

Psychological astrology: the marriage of heaven and hell



Mike Harding

This article was written during the autumn of 1995, when the shape of the sky was somewhat different. The planets have moved on somewhat, and so have I. Being given the opportunity by the Editor to make some changes, I have cut one or two paragraphs, and added some comments which appear in bold type within square brackets, and these generally indicate where I no longer agree with myself, or wish to add something. On re-reading the original, I was struck by the fact that, while I was critical of several psychotherapeutic approaches, I wrote virtually nothing about my own therapeutic modality. This was not to suggest that it is above criticism, but more in keeping with a central theme of mine – that astrology needs to develop its own language and ways of working with human issues, and not get subsumed in shifting therapeutic theories. Astrology has a richness and complexity that transcend any theoretical model I have encountered – including the philosophical works of Heidegger and Wittgenstein that inform much of my practice, though these two philosophers have many pertinent points to make regarding such complex issues as time, language and consciousness.¹

THE LAST FEW years have seen some unprecedented attacks on the foundation of psychoanalysis, and by implication, on the nature of psychotherapy itself. On 18th November, 1993, Professor Crews assembled an array of evidence in the *New York Review of Books*, much of it drawing on previously unpublished case notes or letters, that hit at the very heart of Freud's theories. Freud stood accused of basing his central ideas on just thirteen cases, which his private notes revealed were never resolved. None the less, he wrote them up as successes with such major changes of detail as altering the gender of some child abusers from female to male to fit in with the emerging oedipal theories that the cases were supposed to illustrate.

Jung's reputation has fared little better. The rumblings about his Nazi affiliations have grown louder and louder over the last few years, and his previously untranslated documents show a man praising the cause of Nazi "Raceology" to a degree that can no longer be seriously denied, with the *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie* carrying, under his editorship, a letter recommending Mein Kampf as the basic text for every psychotherapist.¹ At a more general level, historian Sonu Shamdasani's research reveals Jung as a man who lifted most of his ideas from the works of others and produced an autobiography that is essentially a work of fiction.² The result of all this has had some Jungians filling the pages of their own journals with articles that either question Jung further or announce their own defection to other camps. The Freudians for their part have covered their confusions by organising conferences with such titles as *Learning From Our Mistakes and Does Psychoanalysis Have a Future?*

The Uranus-Neptune conjunction is marking out what may be one of the most important turning points in human perception, where the ideas that came into being with the

last Neptune-Pluto conjunction are currently being held to the light and found wanting.³ It is ironic that just as the psychoanalytic bandwagon appears to be grinding to a halt, an increasing number of astrologers are trying to fight their way through the departing passengers to clamber aboard. There is no doubt that counselling skills are much needed by the consulting astrologer, but some of the ideas within the body of psychotherapy are questionable in the extreme. Before we commit ourselves to adopting them, we should first be clear about what these two quite different disciplines have to offer.

Counselling and psychotherapy

By and large, a counselling training is primarily concerned with imparting techniques for self-awareness, encouraging an ability to listen and to identify specific issues, and developing the capacity within the trainee to respond to them effectively and sensitively. **[Much of this sentence makes sense, but a "technique" for self-awareness? I don't know of any. How could I have written this? I meant something like "learn to listen, become aware of assumptions and how they can get in the way of hearing what someone is trying to say". In astrological terms this might include being open to different forms of charting. For example, a traditional astrologer commented that Freud "ought to have a Mercury-Pluto aspect" as so much of his work described such a pattern. He does. His Sun is on the Mercury/Pluto midpoint. How come that this is ignored at the same moment that its symbolism was recognised? The phenomenological approach that I advocate asks us to stay open to the implications of new possibilities and follow them, even if this risks disturbing our certainties.]** While some trainings may go further than this, there is no inherent demand for the counsellor to hold a specific view of the human being. Thus a counselling training is an ideal, and for many an essential component of

an astrologer's training. There is no need for the astrologer to abandon the astrological world-view, for many counselling approaches demand no particular theoretical affiliation. Learning to listen and respond sensitively is an enhancement of our every-day abilities. The practice of psychotherapy, however, can be very different.

The overwhelming majority of psychotherapies are based on quite complex models of human development. Their practice involves the systematic application of various techniques, which not only are claimed to demonstrate the veracity of the underlying model, but also are themselves extensions of it. Typically, everything the client and therapist do together is seen in terms of one of these models, and to argue against it is generally seen as resisting the process that is theoretically taking place. Here the clash between psychological and astrological models can be considerable. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to see how any real relationship between them is possible or even, for that matter, desirable.

