

Honoring the World-Soul

by
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Abstract: James Hillman speaks of the need for “a psychology that returns psychic reality to the world,” that restores the Renaissance cosmology of an *anima mundi*. In this essay, I present an argument for an imaginal epistemology which takes as its central claim that the *anima mundi* is biologically and psychologically enacted as image, pattern, metaphor, and narrative. I offer a revisioning of selected findings within empirical psychology and biology as first steps toward legitimating such an epistemology, and I try to suggest that dangers for self-deception implicit in an imaginal epistemology may be met through the tools provided by poststructural critique.

JAMES HILLMAN SPEAKS of the need for “a psychology that returns psychic reality to the world” (1982, p. 72), that restores the Renaissance cosmology of an *anima mundi*. In such a cosmology, the world-soul becomes the dwelling place of value. In attending to a world-soul, the pain of a clear cut forest might be heard as clearly as the pain of an injured child, the integrity of a complex ecosystem might be as distinct as that of *Hamlet* or *Othello*. A world ensouled speaks directly of suffering and healing. It is the objective correlative of an adequate human psychology, of a psychology wherein *psyche* still means soul.

To speak of a world ensouled is to recall the Platonism and Neoplatonism that inspired much medieval and Renaissance thought. Plato made vivid the distinction between knowledge and opinion, between knowledge which I have personally experienced and knowledge which I hold to be true because others have told it to me. He further differentiated knowledge of the world

(however acquired) from self-knowledge, and foresaw the possibility of linking self-knowledge (*sophrosyne*) with world-knowledge through the domain of the soul. Soul, *eros*, strives to pierce the experiential image to reach the Forms beyond. Plotinus, in turn, elaborated the Platonic forms by generating a complex hierarchy of emanations proceeding from the One through Spirit or Mind, cascading down to the farthest reaches of the creation, all of which, even brute stone, were infused with soul. The Neoplatonic cosmos is penetrated to its depths by soul.

But for us today to speak of a world ensouled is fraught with danger. On what basis may we restore the *anima mundi* to its place as the locus of human value? What is the legitimation for such a move? Let me momentarily postpone beginning to answer the question by first considering another: on what basis can we afford not to?

Many today continue to dream the possibility of knowing as a mirror of nature, the Cartesian dream of the eventual acquisition of a single complete representation of the world epistemologically guaranteed through the rigor of scientific investigation. In the literature of the philosophy of science, this dream is referred to as “convergent realism.” I prefer to call this dream, a dream of the objectified universe, “monorealism.” We can identify certain claims which form its core. Among these are that (1) mechanistic science is the preeminent domain within which reason is exercised, and the epistemology of mechanistic science either simply is epistemology entire, or is our best example of an epistemology, insofar as epistemology is concerned with issues of truth and rationality; that (2) the scientific exercise of reason yields knowledge about the world that corresponds to the structure of reality, and only that version of knowledge can be correct; that (3) such knowledge is objective in the sense that it is true universally and all observers, once freed of their unfortunate biases, would recognize its truth; that (4) the different forms of knowledge revealed by the different disciplines within the sciences are compatible with one another and ultimately cohere into a single, consistent account of the nature of reality that approaches, albeit asymptotically, a full and complete description of the universe (see, for example, Brown, 1987; Hacking, 1983; Laudan, 1977).

I will not offer a full critique of monorealism here except to say that all of its claims are at best half-truths, reflecting a fundamental epistemic confusion. That confusion is the confusion between a *methodology* that seeks objectivity through objectifying its subject matter and an *ontology* that concludes that such objectification of the world, made for purposes of investigation, in fact has captured the actual structure of the world. It is the error that *would arise* if, in observing a diseased child and objectifying his or her ill-

ness as subject to the administration of various medicines and treatments in order to effect its cure, one further concluded that the child could be elucidated in its essential being through further objectifications coupled with appropriate treatments and administrations, as though the child could only be known insofar as it had been objectified. But this is precisely the mistake that *has arisen* in objectifying the world of nature, in which nature is regarded as though the human presence had been removed from it. Objectification is indeed the appropriate means of establishing the conditions for objective judgment in some cases (such as the treatment of pathogenic disease), but it is far from being the appropriate means universally (such as the understanding of human health). Monorealism errs in taking the model of objectification as the only valid technique of objectivity, and generalizing that single method across all domains.

