

Laura K Kerr, PhD

Definition: Synchronicity

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Introduction

The Swiss depth psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) introduced the term synchronicity to describe circumstances that appear meaningfully related yet lack a causal connection. The concept synchronicity grounds Jung's analytical psychology, which is concerned with transcendental aspects of the human psyche and the collective wholeness of all life. For Jung, synchronicity was evidence of the mutual interdependence of psyche and the physical world. Along with space, time, and causality, Jung saw synchronicity as one of the basic organizing principles governing the universe.

Keywords

acausal, collective unconscious, emergent theories, New Age, numinosity, out-of-body experiences, paranormal, physics, Taoism, Uncertainty Principle

Definition

There are three identifying aspects of synchronistic events: 1) meaningful coincidence, 2) acausal connection, and 3) numinosity. (See Traditional Debates below for further discussion of numinosity.) Meaningful coincidences occur when events that otherwise seem random, and thus lacking causal connections, nevertheless share a common symbolism, which Jung perceived as evidence of a collective unconscious uniting all life. A popular example of meaningful coincidence comes from Jung's work with a patient he deemed as overly rationalistic. As the patient shared with Jung a dream of a golden scarab, which is a prominent symbol in Egyptian mythology, a beetle of the Scarabaeidae family scratched on Jung's office window, which he caught and then offered to his patient. Jung claimed the coincidence was not lost on his patient, who was able to move on to a more expansive appreciation of psyche and life.

Jung aligned synchronicity's property of acausal connection with Eastern thought. He described synchronicity as complimenting causality much in the way the East compliments the West: "The East bases much of its science on this irregularity and considers coincidences as the reliable basis of the world rather than causality. Synchronism is the prejudice of the East; causality is the modern prejudice of the West" (1984, pp. 44-45).

Jung also found validation of synchronicity in the I Ching (1967), which he saw as the "experimental foundation of classical Chinese philosophy" (1960, p. 35). The I Ching's system

of divination, and the belief that a psychic state can be represented by a physical situation, parallels the acausal connecting principle identified through synchronicity. Jung also believed Eastern philosophy confirmed his hypothesis for the unity of all nature. In particular, the interpretation of the Eastern notion of Tao as “nothing”—or as “no-thing,” according to Jung—validated the universal principle of synchronicity. According to Jung, “‘Nothing’ is evidently ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ and it is only called Nothing because it does not appear in the world of the senses, but is only its organizer” (1960, p. 71).

Jung also looked to modern physics to understand the nature of synchronicity, and attempted to adapt many ideas in this field to accommodate his conception of synchronicity, including the property of numinosity. He worked closely with Nobel Prize winning physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958) and also consulted with Albert Einstein (1879-1955). The notion of synchronicity shares with modern physics the idea that under certain conditions, the laws governing the interactions of space and time can no longer be understood according to the principle of causality. In this regard, Jung joined modern physicists in reducing the conditions in which the laws of classical mechanics apply.

Traditional Debates

The idea of numinosity as a principle characteristic of synchronistic events is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Jung’s formulation of the concept. The notion of numinosity originated with Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), a German Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative literature. Otto used the term to describe the inexpressible quality of religious experiences. The term numinous identifies the experience of transcending the boundaries of corporeality that supposedly occurs when joining with God in an ecstatic moment. Jung used the term to identify the emotional stirrings associated with the quality of expansiveness beyond the sense of oneself as an isolated psychological being, which is also implied by his concept of the collective unconscious. The term numinosity allowed Jung to extend the influence of psyche outside the body and into the universe as a regulating principle, much like time, space, and causality.

Jung’s emphasis on numinosity as a key element in synchronicity was due in part to his work with psychiatric patients and the analysis of dreams. He also had a lifelong fascination with paranormal activity, and as a child attended séances. To support his conception of synchronicity, he turned to the work of parapsychologist J. B. Rhine (1895-1980) and conducted a dubious experiment on the role of astrology in marriages to prove that an experimenter’s emotional state influenced outcomes—a move Pauli opposed and one that Jung believed was supported by the laboratory experiments that led to Werner Heisenberg’s (1901-1976) formulation of the Uncertainty Principle. According to Jung, “when an event is observed without experimental restrictions, the observer can easily be influenced by an emotional state which alters space and time by ‘contraction’ (Jung, 1960, p. 30). Ultimately, it was Jung’s limited understanding of modern physics that led him to apply its results in ways that were neither intended nor supported. Furthermore, it has been the property of numinosity that has led to the greatest criticism, including assertions that Jung’s analytical philosophy is more New Age mysticism than a scientific, albeit theoretical enterprise (Combs and Holland, 1996).

Critical Debates

Despite the unsubstantiated properties of synchronicity (namely, meaningful connection and numinosity), scholars and researchers in several disciplines share Jung's acausal understanding of natural phenomena. Joseph Cambray noted, "[Jung's] collapse of space and time together with the disappearance of the principle of causality is remarkably congruent with the best theories in physics for the origins of the universe" (2009, p. 20). The concept of synchronicity has also been compared to emergentist theories used in many disciplines to explain the capacity for a large group of individual "parts"—including insects, animals, groups, and specific properties within an individual organism—to collectively organize into complex adaptive systems and exhibit holistic properties (Cambray, 2009).

Jung's interest in the paranormal led him to identify out-of-body experiences as synchronistic events. He believed these phenomena supported his view of a holistic, absolute knowledge that did not depend on sense organs and the causality-based form of knowing associated with body experiences. Although such a view resulted for many in skepticism about the concept of synchronicity, researchers have attempted to produce out-of-body experiences in the laboratory (Ehrsson, 2007; Leggenhager, Tadi, Metzinger, and Blanke, 2007). The results, however, are thought to prove that conflicting visual and somatosensory input leads to sensations that mimic out-of-body experiences rather than the presence of an absolute knowledge transcending the boundaries of the human body as Jung believed.

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