Models of therapy

Astrologers have generally been attracted to traditional Jungian/Platonic views, relating concepts of archetypes to planetary principles and using the concept of synchronicity to support astrology's concern with the nature of time. There are many criticisms that can be made of this approach, which I have gone into in some depth elsewhere, and these will not be repeated here.⁴ It is striking, however, when considering Jung's importance to the astrological community, that there has been virtually no response to the various criticisms that have been levelled against his work from several quarters.

However, Jung's psychology is more than the general theory of racial evolution that has been so criticised, where personal growth and individuation are said to mirror the evolutionary process whereby the "primitive" black psyche becomes European and enlightened.⁵ It is also steeped in biological reductionism, nowhere more evident than in his claim that *"the brain of an English child will not work like that of the Australian black fellow but in the way of the modern English person . . . The brain is born with a finished structure, it will work in the modern way."*⁶ While Jung can be forgiven for not knowing that the brain is far from finished at birth, with vast amounts of neural connections formed only during the early months of life, and can also alter in later years, his confusion of mind and brain is typical of much psychoanalysis, as are the unconsidered implications of being born with a particular way of *knowing*. Nowhere is this problem seen more clearly than in the work of Melanie Klein. [**Here I seem to contradict myself, for does not the birth-chart suggest that the native is born with an innate orientation towards certain forms of experience? Indeed it does. The following paragraph on Klein may clarify this, as "object-relation" therapists make the assumption that we are all born with an identical pre-disposition to interpret the world in certain ways.**]

Relations with objects

In contrast to Freud's view of the human being, which was as someone seeking to reduce the instinctual tension between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind, Melanie Klein saw our goal lying in the relationships we have with others. She believed that these relationships were fuelled by our earliest perceptions, which were fragmentary and polarised around pleasurable and unpleasurable sensations. This became her theory of object relations.

In psychoanalytic terminology, everything we invest with importance is an *object*. People are objects and – for the infant – those *parts* of people that it identifies as giving pleasure or distress are also objects in their own right. Hence the breast can be a "good" object when associated with food and warmth, but a "bad" object if it evokes the infant's rage or its imagined desire to bite and destroy. Objects can be internalised or externalised, that is, the infant's internal feelings are said to be projected or its experience of the external world introjected. It is also claimed that how well the infant resolves its early recognition of the fact that much of what it has experienced as separate belongs to the same person and lays the foundation for its future psychic life. The goal of most psychoanalytic treatment lies in the client's recognition and assimilation of the residue of internal and external objects.

While it is striking that such psychoanalytic thought came from a group of people who were themselves refugees and seeking their own assimilation into the host community, these views have to be judged on their own merit, and not *themselves* seen as some form of projection. The questions facing those astrologers drawn to the object relations model is the extent to which its theoretical underpinnings are sustainable. The closer we look, the more shaky these foundations appear.

The Kleinian world is remorselessly Cartesian, almost making a virtue of the mind/body divide. Pre-verbal infants are claimed to have innate knowledge of the world as well as a cognitive grasp of their instinctual needs, even to the extent of being able to picture them in a way that is



Melanie Klein

comprehensible to adults. As the standard reference work on Klein describes it: *Instincts are represented in the mind as unconscious phantasies of relationships with objects. The various instincts give rise to phantasies of objects and active relationships with them that are not as yet known in external reality.*⁷ Put simply, the infant is presumed to be born with knowledge of the world, an intellectual ability to recognise and identify specific sensations, a capacity to locate them in space (inside or outside its body) and the mental wherewithal to comprehend spatial relationships. All these activities require considerable cognitive skills, and the ability to use these skills to make intellectual deductions about the nature of the experienced world.

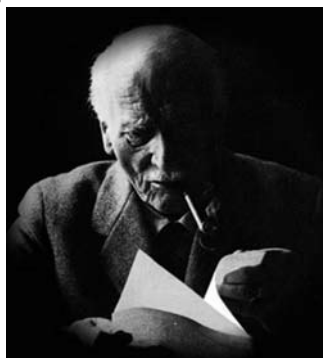
Those who have not considered this issue may be tempted to suggest that the infant simply *feels* the world is a certain way, but this just re-states the same problem. After all, without language, how can the infant actually identify what its feelings mean – indeed, from where does it get the idea that feelings have meanings in the first place? More importantly, how is the state of the world to be described, which it has to be if it is to be recognised as a specific state corresponding to a particular sensation? Even such simple acts as knowing that you have a body and that things exist outside it call for a grasp of specific linguistic concepts, and cannot be just assumed.⁸