But though monorealism is ultimately untenable, we should not for a moment discount its impressive rhetorical power, the appeal of its promise to fulfill the ancient dream of human perfectability through the understanding and control of nature (including human nature). Let me, then, concede the possibility of actualizing the monorealist dream despite what I have just said. For even if this dream were capable of realization, we might still question its desirability. It is on this ground — an ethical and aesthetic ground arising out of *psyche* — that I would challenge it here. I would argue that it is the vision of monorealism, with its sharp fact-value dichotomy, its self-serving protestations of its own neutrality, its hegemonic appropriations of the diversity of voices and its normalization of everyday life through bureaucratization and regulation, that is our greatest contemporary source of nihilism (Foucault, 1975/1979; Weber, 1904/1958), the greatest threat to human autonomy. Monorealism informs us with the bland authority of scientific knowledge that our lived-experience is trivial and unreliable; that passion and emotion are blind; that imagination is fantasy, suitable only for preschoolers and savages (who are taken to be epistemically identical); that intuition has no ground; that at its best the human spirit is efficient and productive; that art is accoutrement and entertainment; that ethics has no necessary relation to knowledge; and that the essential manifestations of mind are purely cognitive. In making the methodological technique of subject-object differentiation into a universal ontology, it renders shameful and quaint what are arguably the central manifestations of lived human reality — affect, imagination, vision, love, care, compassion. Monorealism tolerates these as weary parents tolerate the fantasy play of their youngsters, as a stage which is likely to be outgrown but which in any case need not and should not bias the solemn deliberations of adults.

Monorealism's corrosive ideology demands our attention because it is the dominant system of thought in our culture. It is the truncated remnant of Enlightenment faith in reason, reason bereft of the function of critique and reduced to instrumentality and domination (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972). Learning to think monorealistically is often taken as being synonymous with what is called "getting an education." We need only contrast our schooling with the Greek understanding of education to limn what has been lost in our diminution of reason. For the Greeks, education was *paideia*, education into full human participation in a culture. Education literally means "to educe," to draw out. It suggests an enrichment of the soul, a disciplined answering to the yearning of *eros*. That was the function of Greek *paideia*, to make the young fully human. This is obviously not what education means for us; our metaphors are of stuffing the head, of suppressing natural desire, of cramming in information, of stifling impulses, of repressing inclination. That such bastardized instruction should underwrite our cultural transformation into desiring-machines, into bundles of diffuse and insatiable impulses for which a consumer culture so conveniently provides a market should not be surprising. While the impulses of soul do not disappear, in a consumer culture the forms of their realization can be made marketable (Marcuse, 1964). That such a culture should invite nihilism, both spiritual emptiness and bizarre outpourings of untended imaginative aggression, from those who lack — lack capital, lack discipline, lack *sophrosyne*, lack a self — is as predictable as death (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1982). We collectively live out the condition which the distraught Marlow described for Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "His reason was perfectly clear. Only his soul was mad" (1902/1986, pp. 144-145).

