

A Multi-Causal Approach To Synchronicity

Zachary Stinson

ABSTRACT: Synchronicity has long been described as an ‘acausal’ connecting principle. However, the use of this descriptor is not only misleading, but also outright false on any seriously considered picture of synchronicity due to admissions of multiple types of causes. Furthermore, previous attempts to clarify the ‘acausal’ label have served only to further muddy the waters of discussion. A ‘multi-causal’ conception of synchronicity is proposed to ease and encourage future discussion in many disciplines.

Synchronicity is a nefariously slippery topic. I contend that much of the confusion surrounding synchronicity stems from describing it as ‘acausal.’ The myriad of explanations and interpretations of this terminology muddy the waters of discussion. In my search to better understand this topic, I have arrived at the position that synchronicity should be described, instead, as ‘multi-causal.’ Gestures made to Aristotelian conceptions of causes favor the adoption of a ‘multi-causal’ description of synchronicity, and conflict with the current ‘acausal’ conception. More importantly, though, conceiving of synchronicity as ‘multi-causal’ opens discussion in many disciplines, whereas the term ‘acausal’ has immensely limited the conversation.



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Since I posit that synchronicity is better understood as ‘multi-causal,’ I shall attempt to explain synchronicity one cause at a time while addressing my concerns with the ‘acausal’ label and previous attempts to clarify it. I shall first explain the basics of synchronicity and the intimately related process of individuation, including the invocation of Aristotelian causes made by Jung and Mansfield. I shall then illustrate how these two thinkers, as well as Aziz, implicitly acknowledge material and formal causes. Finally, I shall address the substantive lack of efficient causal discussion, which I credit to the continued description of synchronicity as ‘acausal.’ When appropriate, I shall highlight pertinent philosophical points of interest.

Synchronicity, Individuation, ‘Acausal’, and Final Causes

Synchronicity is a term employed to describe a connection between two events.¹ These events are symbolically expressive of a need for compensation and integration of unconscious content into ego-consciousness.² One of the events, the objective event, is a public occurrence in the realm of normal sense perception. The other event, the subjective event, is only existent in the mind of the individual and only experienced by him, often as a dream. Taken together as a synchronistic experience, the paired events guide toward the ultimate goal of individuation.³ In the process of individuation, a person realizes unconscious facets of himself, and by integrating them into ego-consciousness he achieves a more complete and functional personality.⁴ The unconscious need for compensation, prior to its recognition and remediation, shall be referred to as the subjective state.

1. Aziz, C. G. *Jung's Psychology of Religion and Synchronicity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990): 73; Carl Gustav Jung, “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” trans. R. F. C. Hull in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, vol. 8 of *Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

2. Aziz, *Jung's Psychology*, 97.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

Although synchronicity can be described as the connection between the subjective and objective events, Jung introduces a further descriptor – ‘acausal.’⁵ In the decades since coining it, others, such as Aziz and Mansfield, continue using the term.⁶ However, the specificity of what this term signifies is not superficially evident. Superficially, it appears to denote an absence of causes.⁷ However, Jung remarks that synchronistic pairings of events can occur “...without there being any causal connection between them.”⁸ Likewise, when describing synchronistic pairings, Aziz states that the events are “not causally related.”⁹ He also remarks that there is “nothing to suggest any mutual dependency concerning the fact of their coming into being.”¹⁰

From these statements it would appear that in a synchronistic experience the events are not causally related and do not depend on each other (or do not mutually depend on something else) for their occurrence. This seems flawed from the outset, as the component events are each symbolically reflective of the individual’s subjective state and thus further the individuation process. Put differently, all synchronistic experiences (component events included) further the process of individuation and are thus related. Additionally, Jung himself explicitly endorses the operation of final causes in the occurrence of synchronistically paired events, as does Mansfield.¹¹ This seems to be a movement to include the long-neglected conception of various types of causes, extolled by Aristotle, into discussions of synchronicity.

5. Jung, “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle.”

6. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology*, 59; Victor Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science, and Soulmaking: Understanding Jungian synchronicity through physics, Buddhism, and philosophy* (Peru: Open Court Pub. Co., 1995): 20.

7. The negating prefix ‘a-’ usually denotes some type of an absence or lacking, such as in the words asymptomatic, amorphous, or asexual.

