

This is Wes Alwan in Boston, Massachusetts, and I'll be introducing the reading for episode 81 of the Partially Examined Life, in which we'll discuss the first chapter of Carl Jung's "Man and his Symbols," called "Approaching the Unconscious." Jung was of course a famous Swiss psychologist who while heavily influenced by Freud, developed some substantial disagreements with him, both personal and theoretical. Jung's theoretical innovations – commonly collected together under the term "analytical psychology" – include the concept of the collective unconscious, his theory of archetypes, and his theory of personality types – one that many of us are indirectly familiar with through the Myers-Briggs personality test and terms like "introversion" and "extraversion."

"Man and his Symbols" was Jung's last work, written for a popular audience by Jung and several associates and published in 1964, three years after Jung's death. The book's front matter explains that Jung was prompted into writing the book by a prophetic dream that his work was to be widely understood by the public. This fact is especially poignant in light of the fact that after a falling out with Freud in 1912, Jung was excluded from the Freudian psychoanalytic community. Jung and Freud had become friends in 1906 and quickly developed an intense relationship in which Freud referred to Jung as his "heir." Jung increasingly disliked his subordinate role in this relationship, and his theoretical differences with Freud – primarily over the role of sexuality in psychoanalysis and the value of religion – eventually became personal. Jung – offended by Freud's failure to visit him when on a trip in his vicinity, as well as Freud's habit of fainting when in his presence, eventually wrote Freud some very bitter letters. You might be interested in the six year correspondence between Freud and Jung, published in the 1970s; or you can readily find Lionel Trilling's 1974 review of this correspondence in The New York Times online.

In light of this history, it's interesting to find that Jung's last work is largely a response to Freud's theory of dreams and the unconscious. Jung doesn't describe Freud's ideas in detail, so we should pause to review them briefly here.

According to Freud, dreams were not simply random successions of images based on the memories of waking life. It's true that our dreams are not as structured as the reality of our waking life. Dreams are full of impossibilities and improbabilities that would astound us while awake, but of which we take little notice during the dream itself. Nevertheless, dream images follow certain rules of association, a faculty that – as we have seen with philosophers such as Hume and Kant – is also critically important to our waking experience. The difference is that during dreaming these associations – unchecked by external stimuli and the ability to reason, focus, and reality test – operate more freely.

That freedom is not complete, according to Freud. For while it is true that association is less constrained by external reality during dreaming, it is shaped by an internal reality that is equally as powerful. This internal reality consists of our instincts and the specific impulses that flow from them. In the absence of the persistence of such impulses, we might rightly call dream images random. But such randomness turns out to be merely the raw material of dreams, which are further shaped by human desire.

This is what Freud means by saying that dreams are fulfillments of wishes. Freud sees dreams as functioning much like daytime fantasies, to provide us compensatory gratification when our impulses cannot be gratified immediately in reality. If I couldn't imagine eating – and remind myself when hungry that I'll be able to eat soon – I might respond to the frustration of hunger much as an infant would, with absolute frustration, and even rage or despair (as expressed by crying uncontrollably). A fantasy life is fundamental to tolerating frustration until the next round of actual gratification. Freud saw this function as especially important during dreaming, because he thought that without it the desires for satisfaction

that shape our dreams might become so pressing as to wake us up. And so he called dreams the “guardians of sleep.”

Thus far, we’ve laid the groundwork for explaining why dreams are symbolic and so can be interpreted: they are freely associative, and yet this association is not merely random: it is shaped by desire. That means an impulse can slip along an associative chain in such a way that one thing stands in for another. And so for instance, I might have a dream in which my father is represented as a bear – whether because my father was nicknamed “Bear,” is burly like a bear, constantly says “I can’t bear it anymore,” or is named “Barry.” As a stand-in for my father, the bear in such a dream might be the subject of desires, fears, and general emotional overtones that I actually have toward my father. We can think here of a certain kind of psychical energy – the currency of our emotional investments – slipping along the associative chain from one image to another, from father to bear. This is where dreams get their symbolism.

But this picture, thought Freud, does not tell the whole story of what goes on during dreaming. Freud thought that in the same way that sleeping weakens our reality testing and reasoning, it also weakens – but does not entirely eliminate – our ability to repress forbidden impulses. These impulses – unconscious during waking life – are given partial, distorted expression during dreaming. Sleeping relaxes repression enough for such impulses to work on and shape dreams, but not enough that they are given overt expression: at the critical moment, a kind of censorship kicks in. And so the slippage we have described along an associative chain is neither merely random nor merely shaped by impulses of which we are readily aware: it is also motivated by censorship. This means that in interpreting dreams, we can work our way back inferentially to the unconscious impulses being censored. So for instance, it might turn out that my representation of my father as a bear is motivated by an unconscious fear toward my father that gets a partial expression in my fear toward a bear that symbolizes my father. The work of censorship nudges certain emotional investments along the associative chain in order to distort and conceal the original unconscious impulse. Or to use Freud’s example, instead of dreaming about sleeping with my friend’s wife – assuming that this thought is unthinkable to me while awake – I dream about sleeping with a woman of the same name (or a woman who bears any other associative connection to my friend’s wife).

