

Psychological and Astrological Complexes

An Evolving Perspective

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For Jung, the call to individuate arises from the deepest sources of life and is supported inwardly and outwardly by the compensatory activities of nature. It is a call, therefore, that is not to be taken lightly. Both inwardly and outwardly nature strives unceasingly to bring about the realization, in the life of the individual, of a unique pattern of meaning.

Robert Aziz, *Jung's Psychology of Religion and Synchronicity*¹

When I first began seeing clients as a psychotherapist, I found myself entranced by their stories and deeply moved by their struggles. As I listened to the themes of their lives play out and shape themselves into patterns in front of me, it was as though I could see strands of their psychic material weaving together into a Gordian knot. I could feel how when one strand was tugged, the entire knot reverberated in response, and my client would go into a well-worn, deeply problematic reaction. That reaction seemed to be fueled by a perception that did not appear to be an appropriate fit for the current situation, and often exacerbated existing relational issues, if not actually creating problems where they had not existed before. These problematic interactions often resulted in yet another life experience that validated the client's painful beliefs about his or her place in the world, and added to the already complicated mass of related feelings, experiences and memories. I frequently found myself reflecting to my clients: "This is complicated."

In depth psychology, these complicated masses of psychological material are known as *complexes*. Carl Jung first called his work "complex psychology"

because he saw the phenomenon as a central organizing principle in the psyche. In this essay, I would like to explore this deeply personal, uncomfortable, and arguably universal phenomenon from a clinical perspective. Starting with its theoretical roots in Jungian psychology and bringing in archetypal astrology's invaluable contribution to clinical practice, I will offer some case examples alongside my vision for how the astrological chart can elucidate the relationship between the personal and transpersonal dimensions of the psyche. I hope to discuss Jung's important observations on these unconscious, autonomous emotional conflicts and how viewing them with an archetypal astrological eye elucidates their meaning both personally and collectively, making the case for working with complexes as nothing less than one's spiritual imperative.

According to Jung, complexes are

autonomous groups of feeling-toned associations that have a tendency to move by themselves, to live their own life apart from our intentions. . . . We like to believe in our will-power and in our energy and in what we can do; but when it comes to a real show-down we find that we can do it only to a certain extent, because we are hampered by those little devils the complexes.²

In my clinical experience, the autonomous quality and devilish nature of this phenomenon makes it particularly challenging to work with—or to live with. Even the most intellectually brilliant or spiritually aware people can transform into almost unrecognizable (and often very unpleasant) versions of themselves when their complexes are triggered.

Between 1900 and 1909, while working at the Burghölzli Psychiatric Hospital in Zürich, Jung began to uncover psychological complexes using a word association test to measure the disturbance in his patients' reactions. The test involved reading his subjects a list of words and measuring where they hesitated, shut down emotionally, or became anxious in response. A disturbance in consciousness indicated the presence of a complex, a network of associated material made out of repressed memories, fantasies, images, and thoughts.³ Usually childhood traumas were involved, the stimulus words arousing painful associations that had been buried in the unconscious. Through his exploration, Jung gathered evidence that psychic structures were located beneath the level of conscious awareness. This evidence helped him form the concept of archetypes, the deepest structures of psyche in which we all participate.

In a talk given in Zurich on May 5, 1934, Jung said that the “feeling-toned” complex was

the *image* of a certain psychic situation which is strongly accentuated emotionally and is, moreover, incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness. This image has a powerful inner coherence, it has its own wholeness and, in addition, a relatively high degree of autonomy, so that it is subject to the control of the conscious mind to only a limited extent and therefore behaves like an animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness. The complex can usually be suppressed with an effort of will, but not argued out of existence, and at the first suitable opportunity it reappears in all its original strength. Certain experimental investigations seem to indicate that its intensity or activity curve has a wavelike character, with a “wave-length” of hours, days or weeks. This very complicated question remains as yet unclarified.⁴

What Jung describes here is a self-state, an evoked embodied experience that feels inherently uncomfortable or bad because it is incompatible to the position of the ego.⁵ The “habitual attitude of consciousness,” or what one considers one’s normal state, is overwhelmed or possessed by an emotional, physical and psychological state quite different from that with which one usually identifies. Once this process is set off, often by something seemingly small, it is difficult to stop until its “wave-length” plays itself out. This is an all too common phenomenon which each of us can recognize in ourselves with a little practice. Our vernacular is peppered with descriptions of having a complex triggered, or *constellated*. “I saw red.” “I freaked out.” “I went off.” “I lost it.” “I shut down.” “I got triggered.” “She got under my skin.” “He pushed my buttons.”