8. Jung, “On the Nature of the Psyche,” in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 215.

9. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology*, 64 & 73.

10. *Ibid.*, 73.

11. Jung, “Synchronicity,” 493; Mansfield, 20.



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Following Aristotle, there are four different types of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final.¹² The material cause of something is the substance that composes it, such as the Styrofoam used to make a cup. The formal cause is the form or organization of the material cause, which in the current example would be the shape of the cup. The efficient cause refers to the actions that brought about the particular arrangement of the material cause, such as the physical manufacturing of the cup or the process of molding Styrofoam. The final cause refers to the purpose or end for which something occurs, which in the current example would be to have a portable container that keeps a beverage at optimal temperature. Each type of cause provides a different component of a complete explanation of the cup.

Andrea Falcon notes that Aristotle maintains a rather stringent criterion for something to be qualified as an end, or telos.¹³ Aristotle contends that, “not every final stage has a claim to be called an end; only the best is an end.”¹⁴ Stating that something is an end or final cause, to some extent, involves attributing normative value to it. This is professed to be the case with synchronicity since its final cause is the process of individuation, which Jung says “all our highest and ultimate purposes seem to be striving towards.”¹⁵ The process of individuation is likewise understood by Mansfield to be the “highest good” in human life.¹⁶

This is a considerable ethical claim, a virtually universal declaration of the moral obligation of every individual. The issue becomes weightier when considering Aziz’s “synchronistic worldview,” wherein the individual benefits from individuation process, but also provides in return,

12. Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 38-39; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (England: Penguin, 1998): 10 & 244.

13. Andrea Falcon, “Aristotle on Causality,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (28 April 2008), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-causality/> (6 September 2010): §4 ¶4.

14. Aristotle, *Physics*, 38.

15. Jung, “The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious,” trans. R. F. C. Hull, in *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, vol. 7 of *Collected Works*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978): 215.

16. Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 17.

“something of genuine importance to the progressive unfoldment of the whole.”¹⁷ The process of dynamic integration plays out on both a micro-cosmic level and a macrocosmic level, and responsibility thus extends past the individual level. While the conception of final causes purported to be involved in synchronistic experiences does appear to accord well with Aristotle’s criteria and opens up robust ethical discussion, its use directly conflicts with a description of synchronicity as ‘acausal,’ both superficially and by exhibiting a type of causal relation between synchronistic events.

Material Causes: Psyche, Matter, and the *Unus Mundus*

An implicit admission of material causes is made when describing the substance of synchronistically paired events. The objective event is said to occur in the material world, or an arrangement of matter.¹⁸ The realm of the subjective event is often referred to as psyche.¹⁹ This is what is referred to by Aristotle as a material cause – the subject of change, the substratum or material that is “capable of receiving such and such a form.”²⁰ In Aristotelian terms, then, just as Styrofoam is the material cause of a cup, psyche and matter are the material cause of subjective and objective events, respectively.

The issue is accentuated when considering another aspect of discussions on synchronicity, that being the concept of the *unus mundus*, or the “unitary world.”²¹ Although the synchronistically paired events are described as occurring in the realms of both psyche and matter, these seemingly disparate substrates are actually conceptualized as being “two

17. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology*, 214.

18. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology* 56; Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 45.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Aristotle, *Physics*, 38; Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, trans. W. Ogle. (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co., 1882): 7.

21. Jung, “A Psychological View of Conscience,” *Civilization in Transition*, vol. 10 of *Collected Works*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978): 452.



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ways of perceiving the same thing.”²² Jung adopts the view of matter and psyche as ultimately identical, noting that we have to think of them as distinct “simply for the purpose of better understanding.”²³ A similar phenomenon has occurred in the realm of quantum physics where the bifurcation of particles and waves has been replaced with a conception of a wave-particle-duality.

Most of those involved in discussions of synchronicity adopt this type of dual-aspect view of the *unus mundus* as the one and only substance of synchronistic experiences. Wolfgang Pauli describes psyche and matter as “complementary aspects of the same reality.”²⁴ Both Aziz and Mansfield profess the “identity of” and “unity of” matter and psyche, respectively.²⁵ Viewed in this light, rather than being composed of different substances, the *unus mundus* is the substrate of both events, thus it is their mutual material cause.

