

Synchronicity

C H R I S T O P H E R B O N D S

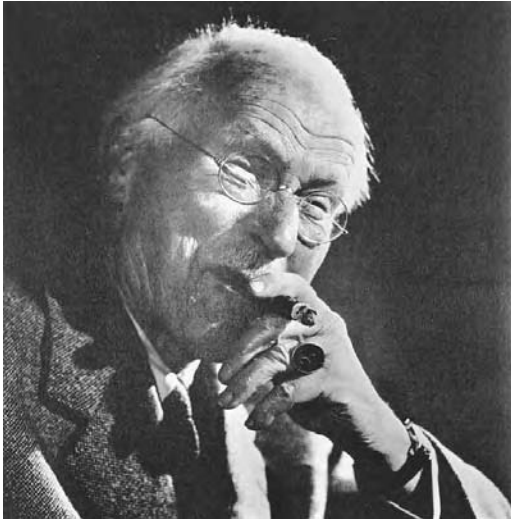
Synchronicity is the name given by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung (1875–1961) to the phenomenon of two or more events that seem to be connected but are not causally related; it is also called an acausal connecting principle. Jung (1951) grouped synchronistic phenomena into three categories: (1) the coincidence of a mental state (idea, feeling, image) with a simultaneous external event that corresponds in some meaningful way to the mental state; (2) the same correspondence of a mental state and a simultaneous external, meaningfully connected event, with the latter being outside of the observer's field of perception; and (3) a meaningful coincidence of a mental state with some future event.

To illustrate synchronicity, Jung (1951) told a story about a woman patient whose treatment had come to an impasse. During a therapy session, the woman told him about a dream she had in which someone had presented her with a golden scarab (the scarab beetle is an Egyptian symbol of rebirth). At that precise moment, Jung heard a tapping at the window behind him, and when he went to open it, a large beetle (a rose chafer) flew in. He caught it and handed it to her. The incident broke the patient's impasse so that treatment could proceed.

Jung believed that synchronicity had both a philosophical and a scientific basis. He cited many historical antecedents of synchronicity in alchemy, astrology, and Chinese philoso-

phy. He also drew upon the philosophies of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630).

Paranormal phenomena interested Jung from the beginning of his career. The work of parapsychologist J. B. Rhine in the 1930s appeared to prove the existence of extrasensory perception (ESP), which for Jung suggested an empirical basis for synchronicity. Discussions with physicist Wolfgang Pauli added to his conceptualization of synchronicity as a necessary organizing principle of the universe that was equal but in opposition to causality. Jung's theory was highly controversial from the first, and he often complained about being misunderstood. Although he tried very hard to present a strong case for synchronicity, his ideas were and are far from convincing to the skeptic. The main reason, from the scientific standpoint, is the difficulty or impossibility of any experimental confirmation that synchronistic events are qualitatively different from ordinary coincidences. Another reason is that synchronistic experiences are too open to a variety of interpretations. Almost any coincidence can be a synchronistic event if the observer thinks it is. Nevertheless, synchronicity continues to have great appeal in the New Age movement today (a search of the Internet will easily show this to be true) because of its paranormal quality and because it postulates a hidden meaning to existence—a bond or connection between the psyche and the material universe—that can only be known by intu-



C. G. Jung. (Fortean Picture Library)

ition. But from the scientific point of view, synchronicity is neither testable nor falsifiable and must be considered pseudoscience.

Synchronicity is closely related to Jung's theory of the structure of the psyche. According to Jung, the deepest layer of the psyche, shared by all humans, is the collective unconscious. This layer is structured by patterns of instinctual behavior called archetypes. The archetypes can never be observed directly or made conscious; they function as a kind of source code for outer manifestations such as symbols, myth, and religion, among others. Synchronistic phenomena occur when an archetype is "activated" or when it exercises a particularly strong effect on conscious behavior or thought. This is most likely to happen when the person is at a crisis state of some kind (as was the woman in the scarab story) or is emotionally preoccupied with something. When this crisis or preoccupation is accompanied by a corresponding lowering of the consciousness threshold (as in a so-called trance state), the stage is set for a synchronistic event.

To empirically test for synchronicity, Jung analyzed the horoscopes of 400 married pairs, in three sets collected over time, to determine if an "acausal connection" existed between the

horoscopes and actual marriages. Although he found no significant statistical evidence of a connection, he noted that in each of the three batches, the most frequent arrangement of planets was one of three that are important marriage indicators according to astrology. With the help of a statistician, Jung calculated that the probability of such a thing happening was so small as to be inconceivable (1 in 62,500,000), and therefore synchronistic. In Jung's words, "It is nothing but a chance result from the statistical point of view, yet it is *meaningful* on account of the fact that it looks as if it validated [the case for astrology]" (Jung 1955, 1958).

Unfortunately, the scientist is not permitted to place any weight on experimental results that *appear* to support something they in fact do not. From the scientific standpoint, there is no meaning to the coincidence. Furthermore, the excitement about the particular chart configurations that came out on top has a suspiciously post hoc quality (not uncommon in astrology!). Jung was aware of all this, yet he claimed that statistics are simply unable to account for such exceptional cases; therefore, he said, a new principle had to be devised.

One may ask why Jung, who considered himself an empiricist, was not content with more objective studies of supposedly synchronistic phenomena, which would address the issue of "meaningfulness" from the standpoint of the subject's observable mental state. But given Jung's personal and philosophical background, the nineteenth-century interest in Spiritualism and the occult, and the state of neuroscience at the time, it is easy to see how he could find the idea of synchronicity not only attractive but also necessary to his psychology.

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