

Chicken or Egg?

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An interesting question to me is the chicken or egg question. I get distracted by this question. What comes first, cognition or affect, thought or emotion? Do I choose to feel what I feel at some level, or does it just happen to me? How autonomous am I in determining the quality of my own life? Do I have emotions, or do they have me?

Historically, as we know, Plato thought that emotions were just one component of the mind, along with desire and intellect. Aristotle on the other hand, made emotions a central part of our identity, and thought character was determined by our ability to *learn* to feel a certain way in the face of particular events. And Hume further elevates emotion – “reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.”

In Judeo-Christian thought there is one God who created the universe, such that everything created by God is outside of and separate from Him. God creates something, and then lets it exist externally to Himself. God *created* the tree, God is not *in* the tree. The way we understand our universe and ourselves is through the perception of external objects.

Along these lines, William James famously proposed that emotions occur as a result of physiological reactions to external events. According to this theory, the perception of an external stimulus leads to a physiological reaction, which **is** the emotion. James thus maintained, for example, that “we feel sad because we cry...and not that we cry...because we are sad ” (James 1884, 190).ⁱ

Spinoza, on the other hand, says there is just one reality, one substance, and we are it. We are made of the same stuff as God and not separate from Him. The concept of our existence is not one that is arrived at through **external** sense perception but through an act of **inner** understanding.

The question of external and internal seems important here. Are we discrete personal beings, constantly reacting to external sensory stimuli and trying to cope with that? Or is it the other way around? Does what is inner determine how we perceive the outer?

In 1912, Freud talked about the use of normal projection as establishing the image of the external world. Grottstein notes that in fact “the external world is actually built up as projections of our perceptions and beliefs about our *internal* world” (Grottstein, p. 141). **In this way, projection makes perception.** All of this is unconscious, of course. The typical human experience is of living in and being at the effect the world, not creating it. But according to the psychoanalytic model, we create our world, forget that we did, and then react to our creation as if it created us. Cognitive theories such as SPAARS take their cue from this model – we have an unconscious set of core beliefs or schema that determine our perceptions and emotional experience and how we see the world.

According to Symington, as we all know ☺ the point isn't about **what** we feel at all – but rather *how we feel* about what we feel. Do I hate the feelings I am having, the thoughts I am thinking, or the way I am behaving? Such hatred is the primary cause of mental illness – it is the source of all splitting and projective identification. But as James Hillman says, “we need no deliverance from evil if we are not imagined to be evil in the first place.” (1975, p. 29).

When I was in college I was deeply affected by a book called *The House of Spirits*, by Isabel Allende. It is an epic story spanning four generations, tracing the post-colonial social and political upheavals of the Latin American country in which the family lives – most likely Chile, as many believe the book is a *roman à clef* about the family of Salvador Allende. Anyway, in the book, a main character, a young and beautiful woman named Alba, is taken as a political prisoner by a brutal regime. She is repeatedly raped, tortured, mutilated, and kept in a cage. Her fingers are cut off. She soon loses her will to live and one night is visited in a dream by her grandmother, Clara. Alba begs Clara for death, and Clara tells her that death is inevitable, not to worry about that. The extraordinary thing would be to *live*. The next morning when Alba awoke she began excitedly speaking with the other captives, encouraging them to have hope and to choose life. This made a huge impression on me. Alba sees the dream figure as more *real* than the guards who torment her. Alba's body is brutally broken and tortured, but look at that, her spirit is undiminished. Look at that, *she is free*.

Someone in Alba's state of mind probably wouldn't panic if she saw a bear coming towards her! ☺ She is so free she is likely ungoverned by even the most primitive of impulses or schema. The external world has lost its grip and influence over her. Despite a tortuous trip down into the depths of hell, into the darkest and most terrifying chasms of experience, Alba emerged intact, untouched, inviolate.

I bring up this example because the emotional and cognitive transformation she experienced is not easily accounted for in the theories I've brought up so far. Physiological impulses stemming from sensory perception, splitting and projecting which fashions the world to which I react, conscious and unconscious cognition...it seems that I am forgetting something...

Carl Jung had an idea. From his work “Psychology & Religion” (1938, London: Yale University Press):

It is, to my mind, a fatal mistake to consider the human psyche as a merely personal affair and to explain it exclusively from a personal point of view. Such a mode of explanation is only applicable to the individual in his ordinary everyday occupations and relationships. If, however, some slight trouble occurs, perhaps in the form of an unforeseen and somewhat extraordinary event, instantly instinctive forces are called up, forces which appear to be wholly unexpected, new, and even strange. They can no longer be explained by personal motives, being comparable rather to certain primitive occurrences like panics at solar eclipses and such things...The

change of character that is brought about by the uprush of collective forces is amazing. A gentle and reasonable being can be transformed into a maniac or a savage beast. One is always inclined to lay the blame on external circumstances, but nothing could explode in us if it had not been there. As a matter of fact, we are always living upon a volcano and there is, as far as we know, no human means of protection against a possible outburst which will destroy everybody within its reach. (pg. 17).