To phantasise about events that “are not yet known in external reality” requires a language in which to do it, and also the amazing ability to recognise what “is not yet known”. I’m sure that we all wish that we could recognise what we don’t know. Language comprises rules, procedures, codes and meanings. For even the simplest language to be meaningful, the rules of its usage have to be consistent. These rules do not reside in us, but lie in language itself. We cannot invent them for ourselves because we would need the very rules of consistency that language gives us in order to know that our invention was consistent. Freud himself was only too aware of this sort of problem, writing: if we say “*At this point an unconscious memory intervened*”, what this means is: “*At this point something occurred of which we are totally unable to form a conception, but which, if it had entered our consciousness, could only have been described in such and such a way.*” While he correctly identifies a major issue, he immediately claims that the “unknown” could be described only in one way! How could we describe the unknown in *any* way if, by definition, we can’t know it?

This is not to suggest that infants do not have conflicting sensations, nor that nothing is real that is not in language. Much that intensely personal lies outside of our capacity to describe. Many therapeutic experiences evoke very early feelings that we might claim meant specific things to us at the time, but this is how we make sense of those experiences *now*, and may itself change when we reflect further on such episodes. In either event, we cannot abandon language and re-experience the preverbal state; we can only conjecture from the present. **[There are parallels here when it comes to looking at the origins of astrology, especially if such a project assumes that, in its beginnings, lay an immaculate truth, which, if we could only grasp it, would bring our current craft into perfection. While historical research can only be of value, serious problems arise if we assume that its findings suggest that (a) the ancients “got it right”, and (b) that we know what was actually meant at the time. Even overlooking the vast amount that has been written in current philosophy that casts doubt on the whole concept of “origins” (how can we ever know what was original if the few extant texts summarise the practice of earlier, pre-literate societies?) we also risk aping Klein in suggesting that an imagined past somehow provides the key that will unlock the quandaries of today. The past is another country, and however important our past might be, and what it might contribute to our problems, its investigation can take place only in the present. And for astrologers, this “present” is always on the move, and the concept of “the now”, and what the “now” might “be”, remains as problematic as it was for St Augustine, whose *Meditations on Time* can only be commended to all astrologers.]**

The psychotic experience

A number of astrology books follow Freud and Jung in claiming that psychosis is caused when the boundaries of the ego break down and the individual is overcome by forces in the collective. Again, parallels are drawn from the world of mechanics at some considerable cost to accuracy. Close experience of many people in a variety of psychotic states suggests



Carl Jung

to me that, far from being overtaken by the collective, the issues that concern the sufferer tend to be intensely personal. So personal, in fact, as to be often incomprehensible to others. The only clear aspect of the collective that is present – the nature and structure of our shared language – is not discussed.

Instead of thinking of ourselves as an object that exists as a discreet “self” in the world, let us consider the obvious: we were not born knowing we were a “self”; we learned it as we learned the nature of our world. In other words, to some extent we have learned to embody a linguistic concept. This is not easy for adults, much less children, to understand, and virtually all children will initially call themselves by their own name, rather than use the term “I”. This is not surprising, as the term “I” does not actually refer to any one thing; it is primarily a philosophical concept. You cannot point to an “I” any more than you can be aware of the “I” you might claim to be, in a way that locates this “I” separately from the experience that it is claimed to be having. That is, we are always conscious of something, be it a sensation or some aspect of the world. This sense of self is always relational; we are inextricably bound up in the world. **[I am aware that many mystics do report experiences of pure consciousness, but what seems to unify such reports, whether from Eastern or Western traditions, is the inability to say anything about it. As Wittgenstein put it: whereof we cannot speak, thereof we have to pass over in silence.]**

However, one way or another the vast majority of us fudge over this and describe ourselves as a psychic object; this is how we have been brought up to think in a world still influenced by Descartes. We locate ourselves as existing within our body and our experiences are similarly located there as an “inner world”. With the psychotic state, this may change dramatically.

For many individuals the psychotic state represents something like a collapse of this ordinary use of language. It is as if the concept of “I” ceases to be located anywhere; thoughts and feelings continue to be experienced, but they cannot be located within a self – there is no self to hold them. Frequently these intense thoughts and feelings then get located elsewhere; typically, “other people” are having them. As thoughts and feelings are invariably experienced as influencing us, it is now the “other people” who are invested with these powers. Therapeutic intervention is fraught with difficulty. Asking “how are you feeling?” or “what do you want?” is often meaningless: the individual no longer locates their thoughts or feelings within these linguistic concepts. The therapist is experienced as literally talking another language, using words that are at that moment beyond the realm of the client’s experience.

