

# Demythologising an Archetype

The text of this open letter to Steven Kull criticises his thesis that war is the outworking of a species-threatening Archetype of Destruction inherent in human behaviour. It presses behind his Jungian assumptions to analyse the origins of the archetype and indicates that destructive behaviour is a learned response capable of modification, rather than an unalterable instinctive reaction. Steven Kull is a psychologist and a Fellow of the Institute of Peace and Common Security in San Francisco. He is currently carrying out a research project on the psychology of the Soviet-American nuclear arms race.

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Thank you for the two articles [Nuclear Arms and the Desire for World Destruction, Political Psychology, Vol.4, No.3, 1983, pp.563 - 591 and War as a Species Disorder, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol.24, No.3, Summer 1984, pp. 55 - 64] and accompanying letter. We are clearly struggling with a common agenda, although obviously approaching it from different social, academic and practical backgrounds.

I have worked over your material in some detail, found myself excitedly in agreement with your thesis and yet again and again wanting to push you back into causal analysis of material which you present as assumption, as archetype, or otherwise 'uncaused cause' of the symptoms you so accurately describe.

Over the last few years we have been particularly concerned with the analysis of common social defence mechanisms, by which I do not mean defences against overt contemporary aggressors, but intra-psychic defences against shared experiences of neurotic and psychotic anxiety, terror, rage and grief. In so doing we have had to probe behind the assumptions of the classical analysts and have come to recognise as learned and experienced pre-verbal pre- and peri-natal material much that Freud described as instinctive, or which in the Jungian schema gives rise to the archetypes of the common unconscious. As soon as a behaviour is designated 'archetypal' it is as if further causal analysis is rendered taboo.

I would now argue that the experience of living in a threatening, or potentially aggressive environment, and in particular the experience of actual attack from that environment triggers, or reactivates, common trauma of perinatal impingement. This in turn leads to the use of extremely primitive defences against the anxieties aroused, including idealisation or splitting, projection, denial and the depersonification of the out-group as some kind of malignantly threatening cervix. War can thus be seen as the common ritual enactment of the shared perinatal drama. The depersonalising of the out-group or 'pseudo-speciation' acts as a 'filter' to over-ride the instinctual inhibition against killing one's own species.

In attributing this material to the development of the human cortex it seems to me that you have provided a necessary but insufficient ground of argument. Our own species does appear to possess a unique level or capacity for learning and retaining very complex patterns of information. It is now clear that this facility is already active within the intrauterine

condition and that the experience of birth is probably the most powerful and intense imprint normally received by a human being. In other words the capacity of the enlarged cortex is essential for the development of 'the archetype of world destruction' but that self- and environmental-destructive impulses do not necessarily arise simply from the condition of an enlarged cortex. It is clearly quite inadequate to postulate uncaused 'archetypes of destruction' as if by producing some rabbit out of the hat one had magically explained how this aberrant behaviour came to be. When you write 'we may assume that these behaviours are generated by the activity of the cortex overriding the more primitive tendencies of the lower brain' I want to ask, 'On what basis?' 'Why?'. In the absence of satisfactory answers represented by inadequate causal analysis the rest of your construction seems to me to bear very little weight, accurate in description though it may be.

One consequence of the enlarged cortex is, of course, the enlarged cranial diameter which renders the passage of birth itself very much more painful and moves the stress levels of parturition towards the transmarginal. Another factor which must be borne in mind is the change of posture to an upright position, which appears to have occurred at about the same period of evolution. This change also had considerable impact upon the process of birth. Firstly there was a thickening and strengthening of the pelvic skeleton, together with a tightening of the musculature which meant that the larger head had an even harder passage through the birth canal. Another effect of the upright posture which has come to my attention from the medical literature over the last 18 months is that the weight of the full-term foetus instead of being held pendant under the mother's tummy rests down into the pelvic girdle and presses on the main veins and arteries carrying blood to and from the placenta. The result is a normal condition of malnutrition and hypoxia during the last weeks before birth leading to degrade in the main organs responsible for stress handling, namely heart, liver and kidneys, at a point at which the full-term foetus is required to carry very high levels of stress indeed. There appear to be common patterns of under-resourced, environmentally threatening impingement, rapid change, stress, anxiety, life-threat, separation and loss of the known world held repressed behind the primitive defence mechanisms and shared as a common deposit of varying intensity across the whole species. It is, I suggest, this deposit, together with the development of common symbols, reifications, ritual and mythology that gives rise to the pattern of archetypal images and in particular to the archetype of common threat, with its common response, destructive retaliation or in extreme cases, imploded self-destruction.

I think we shall find some confirmation of this way of understanding the material by noting that the very personalities who tend to head up the highly rigid militaristic ideology share a very rigid defence structure. There are high levels of polarisation or idealisation, leading to perception in terms of black and white, good and bad, us and them. The defences are also characterised by paranoid projection onto the out-group and the repression of negativities within the defined boundaries of idealisation. These are precisely the characteristics demonstrated by people who have had a more than usually stressful or traumatic perinatal impingement, often reinforced in the post-natal field and anticipated during gestation.

One of the results of cathartic abreaction and resolution of primal stress is precisely the reduction in idealisation, the decay of the projection of absolute qualities onto given fields, and an increase in what we would call 'reality-orientation', less disturbed by the projection of primal phantasy, less split by dissociation into good and bad fields, less overlaid with elements of environmentally induced paranoia from a universe perceived to provide inadequate resources. Finally, resolution of pre- and peri-natal trauma also leads to a certain

amount of catharsis of the loss involved, so lowering the tendency to seek to regain the pre-full-term conditions of the idealised intrauterine space, any disruption of which triggers psychotic anxiety of perinatal threat and therefore leads to the corporate acting out of group paranoia, ultimately reified into boundary conflict at national and international level.

I have gone to some length in this response because I sense that there are massive and very practical differences in the possibilities for the resolution of war-like behaviours which depend upon our understanding of the causes of the behaviour itself.

If we postulate that there is a universal archetype of destruction, then I think you are absolutely right to indicate that all we can do is work towards a modification of its practical outworking in human behaviour in ways which are less species destructive. If, on the other hand, we press behind such an assumption to the analysis of the origin of the archetype itself and come to see that archetype as a learned response to actual impingement, then there are very much more powerful possible interventions available to us. For instance there is the possibility of analysis, catharsis, and integration, so lowering the level of repressed material which itself energises the defence constructs which emerge as the presenting archetype. Then there is the widening of understanding of the archetype and its enactment as the activation of neurotically repressed common primal material. This in turn helps to withdraw energy from the displacement of the causation of war into current arguments about economics, resources etc. so enabling more functional problem-solving of this kind of conflict without being overwhelmed by the psychotically energised reactivated primal drama. Thirdly, there is the programme which works in the long term towards the minimising of pre- and peri-natal trauma and the establishing of norms of integrational catharsis for the residual patterns of stress still laid down. Such a programme also has massive implications for our understanding of the processes whereby different ideologies are reified and absolutised, including the major political and religious systems of the present world order.

It is a daunting agenda, but one in which the stakes are high and the price of failure could well be extinction.

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