Savage beasts and volcanoes, yeah!! What Jung is talking about, of course, is what happens when one is seized by an archetypal complex. So here we have another answer to the cause-and-effect question. Instead of emoting as reaction to an external world, or sourced by an internal schema, we are instead vehicles of expression caught up and inside of autonomous complexes. Our emotions are not ours, they are not personal, but collective, archetypal. These internal figures – Shadow, Ego, Animus, Great Mother, Self, etc. - “These are the archetypes, the persons to whom we ultimately owe our personality. In speaking of them, Jung says “we are obliged to reverse our rationalistic causal sequence, and instead of deriving these figures from our psychic conditions, must derive our psychic conditions from these figures.” (Jung, CW 13, par. 299, 62). In other words, the idea that each of us has a personal independent psyche is backwards. I don’t have a soul inside of me, soul has me inside of it. According to Hillman, we live and move in psyche. The external forms we see originate in our imagination. They come and go, but soul is ever-present. When I ask the question of why I feel what I feel, I come closest to my *reality* when I see *through* the form to the idea behind it, the content *within* and expressed through the form, the vastness and beauty of soul. In Alba’s dream, Clara made an appeal to the *content* within Alba. While there is nothing so blinding as perception of form, Alba was able to see through it. By listening to the archetypal dream figure, she grasped that her reality, her true feeling, was not given by her fragile and broken body. In that moment of salvation, she identified with Soul instead.

The beauty of looking at affect through the lens of archetype is the lack of judgment inherent in this view. It is not personal, but in allowing it to be present in me, it becomes a part of me. I am being moved by a collective autonomous force, and rather than resist, judge, or hate my feelings, I can look instead in awe at the mystery of the psyche and even feel joy for my participation in it. To think that my tiny ego could refuse or stem the massive tide of archetypal complexes is...well, egotistical. To make welcome the movement of the archetypal complex through me requires my humility.

So then getting back to the question of whether I have emotions or they have me. I think the answer is yes and yes.

I will give a personal example. I have been living on my own for the first time in my life, and at times I feel overcome with sadness. Out of the blue my stomach begins to hurt and my chest feels tight. I think, “Wow, I am sad.”(William James!). Sometimes I look at the pain from a cognitive viewpoint and ask myself what the thoughts are

behind the sadness. Is this about the profound changes in my life and the loss of relatedness? Do I have a “faulty” core belief how I am perceiving my situation? I could look at those thoughts and work through them. I could even try to fix the external situation that seems to be causing my sadness – maybe call a friend. Often I am tempted to resist the pain and wiggle out of it by distracting myself with other things or ideas. And sometimes I hate the sadness and attempt to rid myself of it either by trying to talk myself out of it – “I am so fortunate, I have no reason to be sad” or going into a numb state. But I could also look at my feeling from a depth perspective. I could acknowledge that this pain coursing through me may not be personal. I could watch my sadness, personify it, interact with it, permit its existence in me, allow it to come through me and move me. Is it wanting something from me, or for me? This is the route I took the other day, and as I was walking aimlessly along State Street in Santa Barbara, allowing this sadness to possess me, I looked up and recognized one of only two people I have met in the two weeks since I have moved here! A retired man who reminded me of my father, he allowed me to interview him for a research class. He had been walking out of a coffee shop to lock his bike, and if he had not come out at that exact moment, I would have walked on by never seeing him. I was astounded by the synchronicity. He kissed me on the top of the head and I followed him in to share a pot of tea. We talked for two hours – he told me of his troubles with some of his friendships – and we helped each other.

Freud, S., (1912), Totem and taboo. *Standard Edition* 13:1-163

Grottstein, J. S. (1985). *Splitting and projective identification*. London: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology*. New York: HarperCollins.

Symington, N. (2002). *A pattern of madness*. London: H. Karnac (Books) Ltd.

ⁱ One problem with this theory is that it cannot give an adequate account of the differences between emotions. In 1962, Stanley Schacter and Jerome Singer injected subjects with epinephrine, a stimulant of the sympathetic system. They found that the subjects tended to interpret the arousal they experienced either as anger or as euphoria, depending on the type of situation they found themselves in.