Psychological Complexes

Some hallmarks of a psychological complex are as follows:

- They are coherent.
- They have intense affect.
- They have intense energy.

- They gather around a central archetypal core or theme.
- They manifest in the body.
- They are physiologically arousing.
- They seek expression.
- They have autonomy.
- They roar up out of the unconscious once constellated, take over ego control and then drop back down into unconsciousness again once the affect is discharged.
- They are marked by a self-referencing, ego-identified stance.
- They are marked by an absence of empathy.
- They are marked by black and white, positioned thinking: the emotional stance is “If you’re not with me, then you’re against me.”
- They correspond to Melanie Klein’s Paranoid-Schizoid position, a self-state in which one splits good from bad and attempts to eject the bad by projecting it into the other.
- They are characterized by a feeling of “not being oneself” in affect, tone of voice, posture or demeanor—in other words, by a feeling of being possessed.
- They are repetitive.
- They are inductive, having a magnetic pull.
- They resist change and do not learn; like a snowball rolling downhill, they gather material from one’s life experience and grow bigger and stronger.
- They are set off by very particular things, but any of those particular things, however little, can set them off.
- They are often rooted in traumatic experience.⁶

Complexes are embodied phenomena. Not only is the core of a complex affective or emotional, it involves overwhelming and automatic physiological reactions, postures, perspectives, memories, and beliefs about the self, the past, and the future. The more intense the affect, the more intense the resulting embodied reaction. To give an example, I treated a couple whose presenting problem was intractable, brutal fights that lasted hours or days. When the wife would feel misunderstood by her husband, she would get furiously angry. When this happened in session, I could observe her stiffen and lean forward, her jaw jutting out and her eyes virtually shooting flames. In response, her husband would turn bright red, his eyes cast down, his chin sunken into his chest. He looked as if he were trying to disappear down his own throat, saying nothing.⁷

Complexes are possessive. The term *constellation*, according to Jung,

expresses the fact that the outward situation releases a psychic process in which certain contents gather together and prepare for action. When we say that a person is “constellated” we mean that he has taken up a position from which he can be expected to react in quite a definite way. But the constellation is an automatic process which happens involuntarily and which no one can stop of his own accord. The constellated contents are definite complexes possessing their own specific energy.⁸

An experiential hallmark of having a complex constellated is the feeling of being caught in the grip of a force much stronger than one’s own will. I have heard people describe this experience by saying, “I have no idea where that came from; that wasn’t even me,” or “I wasn’t having the fight, the fight was having me.” The process of discharging a complex can consume an enormous amount of psychic and physical energy. One is often exhausted afterwards, spent after a storm of rage, tears, or paranoia. There is a genuine feeling of being possessed by something ego-alien, like a demon or spirit.

Complexes are relational. They tend to form in relationship to others, and the network of beliefs about the self operates in relation to another or a group of others. When a complex is constellated, it is most easily visible in projection onto the other. Originally conceptualized as an ego defense, *projection* means seeing in another a quality actually inherent in oneself but with which one does not consciously identify, and often rejects outright. To relate to the rejected quality, one unconsciously projects it onto another person, as a film projector throws an image onto a screen. For example, a woman consciously identifies as a fierce protector of freedom and autonomy. The feeling of possessiveness is odious to her, seeming to stem from insecurity or neediness. If she cannot tolerate the idea of being possessive of her partner because that does not fit with her ego ideal, she might split off her awareness of any possessiveness arising in her along with love, attachment, and vulnerability to loss. Yet, since affects arise from a place beyond conscious control, if that possessive feeling threatens, she might unconsciously project those feelings onto her partner: “Are you trying to control me? Don’t you trust me? *What’s wrong with you?*” This takes her focus off any possessive feelings she might be having and frames the debate, as it were, with her partner at the center. She does not have to consider her own conflicting feelings if she is focused on him. If her conflict is rooted in past experience, such

as feeling controlled by a parent or prior partner, the conscious compensatory belief goes something like, “people should let each other do what they please, but no one ever does. I must be on my guard to keep from being controlled.” Thus, a complex involving fear of being controlled may get constellated by feelings of possessiveness in the relational field, potentially even encouraging controlling behavior on her part or that of her partner.

