, and therefore our behavioral adaptations and our archetypes are those of hunter-gatherers living in small nomadic clans of several dozen. The gods that rule our lives today are the same gods who helped our paleolithic ancestors to survive in those ancient circumstances.

This presents us with a dilemma. On one hand, the behavioral adaptations that helped our ancestors survive for the last 200 thousand years — and for much longer before that — are not necessarily behaviors that are suited for modern life. On the other hand, we cannot simply repress the archetypal patterns of behavior wired into our brains. These gods cannot be banished and will punish us if we try to do so. To put it in psychological terms, repressed archetypes do not go away, but eventually erupt in ever more primitive forms, as analytical psychologists have observed. For example, repressed sexuality eventually will be acted out in the crudest and least acceptable ways. Repressed aggression may lead to a violent explosion or self-destructive behavior. What then can be done to honor these ancient gods while conforming to contemporary social norms? We must negotiate a *via media* between the demands of our ancestral gods and contemporary ethical principles, both personal and societal. This is where the contemporary application of theurgy may be beneficial.

To live a fully human life, to become *téleos* (or complete), we need to unify and harmonize the conscious and unconscious halves of our souls. Therefore the fundamental goal of analytical psychology is the process that Jung called *individuation*, that is, becoming *individuus* or undivided. It is a process of psychological integration, which in particular brings unconscious processes into conscious awareness to achieve a harmonious union of the conscious and unconscious minds. Furthermore, individuation strives to make conscious contact

with the unified root of all the archetypes, which has been called the Highest Self, the Highest Soul, the God-image in the individual soul, and the Inmost Flower of the Soul. Jung stressed that it is mysterious and paradoxical, because it unifies all the opposites, transcending being and not-being. It is beyond discursive reason and can be approached and grasped cataphatically only by means of metaphors and symbols. It is The Unspeakable One, *to Arrhêton Hen*.

How is this contact accomplished? Analytical psychologists and ancient theurgists are in complete agreement: it is by means of symbolism. Symbols can express the discursively inexpressible and connect the logically unconnected. Therefore Jung calls the symbol-making faculty of the mind the *transcendent function*. In theurgy a symbol is something in the *seira* (the lineage) of a god, whether it is an animal, plant, or stone, a mineral or a myth, a hymn or poem, a drawn character or even a number. Analytical psychology shows us that a symbol is a component of an archetype or complex, which can activate the archetype or complex, or by which the archetype or complex manifests in consciousness. But this is the same idea in different words. A symbol serves both to invoke a god or daimon and to signal the arrival of a god or daimon.

Some symbols are inherent in the phylogenetic structure of an archetype and are therefore universal, common to all humankind. Other symbols are in the personal associative network that constitutes a complex or sub-personality arising from the archetype. These symbols may be personal, cultural, or common to some other group. In effect they invoke or signify a *specific* daimon that is engendered by a *generic* god, but associated with the individual or group.

Let me turn now to some theurgical operations and their contemporary incarnations. First is the *sústasis*, or liaison with a god or daimon. In this practice symbols are used to invoke a divine being into the theurgist's presence to facilitate communication. In analytical psychology the corresponding process is called *active imagination* and is often used to engage dream figures or complexes, which are autonomous sub-personalities in our psyches. The contemporary practice tends to depend more on immaterial symbols than on material symbols, but some psychologists recommend the use of special clothing or a regular *temenos* for the operation. Gods and daimons — that is, archetypes and complexes — are invoked, for example, by calling their appearance to mind along with the dream context in which they appeared. The practitioner may invoke the spirit out loud or in their mind. Subsequent meetings can be arranged through the use of agreed upon symbols, tokens, invocations, ritual actions, and so forth.

The next step is a kind of surrender, waiting for some signs of animation in the surroundings, some evidence of the presence of an autonomous spirit. Then the negotiation begins. Analytical psychologists stress the importance of treating the spirit with respect while retaining your moral autonomy. This is the way we negotiate an accommodation between contemporary life and our paleolithic gods

and their daimons. This is the way we wrestle with an angel or daimon.

Based on the preceding description, we can understand the practice of *empsúkhôsis*, or animation of an icon. The use in the image of symbols — whether universal, cultural, or personal — serves to activate an archetype or complex and invites projection of the corresponding god or daimon onto the image. In effect, the symbols tune the image to receive particular divine energies, analogous to painting an object to reflect a particular color in the white light that illuminates it. Therefore the animated icon becomes a vehicle to facilitate communication with the spirit.

If *theôsis* (or deification) is the goal of Neoplatonic spiritual practice, and more generally if *homoíôsis theô* — likeness to god — is the goal of *all* ancient Greek philosophy, then we should ask what these goals mean from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. Theurgical practices facilitate individuation by enabling an accommodation and assimilation between our conscious minds and the personal and collective unconscious. This process, the *epistrophê*, advances from the daimons of the personal unconscious, to the archetypal gods of the collective unconscious, toward their root and source, the archetypal Self, the God-image, The Unspeakable One. The *telos* — the end — of these practices is integration of all components of the psyche, transpersonal as well as personal. The result is a psychologically undivided person, *homo individuus*, who understands — experientially as well as intellectually — their role in the life of the universe and in particular in the evolution of humankind — their “phylogenetic destiny” — and can engage the spiritual dimension to fulfill that destiny better.

In other words, the goal of unification with The One is a better, more conscious integration of our individual lives into Universal Providence. On the one hand this is accomplished by explicit engagement with eternal archetypal forces — the gods — and The One from which they proceed. This helps us to choose and act in conformity with our species’ phylogenetic destiny while maintaining our moral autonomy. On the other hand, by consciously understanding and emotionally appreciating our place in this destiny, our lives acquire transpersonal and transcendent meaning.

Therefore, one principal effect of *henôsis* (or unification) is to be more at home in the cosmos, by experiencing your own time-bound life as an expression of The One, and to embrace that role. A second effect is more comprehensive psychological integration by means of conscious integration into this life of hitherto unconscious traits, talents, attitudes, and abilities — the powers and gifts of the gods and their daimons. In this way we live our lives more fully, as wholes rather than as divided and often warring sub-personalities, whose presence and influence is often unacknowledged. In this way we benefit ourselves as well as the wider world, non-human as well as human.

IV. Conclusions

In sum, I hope that I have convinced you of the value of viewing Neoplatonic spiritual practices, and in particular theurgy, from the perspective of evolutionary Jungian psychology. I hope I have shown that this perspective does not diminish the intellectual beauty or spiritual depth of Neoplatonism, but rather supports the value and contemporary relevance of the Neoplatonic way of life by showing its consistency with contemporary science, which provides theoretical support. Neoplatonism, in turn, can contribute to a more holistic science that incorporates spiritual experience. We do not have to choose between being a mystic or a scientist. This viewpoint leads toward a comprehensive understanding of the universe and our place in it, acknowledging and unifying both material and spiritual phenomena, the exterior and interior perspectives. The means to this end is a system of contemporary spiritual practices growing out of venerable Neoplatonic tradition. “*Prâxis* is the ladder to *theôria*,” as Gregory the Theologian said. Thank you for your attention and indulgence.