At this point a robust metaphysical discussion could take place. One route would be to inquire if this is a monistic view. If so, is it a reductive or non-reductive monism? Is the nature of this underlying substance more akin to our conceptions of the material or the ideal? Does it share the properties of both, or is it something yet to be conceptualized? Indeed, a plethora of implications could stem from the assertion that the all of existence is, in fact, composed of one underlying substance, the *unus mundus*. Another question that could be raised is if this view of existence accords with other tenets of synchronicity theory. These questions aside, it can easily be seen that synchronistically paired events involve final and material causes, and that these causes are shared by both events.

22. Albert Einstein, *Albert Einstein, and His Human Side: New Glimpses from His Archives*, ed. H. Dukas and B. Hoffman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): 38.

23. Jung, “Instinct and the Unconscious,” *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, vol. 8 of *Collected Works*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978): 138.

24. Wolfgang Pauli, “The Influence of Archetypal Ideas on the Scientific Theories of Kepler,” in *C. G. Jung and W. Pauli: The Interpretation of the Nature of the Psyche* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1995): 210.

25. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology*, 56; Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 45.

Formal Causes: Archetypes and Images

Another instance of implicit admission to shared causes pertains to the archetypes, which I contend to be the formal cause of the subjective and objective events. In a synchronistic experience, the particular need for compensation is reflected by the symbolic meaning of both events and is experienced only indirectly through archetypal manifestations.²⁶ If the subjective state of an individual is a need for the integration of the nurturing and maternal aspects of his psyche, the synchronistically paired events would have to reflect this particular need. Both the dream and the public occurrence would then presumably manifest some image of the 'mother archetype' which could take the form of his mother, a maternal figure, the forest, the ocean, or a church, just to name but a few archetypal images associated with the maternal.²⁷ In this way, the archetypes are described as "structuring" or "informing" both matter and psyche, and are able to guide the individual to integrate the unconscious content they represent.²⁸

While there are a myriad of potential archetypal images for any given archetype, in a synchronistic experience the same archetype is manifested in both the subjective and objective events. In this sense, the formal cause is the same for both. It is only in this way that the events would be considered to be synchronistically paired, or meaningful. This is because if both events did not express the meaning of that particular archetype, then there would be no parallel or meaningful connection at all. In this sense, the formal cause must be the same for the subjective and objective events in order for the events to be considered synchronistically paired.

Mansfield contributes to additional confusion when he suggests that the archetypes are not a cause of the synchronistic pairing of events.²⁹

26. Aziz, *Jung's Psychology*, 55.

27. *Ibid.*, 20.

28. Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science* 45, Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (New York: Viking, 2006): 57 & 503.

29. Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 20.



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While he may intend this to mean that they are not an efficient cause of the events, in Aristotle's language, they are certainly the formal cause of synchronistic events. Just as the formal cause of the Styrofoam cup gives it its usefulness, it is through the archetypes that synchronistic events have their usefulness, in other words their ability to convey the meaning of the subjective state through their recognizable structure. It can then be understood that synchronistically paired events share the same formal cause and mutually depend on it for the expression of the need for compensation by the ego. Furthermore, these events mutually depend upon that which they express, the subjective state.

Efficient Causation

By now it should be evident that the term 'acausal' conflicts with elementary tenets of synchronicity theory. The inclusion of multiple types of causes and suggestions of mutual dependency should suffice as evidence enough of the superiority of a 'multi-causal' description. However, one further 'acausal' intricacy deserves elucidation. While the term 'acausal' superficially implies an absence of causes, and is also explained as signifying a lack of causal relation or mutual dependency between events, it is used to denote an absence of efficient causes as well.³⁰ Specifically, what is denied is direct efficient causal influence of one event on the occurrence of the other.³¹ Essentially, the dream does not cause the public occurrence. While I can offer no evidence to prove that this assertion is false, I am compelled to ask if it necessarily must be the case.