Complexes are inductive, exerting something like a magnetic pull on perceptions that validate their themes. In other words, we go out into the world and unconsciously induce others to validate the negative beliefs surrounding our complexes (for example, “my emotions push others away and no one lets me express how I really feel”). This means we effectively scan the environment for evidence that validates the beliefs associated with the complex while unconsciously dismissing material that invalidates them. Complexes exert a sort of negative force on us, a “downward spiral” that acts to confirm our worst feelings and beliefs about ourselves. Let me return to my fighting couple as an example. In her childhood, the wife had a strong, ego-dystonic (alien to the ego’s position, as opposed to ego-syntonic, aligned with the ego’s position) belief that she was “too much,” her emotional needs huge and unreasonable. Whereas in adulthood she liked to frame her emotions positively, seeing herself as a passionate, engaged person, the childhood belief that she was too much created fear that her emotionality would cause others to reject her. When her husband was not attuned to her emotions (which was a very frequent occurrence), she would take this as evidence that he was not “allowing” her feelings, as she had felt in childhood with her mother. This archaic disappointment and frustration triggered her rage, a powerful—and empowering—affect which defended against the now-unconscious childhood wound. She would then punish her husband verbally, which had the effect of providing both of them with more evidence that she was, in fact, too much. In reaction, her husband would withdraw, effectively having been induced to reject her.

Complexes are marked by a collapse of empathy, an inability to see from the other’s position. Instead, the identification with the ego’s position becomes stronger and more stubborn. All-or-nothing thinking is more prevalent, with the typical refrain being “If you’re not with me, you’re against me. And since you are clearly attacking me I now have the right to attack you with impunity.” This emotional lockdown is accompanied by feelings of heightened threat and corresponding physiological arousal. This state of mind corresponds with Melanie Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, a primitive state dependent on splitting good from bad.

Complex reactions are quite predictable once you know what a person's specific complexes are. When you "push someone's buttons," you constellate their complex and get an emotional reaction. Naturally, those we know intimately (our partners, parents, siblings, children) tend to constellate our complexes most frequently and easily, particularly since they know where our buttons lie and sometimes feel justified in pushing them, often when we have recently pushed theirs. Being constellated can range from a sense of something being not quite right emotionally to being completely possessed by blinding rage or abject terror. From an extreme emotional state, it makes perfect sense to do things completely out of character for one's ego, such as raging violently, being cruel and punitive toward those you love the most, or regressing to an infantile emotional state where you feel yourself a helpless, innocent victim of someone you trusted and perceived as an equal five minutes before.

Different therapeutic modalities use different terminology to describe the same phenomenon. Gestalt therapy encourages clients to give voice to different parts of the psyche, to own them more fully or put them in an empty chair and relate to them. Psychodrama, voice dialogue, constellations work, expressive arts and drama therapy all think in terms of subpersonalities. Each modality recognizes the autonomy of different parts of the psyche and encourages the full expression of the wisdom that the different (and often disowned) parts hold. Therapeutic integration, the process of changing one's relationship to unconscious material, can be very slow. And indeed, the analytic literature describing psychological complexes is less than hopeful regarding prognosis. Constellating a complex—even if there is an abreactive discharge, a cathartic release of long-held emotion—creates and sustains a state of mind in which emotional space collapses and one feels possessed and overwhelmed by a force bigger than and out of control of one's ego. The gentle, slow progress of therapeutic integration can be gained, but it often seems smashed to pieces once the complex comes up again.

In the past twenty years, developments in neuroscience and the capacity to measure brain activity using functional MRI technology have validated Jung's observations.⁹ During a triggering experience, the autonomic nervous system goes into action in a fraction of a second. The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system controls the "fight or flight" response, sending all our physiological energy to the extremities to defend ourselves or to run away. The parasympathetic branch controls the "freeze" response, which effectively means that we go limp or play dead when there is no hope of surviving the threat by outrunning it or fighting it down. These systems completely overwhelm the

prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain capable of feeling empathy and of exercising ego control. Thus what gets reinforced as experiential memory when a complex is triggered is the repeated action of the “reptilian brain,” the amygdala, rather than the prefrontal cortex, the “human brain” which allows us to reason and empathize with another’s position. In the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology, Daniel J. Siegel describes the significance of integration, or linking different aspects of a system. He sees linked neurological aspects throughout the brain and body as analogous to linking knowledge gained by a broad range of scientific disciplines in order to promote compassion, kindness, resilience and well-being in both individuals and communities, so that the overall system can function as an integrated whole. According to Siegel, the hallmarks of a lack of integration, whether in the nervous system of an organism or in a larger community, are chaos and rigidity, two excellent descriptors of the constellated complex phenomenon I am elucidating here.¹⁰