Jung does not entirely reject Freud’s view of the unconscious and of dreaming. But he believes it needs to be expanded. The unconscious as Freud describes it – full of repressed, forbidden thoughts specific to an individual – is what Jung calls the “personal unconscious.” It is only part of the story for Jung, and not the most important part.

The other part of the story involves what Jung calls “archetypes,” which he borrows from Freud’s notion of “archaic remnants” (which Freud in turn explicitly borrowed from other thinkers, including Nietzsche). For Jung, archetypes are universal emotionally imbued symbolic images belonging to a collective unconscious. These “collective thought patterns of the human mind are innate and inherited” in the same way that nest-building is inherited in birds. They are “shapes of the human mind” that the human psyche exhibits in much the same way the human body expresses basic mammalian structure. We see these archetypes commonly expressed in dreams, religion, and art, in images evocative of primitive ideas, myths and rites. This is not to say that archetypes actually consist of specific myths or symbols. Rather, they are a tendency to produce symbols with a certain underlying structure. As an example Jung describes the very primal themes of death and resurrection expressed in the dreams of a little girl.

And while these archetypes have cultural manifestations, they are not transmitted culturally: rather, they exist as innate tendencies that have been, loosely speaking, repressed at a cultural level by the historical development of civilization. They are primal cultural versions of instincts, or the universal way in which instincts are collectively expressed and symbolized by the earliest human beings in the absence of millennia of historical elaboration and distortion.

As a consequence, Jung, unlike Freud, does not see the primary function of dreams as a distortion of forbidden, unconscious impulses. Rather, the role of a dream – via archetypes – is to serve as a messenger from the unconscious to the conscious, thereby having a naturally reparative, therapeutic effect – a “compensatory function” that attempts to restore psychic equilibrium to minds unhealthy in their disassociation from unconscious archetypes. For Jung, dream imagery, rather than disguising the unconscious, gives expression to emotional and associative and fantasy elements of mental life that we habitually discard or control while awake. While excluded from our attention, these elements cannot properly be said to be repressed in a personal unconscious (in the sense of being completely forbidden and unavailable to consciousness if we were to turn our inward gaze in their direction). (To be fair, we should note that Freud acknowledges the role of this aspect of the psyche in dreams – what he calls the “preconscious” – but he believes that the contents of the preconscious themselves get overpowered and “worked over” through association with forbidden unconscious impulses). Jung is not denying that Freud’s dream distortion sometimes occurs. It’s just that he sees the non-distorting, therapeutic role of the archetype (and the “collective unconscious”) in dreams as more important than the distorting role of the personal unconscious. On these grounds, he objects to Freud’s use of the word “remnant,” which he takes to imply that archetypes are someone meaningless and have no power over us – when in fact they are a valuable bridge between the conscious and the unconscious.

Jung also criticizes Freud’s method of having patients free associate to their dreams, so that a psychoanalyst can help them uncover the meaning that the dream actually conceals. This is not to say that he thinks this method can’t be useful, although he believes one need not begin with dreams as a starting point. But he sees greater value in paying explicit attention to the form and content of dreams. Jung isn’t denying that dream symbols are often quite idiosyncratic and personal: as in the example of my hypothetical association between “bear” and “father”; others will have entirely different associations with “bear.” Jung acknowledges that unearthing these personal associations is valuable. It’s just that the unconscious associations we have to ideas – including their connotations and their evocation of different emotions – are not always unconscious out of personal repression. Again, they are often merely the “shape all impulses naturally take in the unconscious,” which is intrinsically associative and vague and lacks the capacity to produce precise thoughts. Further, it’s also possible that there is an archetypal significance to a concept like “bear” – or to a more general category to which it belongs, like “animal” – to which we ought to pay attention when interpreting dreams.

Consequently, in diagnosing the modern human predicament, Jung sees personal repressions owing to forbidden sexual impulses as less important than our general cultural tendency to ignore and discard the more irrational side of our nature. (Again, this discarding is not to be equated with Freudian repression). Less rational, more primitive minds do not discard in the same way, and have a more immediate relationship to their symbols – are more animated by them. And while we might see their religious beliefs and rituals to be mere superstition and delusion, we have according to Jung replaced such beliefs with neuroses.

The price of civilization is not primarily – as Freud described it in *Civilization and its Discontents* – that it curtails our sexuality and aggression; but that modern, post-enlightenment civilization curtails our

religious sensibilities and our ability generally to grasp and full appreciate symbols in their full “numinosity,” or emotion significance. Modern civilization divides our consciousness from deeper instinctive strata, and impoverishes our ability to be introspective – especially with regard to our darker impulses.

In the final pages of this chapter, Jung goes on to give a defense of religion reminiscent of William James’ “Will to Believe,” and to bemoan the dismissal of dream symbolism by science. He also decries a schizophrenic world containing individuals who because of their neglect of symbols develop a destructive “shadow self.” He points to the irony that our rationalism and our lack of a capacity to respond to symbols puts human beings at the mercy of a “psychic underworld,” with the result of a loss of meaning and general moral decay. The Freudian focus on personal repression is a symptom of, not a solution to, this decline; it is an example of being captivated by a personal, subjective consciousness. Personal repression is actually only a symptom of a greater loss, that of a primitive psyche. Healing this loss requires treating dream images not as mere disguises, but as numinous messages from an unconscious underworld.