

## Reply to Whitmont, “The Destiny Concept in Psychoanalysis”

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“Your destiny lies with me, Skywalker”

—Darth Vader to Luke Skywalker,  
*Star Wars, Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*

Edward Whitmont’s paper provokes a number of reactions, some linked to the time at which it was originally written, others of a more general nature, having to do with both the concept of destiny and the implications of the concept for clinical practice. These aspects of the paper necessarily interact with one another, but it is also possible to examine them separately. In what follows, I will attempt to do a little of both.

Whitmont’s theme is the ancient notion of *amor fati*, the love or embrace of one’s fate. Citing Jung, Whitmont sets out to make the case that meaning accrues to the individual through this act of commitment to the destiny set in motion by the archetypal dimension of one’s life. “Thus, destiny, or fate,” Whitmont writes, “is the unfolding of the Self-archetype in time and space” (p. 25). As Whitmont elaborates this basic principle, we quickly come to see that the role of space is negligible in his conceptual scheme, while time comes to center stage. Events that “we have habitually considered to be causes of . . . psychopathology,” become, on Whitmont’s reading, “manifestations of an emergent life-pattern” (p. 25). But this notion of a life-pattern is not a simple unfolding, emergent or otherwise, in a serial order, of a life history. Rather, and importantly, the notion of destiny establishes a relationship in time that can best be termed a calling from the future.

This is a critical element of Whitmont’s argument, and it involves us in some of the most interesting as well as problematic theoretical aspects of his paper—there are also clinical issues, to which I will return below. To some extent, these theoretical issues echo the pattern of thinking about destiny in the Western tradition. The *Iliad*, to take the one of the most culturally fundamental examples, is essentially a meditation on the destiny of Achilles, whose fate or destiny is set by the will of Zeus. The endless carnage of the epic is almost entirely focused on providing the basis for incorporating Achilles’ eventual doom into Zeus’s plan for his heroic immortality. Absent a host of other great warriors, all of whom Achilles overcomes, his death would have little meaning, as was undoubtedly the case with the vast numbers of lesser warriors whose demise goes unremarked by

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Homer. In Whitmont's terms, Zeus, as the superordinate organizer—one of Jung's definitions of the self—of the Trojan war has it in mind from the beginning that Achilles will meet his fate outside the walls of the great city. Also, Achilles is totally aware of the destiny that is laid out before him, and it is his embrace of that destiny, his *amor fati*, that drives him forward, demanding ever-greater achievements precisely to insure that his exploits will become immortal. And, as we learn in the *Odyssey*, it is Achilles' exploits in life that remain, the man himself being reduced to a shade in the underworld, reminiscing about the good old days with the murdered Agamemnon. This then is the destiny of Achilles; that his exploits in life should become one of the touchstones of Western culture, while he himself becomes a phantom, a mere specter.

Zeus, of course, is the real agent in all of this. The other gods and goddesses, even the beloved daughter of Zeus, Athena, do not dare to influence events in favor of their designated heroes if doing so would in any way interfere with Zeus's overall plan. The Trojans are doomed from the beginning, Hector must fall to Achilles, the death of Patroclus only matters to the extent that it further enrages Achilles and sets him once again in the middle of the battle. Everything in the epic is intended to advance the destined outcome. In that degree we could conceive of the *Iliad* as a study in the emergence of a life-pattern, in which it is the self that determines the action. Zeus knows the end of things, he has promised the sea nymph Thetis, the mother of Achilles, that her son will become a great hero, and he intends to stand by his word. It is at this point that I want to take up Whitmont's use of modern science as a stand-in for the temporal foreknowledge of Zeus. This is, to my mind, a particularly problematic aspect of Whitmont's paper. It is one thing for a god to have foreknowledge; it is quite something else for the element cobalt to have foreknowledge.

Whitmont's argument about time in relation to destiny is actually very Greek. There is a pattern to the attainment of wholeness that to some degree unfolds of necessity. Thus, "the past comes to view [sic] when regarded as the first stage and necessary setting for present and future unfoldment." To the extent that this is the case, the emotional sufferings of childhood "may be seen not just as accident or misfortune but as a destined emotional impasse essential for the actualization of our own particular pattern of wholeness." At this point, early into his paper, Whitmont turns to physics for justification of his argument, which, as he says, "may seem absurd to our ordinary, scientific thinking" (p. 26). And, unfortunately, it is at this point that some housekeeping chores are necessary. Whitmont cites, as a source for these reflections, a paper entitled "Physics Reveals that Evolution Has a Goal," which he attributes at several points in his paper, as well as in the bibliography, to the social theorist Jacques Choron. When I first read Whitmont's paper I was a bit perplexed as to why Choron, a writer known for several books on death and suicide, would be writing on quantum mechanics.

