

JUNG ON SYNCHRONICITY: FREEING COINCIDENCE FROM JUNG'S PSYCHOANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

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Amazing coincidences exist. To name a common one: you're thinking of someone you rarely contemplate, the phone rings – it's that person. Everyone's experienced this or at least heard of such a thing happening, but here's a very recent, more specific example from my own life.

A couple of days before writing this, I was thinking about the use of alliteration – a literary technique that involves the repetition of an initial consonant or vowel sound in a string of words, for example: “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” I was wondering whether I should tone down this technique in some of my own writing. The next day, to pass the time, I settled upon watching a rerun of *M*A*S*H* which I'd never seen before that was first broadcast at least three decades ago. Early in this episode, Radar has penned a special announcement for their medical camp in a highly alliterative style that earns him ridicule from Colonel Potter. Later the same day, without mentioning to anyone else my temporary and personally unprecedented preoccupation with alliteration, I'm told about a recent Jim Carrey film called *Mr. Popper's Penguins*, in which one of the characters constantly uses “p”-alliteration, a device used in the movie for decidedly silly effect. Not only is there repetition of the “alliteration” theme the day after I was giving it some serious thought (this very series of coincidences being akin to an *experiential* alliteration, but with no clear author), it also seemed that the answer to my question “Am I overdoing the alliteration?” was a clear “YES,” unless, of course, I intended for the writing to be silly. But, if there was such a message, where was it coming from?

And even if there was no clear message, there is still the strange thematic coincidence. Watching the rerun of *M*A*S*H*, I couldn't help thinking to myself “That's odd, I was just contemplating alliteration yesterday,” and then alliteration is brought up once again just hours later. The more the theme is repeated, the odder it gets. Neither the person who told me about *Mr. Popper's Penguins* nor those responsible for programming *M*A*S*H* reruns could know anything about my concern with alliteration (and they certainly couldn't be conspiring with each other), so no ordinary, or scientifically accepted, relation of cause and effect can be claimed to connect the various alliteration-themed events within my experience, therefore the coincidence is *amazing* and *wondrous*, or at least of passing interest. It would take an individual with, I believe, an unjustifiably high threshold of wonder to deny that such a coincidence is not even of momentary interest. The occurrence deserves some acknowledgement, even if you tell no one else about it and decide not to interpret it for yourself as having any significance. The coincidence is there, and it's strange, and it calls, however weakly, for explanation. That much, I believe, cannot be denied.

As to whether one should seek explanation on the assumption that there is meaning to be found in the coincidence, that is a matter for further debate. Such coincidences are brushed aside by what I'll call the “scientific attitude” as having no causal explanation and so no explanation or meaning at all. Taking repose in demonstrated forms of causation, the scientific attitude is justified regarding a many phenomena, but the scientific attitude will on occasion reject what cannot be rejected by science.

Two primary tactics are invoked to oppose the significance of coincidence, pertaining to both the objective and the subjective side of a coincidental experience. On the objective side, it can be argued that, given the complexity of experience overall, numerous strange coincidences, perhaps more than one a day per person, are bound to happen by chance, with no greater significance than any randomly occurring event. On the subjective side, it is observed that the human mind, in its development for survival, is in pattern recognition overdrive, which is helpful, because when objectively real patterns do occur, we will be more likely to notice them and make use of these real patterns for our survival benefit. But then pattern recognition can and regularly does go too far, seeing connections that don't objectively exist. The overall tactic in these objections isn't to deny that the coincidence exists, but to characterize it instead as a predictably regular random occurrence that we're bound to seek meaning in using our otherwise usefully hyperactive imaginations. Rigorous critical thinking, however, will curb the desire to take these coincidences seriously, unless a *real* cause is justifiably suspected.

I think this is the most fair response the scientific attitude can provide. To take it further and describe those who notice these coincidences as unusually excitable and/or creative personalities is either to ignore the great number of relatively unexciting cases of coincidence that require neither a heightened mental state nor greater than normal creativity to notice. When I noticed the alliteration-themed coincidence, I fail to see how I was being abnormally excitable or creative. On the contrary, I'd have to be rather unobservant *not* to notice. Even the interpretation I entertained, that the lesson for me might be – that I should restrict use of alliteration only to writing I intend to be silly – formed rather automatically with no great special imaginative excitement on my part. However, this doesn't settle whether the coincidence is indeed meaningful, or – what amounts to a slightly different question – whether it's justified to seek meaning in the coincidence.