The neurobiological psychologist Rick Hanson tells us that our brains have an inherent negativity bias.¹¹ From the point of view of the amygdala, which effectively functions as the alarm bell of the brain, a perceived threat is no different from an actual threat. The amygdala scans for danger extremely quickly and efficiently to help us avoid being eaten: the species is more likely to survive if we react to a benign stimulus as though it were a saber-toothed tiger than if we react to a saber-toothed tiger as though it were nothing. Interestingly, the amygdala is fully mature by the seventh month in utero, so fear learning is totally functional even before birth, but the hippocampus, which inhibits the amygdala and helps us self-soothe and regulate emotions, does not develop until age three. Thus, on a neurobiological level, our negativity bias makes it much harder for us to take in positive experiences and learn from them. Hanson’s statement that our brains act like Velcro for bad experiences and like Teflon for good ones corresponds perfectly with the ideas that complexes gather negative emotional material that validates them (the “snowball” effect) and that they can’t learn. Yet Hanson, Siegel, and other neurobiologically informed psychologists are blending neurobiology with mindfulness meditation to do what Hanson calls “using the mind to change the brain to change the mind,” transforming the human bias toward recalling threat by learning to soothe ourselves intentionally, understanding that we can actually affect our neural pathways.¹²

In his work with patients in non-ordinary states of consciousness, or what he calls “holotropic” states, Stanislav Grof identified the phenomenon of the COEX system, or “system of condensed experience,” which is quite similar to

Jung's complex, but moves beyond the biographical. Grof saw his patients accessing emotionally relevant memories and experiences that "were not stored in the unconscious as a mosaic of isolated imprints, but in the form of complex dynamic constellations."¹³ A COEX gathers not only around an archetypal theme from biographical memory, but from perinatal experience, past lives, and identification with archetypal material far beyond the personal. In his example, someone with a history of asthma might, in a single holotropic experience, find himself being choked by a sibling as a child, having the umbilical cord wrapped around the neck at birth, being executed by hanging in a past life, and being every prisoner ever sentenced to death by hanging.¹⁴ In their work together at Esalen Institute in the 1970s, Grof and cultural historian Richard Tarnas discovered an "extraordinarily consistent and symbolically nuanced correlation"¹⁵ between the four Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM) that Grof classified in correspondence with the stages of the birth process and the archetypal character of the four outer planets: Neptune (BPM I: The Amniotic Universe), Saturn (BPM II: Cosmic Engulfment and No Exit), Pluto (BPM III: The Death-Rebirth Struggle), and Uranus (BPM IV: The Death-Rebirth Experience).¹⁶ The striking observation of such remarkably consistent correlations between the archetypal content of the COEX material and the astrological transits under which the material was expressed led Grof to refer to transit astrology as the "Rosetta Stone" for the understanding of the human psyche.¹⁷ Not only does the correlation of transit astrology with the experiential quality of non-ordinary states provide a meaningful understanding of the archetypal nature of the psyche, but the four outer planetary archetypes provide doorways for our individual and personal expression of the transpersonal, and impel us to integrate these profoundly non-personal energies into our awareness, unfolding our collective evolution along with our individual psychological work.

Recognizing Complexes Astrologically

As I shift my focus from the tradition of depth psychology, I hope to describe the possibilities for psychological maturation that the archetypal astrological perspective provides. I would like to propose that a psychological complex can be discernible in the natal chart, and that by deepening our inquiry into the archetypal core of a complex using the planetary archetypes, that a healing shift can occur. Most of the people I treat enter therapy simply because they are suffering and want it to stop. They are not particularly interested in how that

suffering might correspond to their spiritual development. Yet I believe that making the shift from the personal to the transpersonal might be crucial to emotional healing. Depth psychology is rooted firmly in the modern paradigm, in which our sense of reality is based on the perception that we are separate biographical selves. The suffering we access so clearly when complexes are triggered is largely rooted in that fundamental existential alienation, a preconscious feeling of ruptured connection from the whole. Underneath these constellated surges of emotion are basic feelings that there is something wrong with us, that we are not enough, that our survival is threatened, but coupled with a conflict that keeps such feelings out of awareness. That internal division may be projected outward (“*You don’t understand me*”), but the feeling of alienation is deeply conditioned in us, eating at us, driving us, maddening us. If we are born into a world which sees us as fundamentally disconnected bags of meat living in a meaningless cosmos, why would we not struggle with issues of self-rejection? If our Mother, the world, is like a wire monkey offering material sustenance but no conscious, loving, mirroring gaze, then no wonder we feel abandoned, hurt, angry and greedy.¹⁸ One of the most profound gifts of archetypal astrology is that it helps us move beyond the internalized modern world view of separateness and alienation by making a deep, numinous connection with the cosmos, mirroring us right down to the minutiae of our daily lives and the inner workings of our souls.