I finally located the paper itself on microfilm at the University of Chicago, and initially discovered that, while the citation was correct in terms of title, journal source, and volume, the paper was actually written by one Jean E. Charon, a French physicist and follower of Teilhard de Chardin. The paper is first of all an attempt to underwrite some of Teilhard's notions about the unity of life in the universe, and in pursuit of that goal Charon indulges in what can only be called extraordinary

speculative gymnastics. I do not want to digress into an unnecessarily extended discussion of this paper, but it is important to realize that the passages cited by Whitmont derive from Charon's own speculations about the meaning of what physicists call the violation of parity in certain sub-atomic events, and not from the actual physics involved. Charon accomplishes this shift in emphasis by proposing a strange thought-experiment regarding an anthropomorphized sun, conscious of its passage through time. Charon then proposes that the upper and lower hemispheres of the sun are imagined to be consciously looking in different temporal directions—past and future—as the sun passes through a temporal tube or continuum. The point of this thought experiment is to illustrate how the violation of parity at the sub-atomic level impacts our understanding of temporality.

The question of temporality at the sub-atomic level has been a subject of speculative controversy for nearly a century among quantum physicists. Charon, however, intends to argue that the then recently discovered violations of parity in the decay patterns of cobalt atoms by Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang (who shared the Nobel Prize in 1957 for their discovery), following a suggestion by Richard Feynman, tell us something substantive about Teilhard's notions about the unity of life and the universe. It appears to me that this objective is part of the motivation for Charon's use of the sun analogy—he intends to argue that the issues of parity and temporality that occasionally emerge at the sub-atomic level of quantum mechanics can be extended to temporally embedded systems generally, in order to use quantum mechanics to validate Teilhard. As far as I can tell, because the paper is so peculiar in its structure and argument that it is often difficult to know exactly what Charon is arguing, he attempts this in his comments on the existence of evolutionary fields, which gives rise to the idea that physics proves that evolution has a goal, a notion Charon acknowledges is rejected by evolutionary biologists. Here the argument, to put it in the form of a syllogism, seems to be that (1) carbon atoms, like cobalt atoms, are subject to quantum field forces which are subject to temporal influence from the "future" (future states determine prior states), (2) evolution—i.e., life—deals with entities made up of carbon atoms, therefore, (3) evolution must be subject to quantum field forces, which, because they pertain to evolving organisms, we can now designate as evolutionary field forces and therefore evolutionary processes are subject to the same temporal forces that may, under special circumstances, affect quantum phenomena. The problem here is that while questions of temporality do arise at the quantum level, it is a serious conceptual mistake to assume that quantum phenomena scale to the macro level—we still use Newton's laws of motion to fly into space, and most people would find it odd to invoke quantum-level phenomena to explain space travel—while at the same time, macro-level analogies—Schrödinger's cat is a good example—are intended to be illustrative of problems, not descriptions of macro-phenomena subject to quantum effects. The same situation applies to Charon's attempt to link quantum phenomena having to do with temporality at the sub-atomic level—which remains an area of intense controversy—with the almost entirely macro-level phenomena of evolution. To be clear on this, while it may be the case that some quantum-level phenomena may have some measurable impact on genetic mutation, and thereby on evolutionary process, evolution by variation and natural selection is fundamentally a macro-