But it is not my purpose in this article to settle the matter of the meaningfulness of coincidence. My main goal at this stage in my reflection on coincidence is to establish that it occurs and to resist the cursory dismissal of it that is so common to the scientific attitude. Toward these ends, I believe it is important to challenge the theoretical framework set up around the phenomenon of coincidence by the theorist who is now most famous for taking it seriously, psychoanalytic theorist Carl Jung. Jung is to be commended for his attempt to rescue coincidence from intellectual oblivion in an increasingly mechanistic and materialistic academic milieu. Also, his psychoanalytic theory about the unconscious – about archetypes, the persona and shadow, and so on – are highly influential and perhaps valid concepts when used in the appropriate domains. But the application of his psychoanalytic theory to coincidence only serves to overly burden the broad array of coincidental phenomena with some narrow preconceptions and to open up serious reflection on coincidence to even swifter dismissal by the mainstream scientific attitude.

In a 1952 essay “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” Jung coins the term “synchronicity” for his special (and I argue, overly specialized) concept of coincidence and proceeds to provide a series of definitions while identifying the scope of the phenomenon. I'll argue that he ultimately does more to obscure the concept of coincidence or synchronicity than to explain or define it. Since his famous essay, most popular references to coincidence (and synchronicity) refer to Jung as the authority on the phenomenon and assume with Jung that the

phenomenon is in some sense *acausal* while also revealing the depths of our *psychological connectedness* with each other and the cosmos. His psychoanalytic interpretation of such occurrences lead to needlessly involved, and to some extent conceptually confused, *definitions* of synchronicity that are too often uncritically accepted by his students. I believe that a definition should point to a much more skeletal, basic structure for synchronicity, so that further claims about its nature and origin would be left to additional hypothesis, speculation which Jung includes in the definition.

After noting what Jung takes to be examples of synchronicity, I will question whether it should be included in a definition of synchronicity that the phenomenon necessarily involves *simultaneity, acausality, or a psychological state*. In conclusion, I will provide a much more basic definition of coincidence or synchronicity.

Jung's Examples of Synchronicity

Jung discusses many kinds of examples of synchronicity in his essay while developing a definition for the concept. For instance:

A young woman I was treating had, at a critical moment, a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. While she was telling me this dream I sat with my back to the closed window. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me, like a gentle tapping. I turned round and saw a flying insect knocking against the window pane from outside. I opened the window and caught the creature in the air as it flew in. It was the nearest analogy to a golden scarab that one finds in our latitudes, a scarabeid beetle, the common rose-chafer (*Cetonia aurata*), which contrary to its usual habits had evidently felt an urge to get into a dark room at this particular moment. (pg. 31)

Another example:

The wife of one of my patients, a man in his fifties, once told me in conversation that, at the deaths of her mother and her grandmother, a number of birds gathered outside the windows of the death-chamber. I had heard similar stories from other people. When her husband's treatment was nearing its end, his neurosis having been removed, he developed some apparently quite innocuous symptoms which seemed to me, however, to be those of heart-disease. I sent him along to a specialist, who after examining him told me in writing that he could find no cause for anxiety. On the way back from this consultation (with the medical report in his pocket) my patient collapsed in the street. As he was brought home dying, his wife was already in a great state of anxiety because, soon after her husband had gone to the doctor, a whole flock of birds alighted on their house. (pgs. 31-32)

These two examples relate to Jung's patients. He also discusses his own experience with encountering the idea of fish in numerous impactful ways over a stretch of a few days, which seemed to him to be more than just coincidence. But Jung also detects synchronicity in ESP experiments performed by J. B. Rhine in 1934; in his own extensive astrological experiment described in Chapter II of his essay; and in the "mantic" (or divinatory) practice developed in the *I Ching* (and presumably also in any other divinatory practice).

The astrological experiment is extremely complex and Jung admits that some methodological missteps were made along the way, so I'll be ignoring the details, but Jung's claim is that the "connection" supposed by astrology between the motion of celestial bodies and one's own life is not a *causal* one, as if the celestial bodies are exerting forces on you as an individual, but instead exemplifies an *acausal* connection, one that is reliably meaningful, but not explicable by empirical science, which instead seeks causal connections.