In fact, we do not need to go to the extremes of psychosis to see evidence of this process. In the West, we consistently privilege the concept of an individual “self”, but many cultures, particularly tribal ones, locate a sense of self within the tribe or extended family. An anthropologist might ask a native of such a culture what he or she thinks about something, only to be told that the others must be consulted before an opinion can be given. This is *not*, as the anthropologist might believe, so that the individual can be told what to say, but because the group is the “I” that has been asked the question. The “I” is signified by the group, not the individual, for the self is not a thing but a concept, and like all concepts can be applied in differing ways.

Projections

Just as we can locate concepts of the self within our own body, within our immediate family or tribe, or within others, so can we locate our thoughts and sensations in all sorts of places. We invariably lose sight of this possibility because of the mechanistic way in which we have been taught to interpret our experience. If we cease to think of our feelings or sensations as objects that have to be inside or outside, then our view of the world can change dramatically, and change in a manner that would seem to accord with the nature of astrological description. **[I might speak of “my” birth chart, but it is not my chart, but a diagram of a moment in time when all sorts of things will be taking place in the world. While the angles change with every location, the planets hold their positions. Go to the Internet and check out what was happening on the day you were born. Are these events “projections”, or part of a moment in which your birth participated?]**

Suppose I claim that I am always the victim of other people's behaviour; that it is *they*, never *me*, who behave badly. The traditional model would view this in terms of projection; I would be presumed to have some unresolved psychic issue “inside me”. When someone who fits the bill comes along, I “project” psychic energy into that person and once again get caught up in whatever is the typical problem of my unresolved issue. But do we really believe we have feelings inside us that behave like projectiles and go into people? Is this how it actually feels to us, or have we been told we behave that way?

Yes, it often feels as if the problem we have is within the other person: it is not experienced as being our own, and we can usually justify our sensations very well, for the person we have identified generally proves to have similar issues in their own life. We are behaving in similar ways, and there is an echo of the psychotic experience: our sense of something – let us say anger or power issues – is not linguistically located within ourselves, but located elsewhere, within another person. This person signifies the sensations that we clearly *recognise* but equally do not own. Anger *was* first experienced in the other person; power *did* reside in someone else. In such cases, it is as if our language has somehow got stuck at the point when this was first shown to us, and our way of describing the world has not expanded to recognise how we are also an active participant in our life. **[In the lectures that Heidegger gave to psychiatrists in Zollikon, he observed that no one can project their “evil” into another as if passing an object across a room, and thus be free of it. If they are “evil” then no amount of linguistic games can remove it. Interestingly, Heidegger maintained an absolute silence as to his brief association with the NAZI party.]**

Exploring this within the therapeutic situation may allow us to see more clearly how we have defined our world, and how we locate our experience within *it*. Obviously, specific issues may also be located bodily; after all, Freud's work began with his recognition of hysterical symptoms as “speaking” for the patient. But we are not looking at psychic energy flowing from mind to body, for this would perpetuate the Cartesian divide. Instead, we look for how and where our experiences are located in the world – what “speaks” to us, or presents itself in ways we can understand. All the issues that would normally be dealt with by regarding such issues as “projections” can still be addressed, but in a framework that is non-mechanistic and in which our world is opened up as one with us. Here Jung, who has written much on the

consequence of “projections”, offers a surprising observation. In *Visions* (Vol 1, edited by Claire Douglas, Routledge 1998, page 450) he states that “*Nothing has ever been projected, that is a wrong concept really, the term projection is wrong. A so-called projection is simply a thing which is discovered to be outside. And it then becomes integrated by the discoverer himself. Our psychology was all found outside, it was never in our pockets.*” Indeed. And we continually find it in the present, albeit a present that is constantly on the move. The boundaries between the experience of inner and outer slip and slide with our state of being. For those in psychotic states, who have temporarily lost self-signification, this can be terrifying. The “external” world holds everything that they (previously) felt themselves to be, and often an enormous rigidity ensues, as the principle of Saturn desperately attempts new boundaries. Typically, their behaviour becomes rigid and repetitive, or frozen to the point of autism. Language becomes excessively controlled; speech and thoughts have bizarre structure or sentences are endlessly repeated in an attempt to impose an order on events.

One hand clapping

There is an enormous paradox here, familiar to any student of Zen: the self is both intensely real, but ultimately a fiction. We need to feel solid and secure, yet know from experience the “deeper” we go into ourselves the more insubstantial we become; at core is the nothingness from which we first emerged. To completely lose this sense of self, we must first have a clear and consistent grasp of it. If, for whatever reason, we grew up with a haphazard awareness of who we are, a person who is not really located in the world, or with an identity that is defined by the shifting needs of others, as the work of R. D. Laing observes, then when life confronts us inescapably with the reality of this, whether through biochemistry, odd mental states, exhaustion, or psychedelic drugs, the effect can be shattering: we lose what we have known ourselves to be and have nowhere else to go; madness or enlightenment can ensue.