level process—macro in this case meaning at the molecular and larger levels of scale for variation, and entirely at the organism/environment interface for selection. To argue that by virtue of exotic temporal phenomena at the quantum level one can assume equally exotic temporal phenomena at the level of evolutionary processes is, therefore, to stretch the power of analogy beyond the breaking point. But this is precisely what Charon wants to do, in order to vindicate his hero, Teilhard, and it is what Whitmont wants to appropriate from Charon in order to vindicate his own notions about the nature of destiny in the life of the individual. Basically for Whitmont it seems that if we accept the notion that evolution is governed by future states moving “backwards” through time, which is what Charon wants to claim is underwritten by quantum mechanics, then it is but a small step to argue the life of the individual is governed by future states, i.e., destiny. It would take a much longer reply than is appropriate here to go into all the details of why Whitmont’s assumptions about quantum mechanics, not to mention the peculiar use made of quantum mechanics by Charon, are simply wishful thinking when applied to evolution or the lives of individuals. One could start, however, with the proposition that quantum phenomena can only be analyzed in terms of probabilities rather than in terms of discrete outcomes for individuals—Schrödinger’s cat relies on what is called the collapse of the wave function to move from quantum indeterminacy to a discrete outcome, which was, in fact, what Schrödinger was arguing was impossible—and therefore we should not be able to make any claims about the state of an individual person by appeal to quantum mechanics. The individual does not have a destiny calling them from the future, only a probability function that is easily understood in terms of prior life experience—it is more probable that a poor child will remain poor than that a rich child will become poor, although neither outcome is impossible.

Why would it be important to Whitmont to enlist what one would think even a relatively naïve layperson would recognize as a questionable paper, in need at a minimum of some critical confirmation from another authority, to underwrite a sophisticated clinical paper? The answer can be found if we look at Whitmont’s paper without the appeal to physics or evolution. What we then have, I believe, is an argument based on perspective. In large measure, the problem of perspectivalism is intrinsic to the work of psychology and certainly to analytic and therapeutic practice. Sonu Shamdasani (2003) has given us an excellent introduction to Jung’s interest in the “personal equation” in his recent *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology*, and the issue of perspective clearly shaped Jung’s (1913) work on typology, which originated in his attempt to understand why Freud and Adler—and no doubt Jung himself—could look at the same phenomena and come to such different theoretical conclusions. There is, nevertheless, something uncomfortable about perspectivalism. A case can be made that the rediscovery of perspective by Alberti and other Renaissance artists marks the beginning of Modernity (Harries, 2001) and that a straight line can be drawn from Renaissance perspective to nineteenth- and twentieth-century nihilism. The nihilistic impulse, articulated by Nietzsche, among others, sought to undercut the Western metaphysical tradition by insisting that all metaphysical statements were essentially interpretations driven by extra-metaphysical impulses, such as the will to power in the case of Nietzsche.

Jung insisted that he was not making “metaphysical” claims about the nature of the world but only reporting psychological observations. But in his attempts to link his theories, particularly the theory of synchronicity, to quantum mechanics he was clearly trying to give an explanation for his acausal observations from a point of view in modern science, which is founded on a set of metaphysical commitments. It is to Jung’s credit that in his correspondence with Pauli on these matters he remained open to Pauli’s critical replies to Jung’s often mistaken interpretations of quantum mechanics (Meier, 2001). Nevertheless, there is in Jung, and in much Jungian theorizing, evidence of a strong desire for some extrapsychological—and metaphysical—bottom stop on which to rest the theory. For the sake of completeness, I would distinguish this impulse from the enlistment of analytical tools and experimental results from other fields, such as cognitive psychology, to inform our clinical observations and guide theory-building.

If, then, we jettison the physics, as well as the metaphysical speculation of Charon, in Whitmont’s paper, we are left with a study in perspective. When Whitmont writes, “Thus what must be experienced at the age of sixty-six could well necessitate and precipitate certain experiences at the age of three or four” (p. 28), we can only read the passage in the frame of “as if.” At the age of sixty-six, we can view the events of age three or four *as if* they were necessitated by the place we are now at. Indeed, the problematic nature of Whitmont’s strategy exposes itself in his somewhat disdainful reference to the hippies (p. 31). Given the number of “hippies” who subsequently became Silicon Valley millionaires and even billionaires it can only be the case that their impending future state determined the necessity of their indulgence in “impressive gestures of rebellion and reform.” It was because Bill Gates was destined to become the richest man in the world that he had to drop out of Harvard.

While these comments may seem casually flippant, I believe there is a serious ethical issue at stake in talk of destiny and *amor fati*. A disturbing aspect of Whitmont’s paper is what to my mind is a dangerously casual relationship to trauma, particularly childhood trauma. On the day that I began writing this response to his paper the *New York Times* reported the conviction, in Florida, of one John E. Couey for the murder of Jessica Lunsford (Aguayo, 2007). This was no simple murder, however. Kidnapped at night from her home, this nine-year-old girl was raped and then buried alive in a plastic bag under Couey’s trailer home. At this point we are on the threshold of theodicy, the justification of God—or the Self—in the face of extraordinary evil. If this event, and so many others like it, is in some sense “the unfoldment of the self in space and time,” we are in seriously deep theoretical and ethical waters. Precisely whose destiny is in need of embrace at this point, the girl’s, the killer’s, the girl’s parents’, or all of ours?