The importance for Jung of the acausality of synchronicity is even clearer with his consideration of Rhine's ESP experiments. If we are to trust the experimenter's statistical analysis, various test subjects were able to accurately guess the symbols on hidden cards with greater than chance success, not only when the cards were being drawn at the same place and time as the test subject, but even if the cards were being drawn at the same time but at a great distance, as far as 250 to 4,000 miles away, *and* even if the cards were being drawn at a time in the distant future.

Jung concludes that if test subjects can guess cards radically separated from them in time and place, then their ability to guess the cards cannot be explicable causally. Therefore, an acausal connection principle is required to explain the occurrence. I'll be examining this appeal to acausality in what follows. Finally, Jung proposes that the efficacy of divination techniques (like Tarot card reading, Taoist trigram readings, etc.) is not based on any causal forces, but on a meaningful coincidence between the psychic state of the querent (for whom the cards are being read) and the symbols that come up.

Simultaneity in Jung's Definitions of Synchronicity

As for his definition of the term synchronicity, Jung explains:

I chose this term because the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events seemed to me an essential criterion. I am therefore using the general concept of synchronicity in the special sense of a coincidence *in time* of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or a similar meaning, in contrast to "synchronism," which simply means the simultaneous occurrence of two events. (pg. 36; my emphasis)

To begin my critique of the specifics of his attempts at definition, I'm not sure, first of all, what the significance of the phrase "in time" is (see emphasized phrase above). Of course, any events happen "in time." A coincidence is also always "in time." But especially when ESP *across time* is an example of synchronicity for Jung, the insistence on the coincident events being in time is pointless. So it would seem better for Jung to say that synchronicity involves meaningfully – or, more precisely, "thematically" – related events that it's very hard to believe are connected causally. Adding that the events are in time only serves to confuse, because the assumption will be that the events are happening *at the same time*, which Jung doesn't believe is necessary (considering "future ESP" cases).

Puzzlingly, however, Jung goes on to say, in the next sentence, that the synchronistic events are indeed *simultaneous*:

Synchronicity therefore means the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state – and, in certain cases, vice versa. (pg. 36)

Not only does he insist on simultaneity here, he also introduces the view that one of the events (or states) in synchronicity is always going to be a psychic state, and one that is correlated with an event, or events, external to the psyche. All of this is presented with a “therefore” as if it followed from some additional premise he’d discussed, though it does not.

What of Jung’s appeal to the simultaneity of events within synchronicity in light of “future ESP” cases? Later in the essay, Jung seems to be attempting to reconcile this appeal to simultaneity with the occurrence of synchronicity across space and time in what is probably the most obscure passage of the entire essay, so please bear with us:

Synchronistic events rest on the *simultaneous occurrence of two different psychic states*. One of them is the normal, probable state (i.e., the one that is causally explicable), and the other, the critical experience, is the one that cannot be derived causally from the first. ... [W]e find a simultaneity of the normal or ordinary state with another state or experience which is not causally derivable from it, and whose objective existence can only be verified afterwards. ... This definition must be borne in mind particularly when it is a question of future events. They are evidently not *synchronous* but are *synchronistic*, since they are experienced as psychic images *in the present*, as though the objective event already existed. An unexpected content which is directly or indirectly connected with some objective external event coincides with the ordinary psychic state: this is what I call synchronicity, and I maintain that we are dealing with exactly the same category of events whether their objectivity appears separated from my consciousness in space or time. (pg. 41)

Unfortunately, Jung does not illustrate his point here with precise explication of one of his examples, so I will attempt to do so with a “future ESP” case. Basically, in this definition, Jung is saying that the simultaneity is not between a psychic state and an external event, but between two psychic states, one (P1) that is caused and one (P2) that cannot be said to be caused by P1. In a “future ESP” case, what would P1 and P2 be? What’s clear is that P2 would be the psychic state that is meaningfully or thematically related to the external event (E), which here is the symbol printed on the future card in question. In this case the connection between P2 and E would be the test subject’s correct guess of the card in question. Jung’s fundamental point seems to be that P2 is not in any way caused by E, for how could that be if E happens later? But Jung treats it as natural to conclude that P2 is also not caused by some other psychic event P1, which is occurring *simultaneously* with P2. He doesn’t say any more about it in this essay, so my best guess is that Jung wants us to understand that P1 and P2 are the same event P (i.e., the image or vision of what the future card is) but explained in different ways. P can be understood as caused by a previous psychic event, or it can be viewed as meaningfully related to E rather than being caused by E, while also not being caused by P1.