The solar principle represents this problematic sense of self for us, by symbolising the particular nature of the principle that holds this concept. The mechanics of the solar system show how this sense of self rests on a myth: for the sun is *not* the centre of our planetary system. The true centre lies in the combined gravitational effects of the planets themselves. These form a point in space, known as the *centre of mass*, around which all the bodies revolve. Even the sun itself is pulled to and fro in an oscillating orbit by this force. While this movement can also be demonstrated to mirror many cyclical occurrences on earth, it is a movement around a point of *nothingness*, perfectly symbolising the illusory nature of its role.

R. D. Laing was one of the few psychoanalysts who largely abandoned the rigidities of his initial training in favour of developing open and equal ways of working with those in emotional distress. Although exploring many psychological, philosophical and spiritual ways of describing the human



R. D. Laing

condition, he was most consistently phenomenological.¹⁰ That is, his approach was concerned with describing rather than explaining, and understanding rather than labelling. In speaking of the emotional fractures human beings can experience in life, he had this to say about Time: "the time that we are in unites us, we are always in the same time, we're in a different space and location, but we're in the same time. So there is a thought that some people are split more; time and space for some people are frantic because they are not in the same space with each other. They feel separated by space, whereas some people feel that they are always connected. Once they have made their relationship, they are always in the same time so that they are never really apart."¹¹

It would seem to me that Laing's words touch on something that is central to astrology: the chart shows how we have Time in common with others. It shows those points of contact that might be called instinctive, or essential, where we are orientated around common ways of experiencing and being. The power of astrology for both exploring and picturing the human condition seems to lie in the fact that it is not a model that reduces, but one that opens up. We need not return to infantile desires or the archetypal matrix. It is something like a map of the time in which we all participate, a map that shows our specific openness to events, the points where we may make most clearly our contact with the world of others. But however it may be personalised within our own culture and language, it is not a map of us, but of the temporal landscape we inhabit.

In this landscape there is no inner or outer, no conscious or unconscious. The patterns in "our" chart point equally to our family, and to our friends and partners, as they do to the objects we own and the things we do, and all that is happening around us. They effortlessly encompass the events and ideas that mark our life as we acknowledge that the consequences of each transit can arrive from any quarter, and in any guise. In short, the language of the chart reminds us again and again that we and our world are one.

We have barely begun to use this language, to see where it might lead us. As I suggested in *Hymns to the Ancient Gods*, we are constantly describing astrology in the language of others, and in doing so disallow its potential for challenging prevailing views of the world. In too hastily adopting ideas from psychotherapy, which are often flawed, reactionary or downright nonsense, we are doing ourselves no service, and only delaying further the day when astrology might at last speak for itself.

Endnotes for Introduction

1 See my article on Wittgenstein and astrology at <http://www.valentino-salvato.net/Astrology/articles.htm>

Notes and references of original article

1. See the work of Andrew Samuels, in particular the *Journal of the Society of Analytical Psychology*, Vols 37, Nos. 1 and 2, Vol. 48, No. 4 and Vol. 39, No. 2.
2. Sonu Shamdasani has presented his findings to astrologers during the "Is There Life After Jung?" seminar at the Urania Trust in 1994. He has also run a series of seminars on the work of Jung at Regent's College, London, during 1992.
3. See the 1993 Carter Memorial lecture "Losing our Causes", by Michael Harding in *The Astrological Journal* Vol. 36, Nos. 2 and 3.
4. See *Hymns to the Ancient Gods*, by Michael Harding, Penguin/Arkana 1992. In particular chapters 2-4.

5. For the fullest account of Jung's thinking here see *Jung: A Racist*, by Farhad Dalai in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 1988, 4:3.
6. See Jung's *Collected Works*, Vol. 18, page 41.
7. *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, by R. D. Hinshelwood. Free Association Books, 1989.
8. For further discussion on this, see the Carter Memorial Lecture (*ibid*) and *The Home of Language: A New Look at the Moon*, by Michael Harding and Gaila Yariv in *The Astrological Association Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2.
9. See Freud's *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, pages 105-106.
10. For a fuller description of the phenomenological approach to therapy, and its possible application for astrologers, see *Astrology & Phenomenology*, by Mike Harding in *The Astrological Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3, May/June 1993.
11. See *Mad to be Normal: Conversations with R. D. Laing*, edited by Bob Mullan. Free Association Books, London, 1995.

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