But to return to my original question, if monorealism has indeed constituted our day-to-day experience as nihilistic, it is not immediately obvious that a reformulated epistemology ought to be based on soul. Indeed, to poststructuralist ears, any talk of a world-soul only seems to voice one more logocentrism, one more late modernist nostalgia for some foundation of belief, some ultimate presence that would supersede the contingency of historical situatedness. Let me try to frame my remarks. I do not argue that an epistemology for soul is the only epistemology we should have; my claims are not for exclusiveness or exclusion. In its proper place, as suggested above, even mechanistic epistemology is desirable, and I certainly do not pre-empt the possibility of epistemologies grounded in Marxist theory, in social constructivisms, in feminist concerns or in Foucauldian practices of the self (to name only a few alternatives). My claim is only that insofar as attunement to the *anima mundi* is desirable, an epistemology for that attune-

ment is necessary. The virtue of such an epistemology would be in its elicitation of an ontology which has been largely lost in our culture. Our aim should be, in the words of Heidegger, to allow us “to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (1954/1977, p. 28).

Our task is to discern a place for the *anima mundi* in a way that respects our critical intelligence and preserves the gains of scientific knowledge and of critique. Like Michelangelo before his marble, we must so sculpt knowing as to reveal the soul already there. Our excisions must clarify rather than sever the tie between the world-soul and ourselves ensouled. We require not an objectivist epistemology but an existential hermeneutic, not a systematic and univocal collocation of theories, but a renewed appreciation of how the meanings that arise out of lived-experience dialectically coalesce both our sense of the world and our sense of how we are in the world. This is a being-in-the-world at the opposite extreme from the simple empiricism of positive fact; it is an empiricism of the imagination. Accordingly, to know the world-soul requires an imaginal epistemology, an epistemology disciplined by its attentiveness to the appearance of image, metaphor, and pattern. Let me suggest what I believe is a tenable basis for such an epistemology.

First, we must take biology seriously. But in what way? We must be cautious, lest our concerns be too easily colonized under various “evolutionary epistemologies” (including sociobiology) which both literalize competition, and privilege the competition of entities for survival against a selective environment. Such literalized biology reproduces the worst features of monorealism, dichotomizing subject from object and reifying what at best are analogies. Rather our concern must be with a biology of morphological pattern, of stories told over evolutionary time, of metaphoric variations of archetypal themes (Arthur, 1984; Ho & Saunders, 1984; Thompson, 1917/1975; Waddington, 1967). We must become sensitive to distinction and self-reference, to form and difference, as they are manifest in the living.

The biology here is cybernetic, a cybernetics that not only regulates a system, but self-regulates its own control of that system, recursively, autopoietically (Maturana & Varela, 1972/1980; Varela, 1979), and so generates and maintains itself. Gregory Bateson (1979), rambling in the logical gardens of mind and nature, saw how pattern and difference become manifest in biological evolution and embryology, on the one hand, and in human cognition and social interaction, on the other. He argued that both biology and psychology, properly conceived, are domains of what he called “mental process” and what I am calling *psyche*. These domains are not primarily characterized by forces and impacts, by isolated bodies in collision by sur-

face features and objectifications. Rather, they are characterized by the primacy of comparison, difference, contrast, by how forms are maintained over time as self-regulating wholes despite the constant play of perturbation. A cybernetic biology, like an ensouled psychology, would seek out the deep movements that grant stability beneath immediate disequilibrium, the relations that hold beyond any particular instantiation of them.

Think, for example, of the surprisingly limited number of basic morphologies to be found in organisms. Even though each form displays wide variation, why are certain barriers not transgressed? Why is it that most mammals have four appendages, and most insects six, and not vice-versa? Why is radial symmetry replaced by bilateral symmetry as phyla become increasingly complex? Why do basic plans of segmentation re-occur from worms to crustacea or arthropods? Amongst the tremendous diversity of plant forms, why do groupings of 3's and 5's occur so often? This is a biology of archetype, a biology that is as fundamental to life as is the water a fish swims in. And as the fish fails to acknowledge its medium, so form has been equally excluded from notice by monorealist science.