But, without further information on Jung's understanding of synchronicity, I don't see how any of this talk of simultaneity of psychic events is motivated by the phenomenon of synchronicity. I get the sense that Jung is simply stuck with the theoretical need of including some account of simultaneity in his definition of synchronicity, perhaps because his coined term is a cousin to "synchronism," even though Jung has already explicitly distinguished the terms. I think it would be better to do away with all appeal to simultaneity in characterizing what's necessary for synchronicity. Likewise, I can't see how we're being led in any theoretically useful directions by conceiving of simultaneous psychic events, one caused and one uncaused.

As a side note, it remains valid to say that synchronicity involves a "coincidence" of events. In fact, normal usage of the term "coincidence," as found in a dictionary, treats that term as synonymous with a basic concept of synchronicity, that is, a concept not loaded with psychoanalytic theory as in Jung's definitions. Ordinary definitions of coincidence include "a chance occurrence of events remarkable either for being simultaneous *or* for apparently being connected" or even just "accident, luck, chance." The "co-" in "coincidence" can be seen as a kind of cooperation of events, whether they are occurring at the same time or not. In coincidence, events are not understood to be simultaneous *by definition*.

So, to begin dismantling Jung's framework around synchronicity, I will refer to a simpler, but still cumbersome, view that excludes any appeal to simultaneity. We will consider the view that synchronicity consists in meaningfully but not causally connected events/states, where one event/state is a psychic state and any others are external to the psyche. Two of Jung's main definitional claims left to explore then pertain to (i) the *acausality* of the connection; and (ii) the assumed necessity that of one event/state is "*psychic*" (or "psychological" or "mental").

Acausality in Jung's Definitions of Synchronicity

Jung's motivation to track a concept of synchronicity seems to derive largely from his conviction that synchronicity arises without cause. In this way, Jung is opposing the "determinist" view, characteristic of a naïve scientific attitude (but not characteristic of all scientists), that all events/states have a (prior) cause that explains the existence of the event/state. Jung's position is "indeterminist" in that he believes that not all events have a cause, or that at least for some events, a full comprehension of their significance or meaning cannot be given a causal account. Again, "future ESP" cases are particularly useful in illustrating this:

But since experience has shown that under certain conditions space and time can be reduced almost to zero [as in future ESP cases], causality disappears along with them, because causality is bound up with the existence of space and time and physical changes, and consists essentially in the succession of cause and effect. For this reason synchronistic phenomena cannot in principle be associated with any conceptions of causality. Hence the interconnectedness of meaningfully coincident factors must necessarily be thought of as acausal. (pg. 42)

Here, Jung goes into more detail:

The fact that distance has no effect in principle shows that the thing in question cannot be a phenomenon of force or energy, for otherwise the distance to be overcome and the diffusion in space would cause a diminution of the effect, and it is more than probable that the score [of accuracy in future ESP test subjects] would fall proportionately to the square of the distance. Since this is obviously not the case, we have no alternative but to assume that distance is psychically variable, and may in certain circumstances be reduced to vanishing point by a psychic condition.

Even more remarkable is the fact that *time* is not in principle a prohibiting factor either; that is to say, the reading of a series of cards to be turned up in the future produces a score that exceeds chance probability. The results of Rhine's time experiment show a probability of 1 : 400,000, which means a considerable probability of there being some factor independent of time. They point, in other words, to a psychic relativity of time, since the experiment was concerned with perceptions of events which had not yet occurred. (pgs. 24-25)

We can tell now that Jung's insistence on acausality is intimately coupled with his insistence on the involvement of the psyche in synchronicity, such that it is the psychic condition which allows for the acausality. Still, it seems to be Jung's view that, rather than it being physical causality that is replaced by psychic causality, it is that physical and also any psychic causality (if he believes in psychic causality) are replaced by psychic *acausal* connection. He says more about this in the following passage, in particular rejecting any appeal to "energy transmission" as a causal explanation:

Rhine's [ESP] experiments confront us with the fact that there are events which are related to one another experimentally, and in this case *meaningfully*, without there being any possibility of proving that this relation is a causal one, since the 'transmission' exhibits none of the known properties of energy. There is therefore good reason to doubt whether it is a question of transmission at all. The time experiments rule out any such thing in principle, for it would be absurd to suppose that a situation which does not yet exist and will only occur in the future could transmit itself as a phenomenon of energy to a receiver in the present. It seems more likely that scientific explanation will have to begin with a criticism of our concepts of space and time on the one hand, and with the unconscious on the other. As I have said, it is impossible, with our present resources, to explain ESP, or the fact of meaningful coincidence, as a phenomenon of energy. This makes an end of the causal explanation as well, for 'effect' cannot be understood as anything except a phenomenon of energy. (pg. 27)