There is doubtless a special relationship between the archetype of Saturn and the concept of the psychological complex. I would not go so far as to suggest that all difficult psychological complexes can be seen in the natal chart as aspects to Saturn, but in my experience this seems to be the case much more often than not. Saturn’s placement in the natal chart is traditionally a place of weakness, limitation, fear and hardship. Psychological complexes are Saturnian in their judgmental, discouraging, shame-inducing, frustrating, difficult qualities, as well as their manifest, concrete, embodied expression, their resistance to change, their connection with trauma, and their association with negativity. They bring us back again and again to the difficult things we must face, wearing us down with their repetitiveness. Yet our struggle to tolerate them and learn from them is Saturnian as well, encouraging us to develop patience, tolerance and self-acceptance. Through Saturn one suffers, one struggles, one is frustrated and forced into the reality of facing what exists. By recognizing one’s problems, one’s limits, one’s pettiness, one’s slowness and dullness, the annoying nature of being yoked to a form that does not change as quickly as Mercurial thought but must instead undergo the grinding trudge of time in order to grow,

one eventually develops a respect and a value for the hard labor of life. Through time, Saturn gives its gifts. It carves us into who we are. It initiates us. The process of wrestling with a complex teaches patience, fallibility, humility.

Saturn seems to relate to psychological complexes in another significant way as well. Humanity has been practicing living with the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn planetary archetypes for millennia, but because the trans-Saturnian planetary archetypes have only very recently become known to humanity, then perhaps our task is now to integrate these archetypal energies into consciousness.¹⁹ The discoveries of Uranus in 1781, Neptune in 1846, and Pluto in 1930 were made possible by the technological development of the telescope, but the discernment of their archetypal meaning continues to develop through our research and understanding on both individual and collective levels. In *Cosmos and Psyche*, Tarnas has shown that the astronomical discovery of the outer three planets correlates closely with an upsurge of that archetypal energy into the collective.²⁰ If Saturn is the incarnator, that which makes things manifest, then it is possible to see it also as a mediator, allowing the integration between the personal and transpersonal on a psychological level. Therefore, it might be that the experience of psychological complexes in individuals' lives is a phenomenological expression of the collective process of integrating the trans-Saturnian archetypal energies into consciousness of the species.

Seen through the archetypal astrological lens, the hard work of wrestling with psychological complexes to transform them becomes a teleological practice, drawing us toward our greater and greater potential. The slow, Saturnian practice of tracking one's transits allows one to watch the development of one's relationship to a complex through time, providing the opportunity to allow the complex to transform from the inside. Change happens through time and maturity and the slow practice of being with that which one might prefer to reject from a more limited understanding of oneself. Through incarnation and its subsequent soul-making, one moves toward maturation. And what more precious quality can any one of us offer our uninitiated, adolescent culture at this moment than psychological and spiritual maturity?

Unlike the *psychological* complex, which implies a problematic unconscious reaction, the concept of an *astrological* complex is value-neutral, with potential expressions ranging from the negative or problematic to the positive or life-affirming. An astrological complex is visible as a combination of any number of different planetary archetypes coming together in a variety of ways. In a natal chart, a complex can refer to an aspect, a combination of two or more planetary archetypes in geometric relationship to each other, or a transit, with a grouping

of planetary archetypes transited by another planetary archetype. One could also consider an interaspect between two charts in synastry as being a complex. The term simply makes a fundamental geometric connection between two or more planetary archetypes visible in the chart, and allows meaning to be drawn from how they appear to activate each other, each one inflecting the other's expression, manifesting in an evolving way in the psyche of the subject. According to Tarnas, archetypal complexes are

a coherent field of archetypally connected meanings, experiences, and psychological tendencies—expressed in perceptions, emotions, images, attitudes, beliefs, fantasies and memories, as well as in synchronistic external events and historical and cultural phenomena—all of which appear to be informed by a dominant archetypal principle or combination of such principles. An archetypal complex can be conceived of as the experiential equivalent of a force field or a magnetic field in physics, producing an integrated pattern or gestalt out of many diverse particulars. Any given archetypal complex always contains problematic and pathological shadow tendencies intertwined with more salutary, fruitful, and creative ones, all of which inhere *in potentia* in each complex.²¹

The psychological implications of Tarnas's work are prodigious: his explication of the evolution of Western thought, which made possible an increasingly more nuanced, multivalent, multidimensional, participatory understanding of the archetype, allows us to see the individual's personal struggle as not only part of the connected cosmos, but as integral to it. He delineates several rich concepts that deepen the capacity to live into this perspectival shift, but I will focus on just one: that archetypal astrological complexes are *multivalent*, capable of expressing themselves in a multitude of ways while remaining consistent with a central archetypal core of meaning. Tarnas writes: "The Saturn archetype can express itself as judgment but also as old age, as tradition but also as oppression, as time but also as mortality, as depression but also as discipline, as gravity in the sense of heaviness and weight but also as gravity in the sense of seriousness and dignity."²² Archetypal multivalence reflects the inherently irreducible nature of archetypal expression, which renders futile all attempts to understand an archetype as a univocal or singular manifestation. A dazzling spectrum of possibility, from light to shadow, is available to an astrological complex while still being completely resonant with its archetypal core. Multivalent expressions

become more subtle and complex as additional planetary archetypes are added to the mix (e.g., Saturn + Venus + Neptune). Multivalence thus gives us the capacity to free ourselves from the sense of determined, fated manifestation that makes astrological predictions so potentially imprisoning.