For the monorealist, form is epiphenomenal, reducible to molecular processes in the same way the tertiary structure of proteins is reducible to how local molecular polarities cause an amino acid sequence to fold on itself, to how the mind, once it is understood, will be seen to be the residue of neurochemical activity in the brain. Monorealism is ill equipped to handle the creation and maintenance of form and pattern in evolution. It is equally inept when it seeks to consider the flow of matter through any given organism, not only the flow of nutrients and waste, and the participation of the organism in ecological webs and biological cycles, but of the cells themselves, which in a period ranging from minutes to months undergo near-complete replacement. It is of course possible to see organisms as demarcated hunks of matter, as objects set against one another in an independently existing environment, for such a configuration naturally devolves from an objectifying methodology; but it is more accurate to see them as standing waves maintaining overall shape and stability through a constant flow. And to so conceive them forces us of necessity to re-insert them into their environments and their environments into them, not passively, but as collectively sustaining moments of pattern, *eigenvalues*, in the larger flow of nature (Levins & Lewontin, 1985).

In the same vein, consider that the phenomena which are the stuff of human life — devotion, loyalty, hatred, prejudice, pity, desire, friendship, greed, jealousy, honor, and so on — exist only as relations. That is their ontology. Thought of in objectivist terms, such phenomena either do not exist

at all (i.e., are rendered epiphenomenal) or are reified (i.e., rendered as traits or qualities that have been decontextualized and abstracted, denatured from life like boiled proteins). What could trust or despair or envy possibly be apart from their concrete manifestation in specific motivating situations? One does not despair in the abstract. There are no scales to provide a coefficient of trust. Such terms specify a dialectic that occurs only within lived experience. To remove them from relation is like confusing a musical score with the sound of music, like assuming a piece of parchment signifies an education, like mistaking a sequence of nucleotides for the texture of life.

Our ability to “read” the text of the world arises out of, and is nourished by, our lived sense of our own embeddedness as selves within a world. And, dialectically, our sense of ourselves as continuing psychological totalities is a concomitant of responding to a world in the full richness of our being. Heidegger (1927/1962) argued that for the early Greeks, truth was *aletheia*, an unveiling or bringing forth of Being from concealment, an act of making or *poiesis*. It involved a collaboration between what Being offered and the circumspection of the knower. Here I am stressing that what the world offers are not simply entities — rocks, atoms, chairs — but images, processes, events, histories, stories. The ontology of *Dasein* is its historicity. Thus, the imaginal complexity of lived-experience, a complexity to which Hillman (1975; 1981/1985) has well attended in his archetypal psychology, arises out of the collection of narratives within which we participate. The situations of the world call out to our situatedness within them, evoking our powers, provoking us to marshal the resources for adequate response. This marshalling is the work of imagination. Out of this elicitation by the world emerges our sense of our personhood. Our sense of self is the range of the multiply overlapping personages through which we perform our living, the cast of characters who appear in the stories in which we participate. The complexity of the psyche is the complexity of our pantheon, the totality of all the gods who are active within us and within our lives. And this pantheon also makes place for the shadow gods of our corruptions and complicities, our resentments and jealousies.

As an epistemology of pattern and metaphor rediscovers itself in biology, so it may link the psychological with the biological. Again, though, there is a danger to be avoided. The linkage lies not in the objectivism that asserts psychology is really neurophysiology, biochemistry, and connectionist brain architectures, but in the lived sense that mind is a manifestation of nature, that how we are in the world encapsulates an evolutionary past developed in interaction with the world. From this vantage, a plethora of existing empirical work may be revised to portend the depths of psychological meaning