In all of these passages on acausality, Jung believes what he believes to be necessary to any concept of causality. For one, he holds that causal explanation is most basically going to involve a phenomenon of energy. Also, he has said that "causality is bound up with the existence of space and time and *physical* changes, and consists essentially in the succession of cause and effect" (pg. 42; my emphasis). So, from his discussion in this essay on synchronicity, we can surmise three aspects of causal explanation that Jung believes is not involved in synchronicity: (i) energy transmission (as in basic Newtonian thermodynamics); (ii) spatiotemporal, *physical* change; (iii) the ordering of cause prior to effect.

I don't want to explore this conception of causality fully here, only enough to suggest that it is contentious. Much has happened within science in the 20th century, even before Jung's publication of this essay, to undermine a simple, deterministic conception of causality inherited from the theoretical foundations of the rise of modern science in the 17th and 18th centuries. Jung even notes some early 20th century scientific speculation about radioactive decay – that it seems to have no cause (pg. 133).

Aside from all this, especially in item (ii) above, Jung seems to be narrowing the concept of causality without argument to only physical change (although he doesn't insist on this anywhere else in the essay). It's entirely consistent with the concept of causality (as developed by Descartes in the early 17th century, for instance) to talk about one mental content leading to another mental content, and to conceive of this as happening without physical change. We certainly can *conceive* of wholly "intrapsychic" causality (as Descartes did), even if it turns out that in reality mental change cannot happen without an underlying physical change. What's important is how we're able to conceive causality, and also how science can conceive of it.

Regarding feature (iii) of Jung's characterization of the concept of causality, is it really impossible to conceive of a later event causing a prior event? Even if science does not make use of this conception of causality (presently, I don't know if any mainstream scientific hypothesis does or not), it's at least *conceivable* that a later event could cause, condition or lead to a prior event, even if not by some form of energy transmission but by some as yet unfamiliar explanatory process. Bear in mind that the ancient Greeks made ample use of a concept of "final causality," where events, actions and ordered structures are understood as being caused by their resulting function, aim or outcome (*telos*). This conception was preserved by the Medieval Scholastics, until scholasticism was challenged and more or less defeated in the public arena by modern science in the 17th century. But again, even if science is not now making use of this concept of causality, that doesn't mean that such causality cannot really be at work in synchronicity.

In these ways, Jung seems to be speaking too narrowly of what causality can mean. His apparent restriction of causality to only physical change makes it easy for him to suggest that any intrapsychic change is not causal. This, in turn, makes it easier for him to imagine that the relation between a psychic event and an external event in synchronicity is acausal, since the mere involvement of the psychic would disqualify the relation between the psychic and physical from being causal. But this would be mere stipulation, and so, as with Jung's appeal to the *simultaneity* of synchronicity, I would move to withdraw appeal to *acausality* from the definition of synchronicity. Clearly from observation of examples, not all synchronicity is simultaneous, but it could turn out that all synchronicity involves acausal connection. However, I propose that acausal connectivity would be something to *discover* about synchronicity as a natural kind, and not part of its definition, which should be developed only to enable theory-free identification of the phenomenon, not to speculate about its nature and origin.

The *Psychic* in Jung's Definitions of Synchronicity

The final aspect of Jung's definition of synchronicity to consider is the supposed necessary involvement of a psychic state. As with Jung's inclusion of acausality in the definition, I would

caution against including a necessary psychic condition, especially if this will involve importation of a rather elaborate and not widely professionally accepted theory of the psyche. While it could turn out to be true that all synchronicity involves a relevant psychic state, just as all synchronicity may involve acausality, this would be something to *discover* about synchronicity, which need not be forced into the definition of the basic phenomenon for which we seek explanation. At the same time, the appeal to the psychic seems to me much more compelling and potentially more illuminating of the phenomenon than the appeal to acausality. In the following characterization of synchronicity, Jung's understanding of the psychic nature of synchronicity becomes more explicit and more theoretically elaborate:

In all these cases and others like them there seems to be an *a priori*, causally inexplicable knowledge of a situation which is at the time unknowable. Synchronicity therefore consists of two factors: *a*) An unconscious image comes into consciousness either directly (i.e., literally) or indirectly (symbolized or suggested) in the form of a dream, idea, or premonition. *b*) An objective situation coincides with this content. The one is as puzzling as the other. How does the unconscious image arise, and how the coincidence?" (pgs. 44-45)

This expresses what I'm taking to be Jung's least confused expression of the nature of synchronicity – there being a coincidence between a psychic state and one or more external events – but now Jung begins to reveal his signature psychoanalytic theory of the psyche at the center of which is the supposition of an unconscious. The psychic state is now more precisely described as an “unconscious image” that emerges into consciousness as a direct “vision” or indirect dream. As for the nature of the unconscious, Jung also imports his theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious to account for synchronistic occurrences:

Here I will only point out that it is the decisive factors in the unconscious psyche, the archetypes, which constitute the structure of the collective unconscious. ... The archetypes are formal factors responsible for the organization of unconscious psychic processes: they are ‘patterns of behavior.’ At the same time they have a ‘specific charge’ and develop numinous effects which express themselves as *affects*. (pg. 29)

Jung suggests that the themes or meaning-forms used to connect events synchronistically arrive from these archetypes (or *are* these archetypes), which Jung compares to Plato's pre-existent, transcendental “Ideas” (or “Forms”):

Synchronicity postulates a meaning which is *a priori* in relation to human consciousness and apparently exists outside man. Such an assumption is found above all in the philosophy of Plato, which takes for granted the existence of transcendental images or models of empirical things, the eide [in Greek] (forms, species), whose reflections (eidola) [in Greek] we see in the phenomenal world. (pg. 118)

Additionally, Jung suggests that the existence of transcendental meaning-forms, or archetypes, helps to account for coincidence across space and time, since only a realm in some way transcending the causal universe could provide the required non-causal connections:

The ‘absolute knowledge’ which is characteristic of synchronistic phenomena, a knowledge not mediated by the sense organs, supports the hypothesis of a self-subsistent meaning, or even expresses its existence. Such a form of existence can only be transcendental, since, as the knowledge of future or spatially distant events shows, it is contained in a psychically relative space and time, that is to say in an irrepresentable space-time continuum. (pg. 124)

In all this, there is the theoretical conflict between Jung’s view that the archetypes *lead to* synchronicity and his denial that synchronicity is at all *caused*, but I’ll let this pass in order to focus on his claims about the involvement of the psychic.

Apart from my wariness about including all this theory in the definition of synchronicity, and apart from the question of the validity of Jung’s general archetypal theory of the (collective) unconscious, Jung seems to be making some highly speculative additional claims about synchronicity: (i) that the connective themes within synchronicity conform to some (I’m assuming: *finite*) set of pre-existent meaning-forms; and (ii) that coincidence across time requires the existence of a transcendental realm through which the coincidence would be coordinated.

Regarding the first claim, my experience with synchronicity seems not to indicate any formal restrictions on thematic connection – almost any little thing can end up being a synchronistic theme so that it’s hard to see how some finite set of pre-existent meaning-forms would be guiding all synchronistic occurrences (even if *some* synchronicities end up being particularly archetypal). Recalling the example I explored in my introduction to this article – the alliteration-themed coincidence – I fail to see how this is some extraordinary expression of archetypal material. Perhaps I was concerned intensely enough about alliteration that this intense psychological concern somehow accounts for the later alliteration-themed events I experienced, but how is the theme of alliteration itself archetypal? It’s just another of the millions of myriad incidental issues with which the mind can become preoccupied.

As for Jung’s second claim about the necessity of a transcendent realm for explaining synchronicity, this points to a very exotic view of nature that I don’t yet fully understand. Until I’ve had a chance to explore Jung’s theory of the unconscious further, I can’t say much about it.

Here, I’ll be content to question any appeal to the unconscious in defining synchronicity. Of course, there may be some truth to Jung’s claim that the relevant psychic state is the emergence of an image from the unconscious into consciousness. But don’t all conscious images (or visions, thoughts, etc.) arise from the unconscious in some way or other? By “the unconscious,” Jung means this realm of archetypes, but how in particular do ESP cases rely on deep archetypal work or dramatic unconscious emergence? The test subjects are simply guessing symbols on a card.