In a natal chart, the most easily recognizable astrological complexes are those created by a dynamic aspect between two or more planetary archetypes: the conjunction (0°), square (90°), or opposition (180°). The confluent aspects, the trine (120°) and sextile (60°), are also archetypal complexes, but these might not be expressed with the same dynamism or force, or provide the same problematic spur toward resolution. The process of discerning one's psychological complexes astrologically is highly individual, but with some knowledge of one's own chart, making astrological correlations to the processes I have been describing is not difficult. A conversation with one's astrological consultant (especially with the added insight of one's partner or anyone one lives with to shed a little light on what is not immediately conscious) will provide good directions for inquiry. After identifying the planetary archetypes in the chart that seem to correspond to one's experience, the discernment begins. By recognizing the archetypal core of a psychological complex and breaking it down into its planetary constituents, one can more easily sense the deeper wisdom lying *in potentia* in a problematic pattern. Thus one develops what James Hillman calls the "archetypal eye," exploring and expanding symbolic understanding to recognize the fluidity and subtlety of the archetypes. In itself, this deepening of symbolic awareness can be a healing process, giving an embodied sense of the multivalence of expression and the profound potential that lies outside the familiar, repetitive reaction of the psychological complex. Redeeming one's individual peccadilloes and embarrassing "little devils" by recognizing them as the stuff through which the universe works out its play of consciousness can be a deeply relieving shift of perspective: providing psychological containment, offering emotional comfort, and giving an intellectual context allowing growth, movement, and possibility.

In my experience, psychological complexes are aptly named because they are indeed *complicated*. They signal conflicts between different and potentially incompatible aspects of the psyche which, when unprocessed, act like logjams, slowing the flow of our unified response to a given experience. These "logjams" manifest as emotional and behavioral conflicts which correlate astrologically to dynamic aspects between potentially incompatible archetypal qualities: for example, a square between Saturn, the archetype associated with tradition and stability, and Uranus, the archetype associated with revolution and change.

However, since archetypal expression is multivalent, this apparent logjam could also include incompatible *expressions* of archetypal energies, or conflicts created by belief systems jamming the expression of energies which may be natural to the psyche but are unacceptable to the ego's socio-cultural context. As an example, a client of mine with a Venus-Uranus-Pluto conjunction opposite Saturn felt compelled (Pluto) to explore alternative (Uranus) relationships (Venus), but feared (Saturn) that this would mean he was a bad person worthy of judgment (Saturn-Pluto) and lead to the disruption of his marriage (Venus-Saturn-Uranus), rejection by his partner and social deprivation (Saturn-Venus). Working through the internal conflicts between impulses and consequences that have rendered the expression of these archetypal energies complicated and damaging in his past allows him to choose expressions and behaviors which are in integrity with his current understanding of himself and his relationships.

Confluent aspects can also correlate with unchecked archetypal expressions that are potentially problematic. For example, another client with a grand trine formed by Mercury, Saturn and Neptune had an strong tendency toward a recurrent, self-doubting (Saturn) thought loop (Mercury), in which he struggled with differentiating between what was real (Saturn) and what he imagined (Neptune) about himself, and a tendency toward projecting (Neptune) his fears of judgment (Saturn) onto authority figures at work (Saturn), resulting in crippling anxiety, which is consistent with Saturn-Neptune because it correlates with the imagination (Mercury-Neptune) taking a dark, Saturnian, fear-inducing turn that is pervasive, undifferentiated (Neptune), and oppressive (Saturn). Eventually, by slowly and methodically (Saturn) examining (Mercury) the fear of his inadequacy (Saturn) and the underlying belief system that informed the thought (Mercury-Neptune), he was able to release some of his unrealistic ideals (Neptune) and create a work situation that was much more stable and satisfying (Saturn). My examples are simplified for the sake of brevity, but it is important to remember that the multivalence of the archetypes creates infinitely complex iterations and possibilities in their interactions with one another. As Jung said of relationships: "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact between two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed."²³