inherent in our biology. A full elaboration of what the German biologist Johannes von Uexkull (1928) called the *Umwelt*, the sensory-motor universe unique to each species, results. The human *Umwelt* requires, for example a consideration of visual cliff phenomena; of our high visual sensitivity to blue-green light; of the computational properties of vision (Marr, 1982); of reflex behaviors, instincts and habits; of sensitivity to environmental affordances (Gibson, 1966). Such an elaboration of the *Umwelt* would find a place for “intuitive” theories of naive science (Gentner & Stevens, 1982). It would seek to elucidate what the historian of science Gerald Holton (1973) calls “themas,” that is, a handful of fundamental presuppositions through which knowledge is structure — conservation, weight, force, space, time, causality, balance, momentum (Holton suggests there may be fifty or so of these) — presuppositions reminiscent of Kant’s epistemology though lacking Kantian apodicticity, which reappear over and over within scientific theories and which seem to arise out of our untutored everyday experience of the world. It would inquire into the phenomenon of natural categorization (Rosch, 1975) to understand how our experience of the world — its familiarity, its appearance, the way objects lend themselves to manipulation, the sensations they evoke — leads us to generate categories which display prototypical structures, and it would extend natural categorization into all examination of the logic of stereotyping and prejudice, of schema and script, of poetic metaphor and creativity. It would look into the pellucid work of “cognitive semanticists,” who have indicated how human embodiment (Johnson, 1987), common cultural experience (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and fundamental imaging schemas (Talmy, 1987) are sedimented within language. It would reconsider the use of heuristics in decision making (Kahneman, *et al.*, 1982) not as the exposure of our poor reasoning, but as the mode through which partial knowledge is embedded into coherent narratives which we use to guide our appropriation of the world.

Most importantly, taking seriously our biology as primates would lay an evolutionary ground for the absolute centrality of social behavior in human interaction, that the human *Umwelt* is also a *Mitwelt*. It would clarify why socially responsive affect tracks those aspects of the *anima mundi* most essential for psychological health. It would place the heart at the heart of *psyche* (Hillman, 1979/1987), locating it in attachment phenomena (Bowlby, 1969/1973/1980); in early and continuing object relations, including the mediatory role of transitional phenomena (Winnicott, 1974); in psychosocial crises of trust, autonomy, intimacy (Erikson, 1950); in social referencing; in the sociogenesis of language (Bruner, 1983); in human dialogue (Lynch,

1985); and in the aetiology of psychopathology, not in neurochemistry, but in affective distortion, inconsistency, muting.

Finally, though, the imaginal as I've suggested it here must be placed in a dialectic with the cultural and historical. Poststructuralist critique remains necessary, in complement rather than in opposition to the imaginal. Even as we compose narratives to order our experience, even as we draw upon psyche to illuminate existence, we simultaneously cover over that experience. As Heidegger observed, ontic gathering entails ontological forgetfulness. The imaginative resources upon which we draw are themselves inscribed by culture, and often reveal themselves through structures of hegemony, of patriarchy, of racism, of the microphysics of power. It is part of our constitution as person that we voluntarily undertake disciplines of the body and spirit through whose practice we become the selves we wish to be (Foucault, 1978). It is crucial that we respond to the world as the world elicits us; but we also must recognize that we are fallible and limited beings, that we have no guarantee that our versions of how things are and of how we have made ourselves to be are free from the play of domination and selective blandness. Indeed it is hard to imagine how they could be. As soul falls under the reign of spirit, it may succumb to normalizations which drain its healing power and leave it empty. Our path, then, must be both imaginal and poststructuralist, both affirming the free play of multiple voices and skeptically interrogating them, both enacting the full pantheon of *psyche* and relentlessly scrutinizing what would pass as self-evident, both seeking the spontaneity of imaginal renewal and remaining wary of its dissipation. The *anima mundi* is biologically enacted as psyche, and psyche speaks an imaginal language which comes to consciousness as dream, metaphor, myth, story. But it is only in negotiation between experience and its representation, and the critique of all representation against further experience, that we grope our way along sanity. Our psychological health requires that we validate the authenticity of our lived-experience; but our inscription within culture necessitates that we remain alert that each of our many truths not exclude or repress or marginalize the many truths that others bear. To resist the fall into mere instrumentality requires constant attention to the imaginal. Living with such sensitivity demands constant attunement to the world-soul.

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