Even more basically, I’d like to question the assumption that synchronicity must involve a psychic state, but I’ll conclude that some sort of involvement of the psychological is likely indicated in all synchronicity, though in more than one way. Take, again, my alliteration-themed coincidence. The three events being connected are (a) my question to myself about whether I’m overusing alliteration in some of my writing; (b) Radar’s use of alliteration in some of that character’s writing which is ridiculed by Colonel Potter in a rerun of *M*A*S*H* that I watched

the next day; (c) the mention by a friend of the character who speaks alliteratively in *Mr. Potter's Penguins* a few hours later. The last two events are anchored to conditions that likely would have existed outside of my mind regardless of whether I existed (the content of the *M*A*S*H* episode and the content of the Jim Carrey film). The first is indeed conditioned by my own psychological state – it is my own recent concern with literary style. But is it legitimate to characterize synchronicity such that it is always the case that one of the correlated events is a psychological state?

It would be unreasonable in this case, I think, to ignore that the first in the series of events was conditioned by my mental state of evaluating literary style, but not all synchronicity can be so readily perceived as psychologically conditioned. For instance, let's say that throughout some particular day, I see the number string "1234" six times, on clocks, on license plates, in phone numbers, etc. (This is like Jung's example of encountering the idea fish in a wide variety of ways over a period of days.) In each case of seeing "1234," there is of course my mental state of perceiving the number string. But what is the truly "bizarre" coincidence here? Is it the coincidence of (a) my *perceiving* the number string in each case and (b) there *existing* that number string in each case? Rather, it's much more natural to say that the coincidence is between the multiple appearances of the number string, that is, between a series of external events *only*, not between those external events and some psychological state.

I can imagine two responses to this. First, it could be argued that I am under the influence of a psychological state that I'm not aware of which is secretly leading me to see these numerous appearances of "1234." All I can say about this is that it's highly speculative. And again, if it is the case that synchronicity is always guided by some initially secret psychological state, that would be something to discover about synchronicity. It's theoretically backwards to assume that synchronicity would require some coordinating psychological state within the person to whom the synchronicity is occurring.

A second response might be that, even if a psychological state is not playing a coordinating role in the synchronicity, the synchronicity seems to be occurring *for you*, or *for the sake of your psyche*. For instance, it seems like the consequent experience of the *M*A*S*H* episode and the report I received about *Mr. Potter's Penguins* are part of a lesson that I should heed about my future literary technique. But, again, this doesn't seem to be an essential condition of synchronicity, that all coincidences form in order to be noticed and appreciated. If so, that would be something important to discover about synchronicity, but it seems just as likely that there are synchronicities that go unnoticed or that could, in principle, go unnoticed. For instance, I might not have been paying attention to that part of the *M*A*S*H* episode, or to the part of the conversation when the alliterative character in *Mr. Potter's Penguins* was brought up – but the synchronistic content would still be there. (Also, there is the view that the stable universe we live within is so improbable that it can't exist by chance and is therefore in some way inherently meaningful. This would suggest that synchronicity is inherent in the cosmos at its root. But, if so, this could, in principle, have gone unnoticed forever, and this state of affairs could have come about without it being part of the "point" that someone appreciates the existence of the cosmos-conditioning synchronicity.)

In light of these considerations, one can distinguish two different ways that a psychic state could be involved in synchronicity, either (i) as a coordinating factor within the synchronicity, in which case the psychic state is *constitutive* of the synchronicity (e.g., the alliteration-themed synchronicity occurs *because* I was concerned about literary technique); or psyche can be seen (ii) as the ultimate purpose for synchronicity formation, the purpose being that the some mind or other will *appreciate* the synchronicity in some way, in which case the psychic state of appreciation is retrospective and not necessarily constitutive. If there exist synchronicities in which psychic states are not constitutive, but solely appreciative, then Jung's appeal to the psychic is exaggerated.

So, I don't believe it should be part of a definition of synchronicity that it is always an unconscious revelation of some sort. What then would count as a fair definition? I propose to define synchronicity as *a coincidence of thematically related events having no familiar causal relation* (where it's made clear that "coincidence" does not mean "simultaneity"). The question becomes, if synchronicity *really* exists (that is, if the coincidence is "meaningful" or truly can't be "explained away"), then what brings about synchronicity? The purpose of this article is to retrieve the more basic phenomenon of coincidence or synchronicity from the obscure theoretical framework Jung developed around it, so that the question of synchronicity's meaningfulness can be pursued with greater clarity.