Astrology provides an incredibly powerful tool to work with oneself psychospiritually. Depth psychology suggests that complexes do not easily change, but in lived reality, change is a constantly occurring process. Conscious participation lets one intentionally make the changes one's soul is capable of making or, in a teleological sense, calling one to make. One can begin to point

oneself toward or actively choose a different expression of a given planetary archetype that is more ego-syntonic or comfortable, gradually helping one to own the incredibly powerful archetypal energies at the core of one's being. For better or worse, each of us must work within the strictures of our egos, stretching them over time rather than shattering them. For example, learning to own a Moon-Pluto complex may involve deep, intense emotional work, but that practice is inherently more open-ended and hopeful than condemning oneself for (or feeling accused of) being emotionally monstrous or manipulative. As a clinical example, a client with a Moon-Mercury-Uranus-Pluto quadruple conjunction struggled with obsessive (Pluto) thoughts (Mercury) about her relationship (Moon), fearing that her partner could not meet her emotional needs (Saturn was opposite her Moon-Mercury-Uranus-Pluto stellium). Although her fear stemmed from early experiences of feeling emotionally unmet, it manifested as frequent fights in which she demanded her partner's undivided attention or threatened to end the relationship. Devoting some of her mental (Mercury) and emotional (Moon) attention to her work (Saturn), which involved renovating and transforming (Uranus-Pluto) early childhood (Moon) education (Mercury), allowed her to express those archetypes with an appropriate zeal (Pluto) and provided her with the emotional space to work on grounding (Saturn) her unrealistically high expectations (Saturn-Uranus) of perfect parental nurturing (Moon) in her partnership. By concentrating on deep understanding and articulation (Mercury-Pluto) of her emotions (Moon) to her partner, rather than unconsciously acting them out by threatening to end the relationship abruptly (Saturn-Uranus), her inner work brought more and more consciousness to the complex over time, allowing it to become less magnetic and inductive. Choosing different but still archetypally appropriate manifestations lets the archetypal energies at the core of the complex express themselves in more life-enhancing behavior, thus promoting self-acceptance.

Choosing a healthier expression can allow a more integrated, coordinated response, because psychic energy is no longer as bound up in unconscious conflict. Furthermore, it is possible to recover from the activation of the complex more quickly by using the more conscious and compassionate parts of the psyche to help soothe underlying conflicts in a self-compassionate manner. By recognizing which archetypes are in play, articulating their qualities, and choosing which manifestations to work toward, one can intentionally learn to redirect the archetypal expressions toward something less harmful to self or others, as one would redirect a small child toddling toward a potentially dangerous situation. By knowing oneself better, it becomes possible to educate

others about one's complexes, working around those now-visible triggers collaboratively rather than relating to them in a shame-based or defensive way by rationalizing their existence or ignoring them. Astrology provides tools to do this, because it lays out the geometry of one's complexes before one's eyes, and allows one to *see the solution in the problem* by providing corrective alternative expressions of the very same archetypal signature, and even providing archetypally appropriate goals to work toward.

I often find myself saying in my work with clients that while you cannot change your wounds, you can change your relationships to them over time. Understanding multivalent expression allows the recognition, in retrospect, of the archetypal appropriateness of painful past experiences. One can then see the necessity of those experiences, and thus allow the relational change to occur. A huge part of the psychospiritual maturation process is taking responsibility for the conscious expression of planetary archetypes—and to do that one has to recognize that they are in us, truly belonging to each of us. Because the gods and goddesses *will* express themselves, consciously or unconsciously, we are tasked with engaging and participating in that expression. We are all vessels of the archetypes, and everyone can endeavor to make their vessel clear and strong. Tarnas tells us that the Promethean quest bestowed at every birth is the brilliant, creative synthesis of all opposing tendencies in a chart.²⁴ When a psychological complex is constellated, if the emotions that rush up out of the unconscious and overwhelm us are seen with an archetypal eye, they can be viewed with more compassion for ourselves as fallible human beings wrestling to channel the enormously powerful energies of the gods without shattering. When faced with that inhuman-sized task, the ego can tend to be overwhelmed and succumb to a feeling of helpless, collapsed powerlessness, or else defend against overwhelm by taking a position of inflated omnipotence. The slow, meditative, Saturnian practice of walking the middle path between the opposing poles of powerlessness and omnipotence helps one consciously to practice balance and develop humility. I see this path articulated in the words of the Alcoholics Anonymous serenity prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Reinhold Neibuhr, the American theologian who authored this prayer, was born with Saturn square his Sun-Moon conjunction. The square aspect impels a relationship between the archetypes in the complex. In the prayer we see Neibuhr grappling with the need to integrate the Saturnian reality principles (acceptance of hardship, “the things I cannot change”) with the solar drive of the conscious self and the lunar drive of the emotional life that allow us to