It seems to me that a strong notion of destiny—that is, a notion that there exists some future state of affairs, known to some superordinate knower who guides the course of events as Zeus guided the Trojan War—is highly problematic on both theoretical and ethical grounds. It cannot be vindicated by any external referent without making metaphysical claims Jung wanted to avoid, and it too easily leads inexorably to the worst possible ethical conclusions. Nevertheless, I think a case can be made for the clinical utility of something closer to Jung’s original notion of the teleological moment in the workings of the psyche. This is the

explanation given in his dissertation for the somnambulistic manifestations of his cousin Helene Preiswerk (Jung, 1970). Any moderately well-trained Freudian analyst would undoubtedly have a reductive field day with Helene's behavior, but it has always struck me as one of Jung's singular insights to cast the material of the séances, at least in part, as Helene's effort to find a way forward, out of childhood and into becoming an adult woman. In my own practice I have "inherited" a number of clients who have been in Freudian analysis, often for years, who have come away disappointed by the relentlessly reductive point of view on their circumstances, only to be both taken aback and greatly relieved by the simple question, "I wonder where this issue is taking you?"

Whitmont's case, ironically, appears to rely far more on just such an introduction of an alternative point of view—more an *amor ars perspectiva* than an *amor fati*—than it does on some notions about the cognitive faculties of sub-atomic particles. Indeed, Whitmont summarizes the resolution of the case he presents by writing, in a distinctly perspectival idiom:

But now in *viewing her situation* (past, present, and future) as a single encompassing whole, as an unfolding destiny pattern, the patient gained the sense that whatever happens at a given point of time "belongs" to it as an indispensable part of the picture. The embittered deadlock between her hopes and daydreams, her vocation and the drab reality that she evaded, could be accepted as something more than immaturity or illness; it could be accepted as a valuable, integral part of a larger structure still to be realized—indeed, to be created. In recognizing the value of her suffering, in seeing it as potentially creative material, she experienced a feeling of freedom and the sense that a creative attitude could arise within her; this was the beginning of a love of her fate, of *amor fati*. (p. 35, emphasis added)

It seems that as Whitmont comes to the conclusion of his paper he may be more aware of the actual foundations of his argument than he allowed at the beginning. "With *amor fati*," he writes, after the passage just quoted, "or at least the acceptance of the idea of a personal destiny, life can be understood as something more than a never-ending attempt to right past wrongs (all that has been done to us)" (p. 35). This formulation is entirely an endorsement of assuming a point of view on one's situation, and if Whitmont had only realized that Charon was constructing a point of view on some recent work in physics, albeit a singularly exotic point of view, he might have avoided some serious problems going forward. Be that as it may, Whitmont's frequent invocation of a "point of view" in these concluding moments of his paper alerts us to the central issue that his paper actually gives rise to for contemporary theoretical and clinical work. Susan Oyama (1993), a historian and philosopher of science, has argued persuasively that the very notion of a pattern, or foundational structure to reality—destiny in the present context—is a distinctly Western notion. The alternative, she argues, is a more Eastern conception of reality, which is itself closer to the contemporary understanding of developmental emergence—the appearance of states of affairs that could not be predicted by recourse to prior states, but that are not governed

by some Platonic or otherwise defined transcendent pattern either. Near the beginning of his paper, Whitmont remarks that on the basis of the position he intends to elaborate, “psychopathology may perhaps now be viewed as manifestations of an emergent life-pattern” (p. 25). It is not clear to me that Whitmont had an understanding of emergence that would be identical to the discussions of emergent phenomena in contemporary Jungian literature (Cambray, 2006; Hogenson, 2001; Hogenson, 2005), but here we do have a clue to a way forward. Whitmont’s overarching concern, and I take it to be the concern of all clinicians, is to help those who come to us for analysis to find a way to integrate experience and establish some sense of the meaning of it all. The problematic of modernity, one can argue, is determining whether meaning derives from one’s point of view, or does it arise, *sub specie aeternitatis*? The reprinting of Whitmont’s complex and problematic paper allows us another opportunity to engage this critical issue.

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