Assuming that psyche and matter are both the same substance, the monistic view of the *unus mundus*, one major metaphysical hurdle could possibly be overcome. It stands to reason that without the difficulty of the problem of interaction, one synchronistic event theoretically could act

30. Jung, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," 445-6; Mansfield, 20, 19.

31. Aziz, *Jung's Psychology*, 73; Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 20.

upon the other through efficient causation.³² Stated differently, if there is no difference between what we conceive separately as thought and matter, then it may be logically possible for the seemingly immaterial to interact with something that appears to be material, as there is no true difference of substance. Also, it is equally possible that the component events of the experience could be parallel effects of a shared efficient cause. In this sense, one event does not bring about the occurrence of the other through efficient causation. Instead, both events occur due to the same, yet distinct, efficient cause, much like waves on opposite banks of a river caused by the outward rippling of the water after a stone has been tossed in. The wave on one bank is not identical with the wave on the other, though both are distant, yet parallel effects of a single, shared efficient cause.

Aside from metaphysical concerns, it appears that the focus on describing synchronicity as ‘acausal’ has served to obscure theorizing and investigation into possible indirect avenues for efficient causal influence. Due to the exclusion of efficient causation by the blanket term ‘acausal’ little, if any, attention has been given to the possibility of other avenues for efficient causation in discussions of synchronicity. Indeed, given the high value placed on efficient causal explanation in academic study, the ‘acausal’ aspect of synchronicity has distanced its study from that of modern empirical psychology. Admittedly, discussers of synchronicity (or at least those cited in this paper like Jung, Aziz, and Mansfield) refer frequently to the discipline of quantum physics, but not to neuroscience. No attempt is made to relate the theories presented to the ever-expanding body of knowledge of the neurological correlates of mental life.

It is not a far leap to assume that if empirical study revealed biological processes or brain states involved either the perception or interpretation of synchronistic events, there is the inevitable likelihood that these faculties would be compromised in certain individuals. Suppose an individual was rendered unable to remember dreams due to abnormalities in

32. Howard Robinson, “Dualism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2007). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>. (1 February 2011).



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brain centers involved in memory storage or retrieval, or suffered damage to some part of the brain that left him unable to recognize the symbolic content of the synchronistically paired events? This could effectively cut him off from these guides to the process of individuation.

If neurological structures and processes are implicated in the recognition of archetypal or symbolic meaning or the conscious integration of unconscious content, then this may be the beginning of a form of the problem of evil for synchronicity.³³ Whether through genetics, environmental influences, or an interaction of the two, it is inevitable that some individuals would lack this hardware and functionality. This poses the question of why some would possess an unequal or insufficient capacity to partake in a process that is heralded as “our highest good.”³⁴ The detriment could extend past the individual, as the furthering of the process of individuation on the macrocosmic level may be stifled due to a lack of something of “genuine importance.”³⁵ However, if these deficits are somehow necessary for the individuation process, then this could spark discussion regarding a soul-making theodicy in relation to synchronicity and individuation.³⁶

Conclusion

I have shown that synchronicity is not an ‘acausal’ relationship. I have shown the additional confusion that can likely be traced back to the use of this term concerning the refutation of related, mutual, or shared causes. Furthermore, the focus on describing synchronicity as ‘acausal’ simply to denote an absence of direct efficient causal influence has served to obscure theorizing and investigation into possible indirect avenues for efficient causal influence.

Making sense of synchronicity is confounding, confusing work that often leaves one with more questions than answers. If the ethical and meta-

33. Michael Tooley, “The Problem of Evil,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2009), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/> (3 February 2011).

34. Mansfield, *Synchronicity, Science*, 17.

35. Aziz, *Jung’s Psychology*, 217.

36. Michael Tooley, “The Problem of Evil.”

physical claims made in discussions of synchronicity have any weight, this topic may deserve careful attention from individuals in the disciplines of empirical psychology, psychotherapy, philosophy, and religion. That being said, there is no reason to make the conversation any more confusing that it has to be.

A 'multi-causal' conception of synchronicity accounts for the explicit and implicit admissions of multiple types of causes and allows for a framework to discuss the possibility of causal relation or mutual dependence between synchronistic events. Furthermore, a 'multi-causal' description does not directly conflict with a view of synchronicity that denies efficient causal influence of one event upon the occurrence of the other. Most importantly, however, it provides a manageable method of explaining the convoluted subject matter it is employed to describe while opening up the doors for future investigation and discussion. ❖