navigate using our feelings, desires and impulses, which in our culture has been relegated to the unconscious. As Tarnas tells us, a resolved square can express itself like a confluent aspect, and in this prayer we see how, presumably from his own experience, Neibuhr recognizes the pitfalls of not being able to know the difference between one's own personal power, illuminated by one's solar will and lunar feelings, and the powers in life to which one must submit (Saturn). The prayer articulates the potential for developing a mature capacity to hold that dynamic tension between the free expression of self and the Saturnian limitations to omnipotence all human beings face, allowing its resolution into acceptance, serenity and wisdom without collapsing into powerlessness.²⁵

The Problem of Suffering

So why does this matter? Allow me to zoom way out for a moment to situate our conversation in space, as it were. In his remarkable book *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, Christopher Bache describes his systematic application of Grof's holotropic methodology and its paradigm-shattering implications.²⁶ Bache suggests that humanity is currently at a point where we can move beyond our identification with our experiences as individuals into participation and identification with our collective evolution. There is no question that the current trajectory of our species is destroying our planet, fueled by an insatiable habit of consuming in an attempt to fill an emotional and spiritual hole that consumption cannot fill. In facing our collective death-rebirth moment, if macrocosm and microcosm are indeed holographic, then we must change our consciousness to change our external circumstances.

Bache points us toward a transpersonal understanding of healing which gives it meaning on a collective level, not only the personal one on which psychotherapy typically focuses. He explores how work in deep non-ordinary states opens into the experience of great collective suffering, and how holding and tolerating the pain of our species (or other species) in these states allows the experience that the *collective itself* is being healed. The enormous upsurge of individuals currently drawn to the healing arts, or to doing healing work in non-ordinary states such as ayahuasca ceremonies or psychedelic psychotherapy, correlates perfectly with our current Uranus-Pluto square. That powerful evolutionary transit will remain within the 15° orb of influence until 2020, and corresponds with the liberation (Uranus) of suppressed painful Plutonic material into consciousness, the return of the repressed. The square aspect is consistent

with the driving need to resolve tensions, the life-and-death struggle for survival, and how we understand our participation both as individuals and as a species on the planet, including waking up (Uranus) to the destruction (Pluto) humanity has wrought on the planet in an unconscious (Pluto) drive to subjugate, control and exploit nature for profit (Pluto). As the quality of the current moment impels us collectively to wake up to the inconceivably painful truth that we are literally on the brink of our own extinction, Neptune and Chiron have moved into Pisces, which all share a common theme of suffering. Pisces, ruled by Neptune, the archetype of the redeemer, has a relationship with the sensitive, watery, empathic depths of feeling. Chiron, the archetype of the wounded healer, correlates to the realm of personal suffering with wounds that cannot heal, but which through tolerating, we gain compassion for all suffering beings. The archetypal astrological lens gives us an unprecedented capacity to reflect on the symbolic meaning of our moment in history, helping us open to the opportunity to awaken to what our suffering can teach us and, if we are to survive as a species, to use that awareness for immense collective healing. Any organism tends to struggle against its own death, and the more imminent the threat, the greater the struggle. This certainly applies to ego-functions, to human beings, and, it appears, to paradigms as well.

The modern era saw the death of the containing myth of Western culture, crystallized by Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. Western egoic consciousness was able to triumph on an intellectual level, but on an emotional and spiritual level, it became like a child abandoned by its mother—and what abandoned child would not appropriately feel alienated, anxious, depressed, as though something is desperately wrong? If the upwelling of unconscious material in the form of intense feelings (which are in our collective shadow, since the Western trajectory has overvalued the thinking function and devalued the feeling function) presents itself in a psychological complex that overwhelms the ego, perhaps this is evidence that the ego needs to stretch in its identification, in an effort to reintegrate the devalued feelings. I believe we are well advised by Bache's admonition that the more potent the transformative practice one uses, the stronger must be the spiritual, psychological and social container that holds the psyche of the practitioner.²⁷ Any radical shifts in awareness brought about by catalyzing experiences must be integrated and embodied in order to be of real use. As a species comprised of many individuals, in order to effect the deep change necessary to navigate our current unprecedented death-rebirth moment without shattering psychologically, we must ground ourselves in the container of our consciousness. The Saturnian

practice of integrating our non-ordinary awareness (the transpersonal, trans-Saturnian perception for which the archetypes of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto give us language) into our daily lives and relationships (which Bache refers to as “24/7 reality”) is what really makes the growth happen and allows it to be sustained, especially in times of such profound collective transformation.

If we use Bache’s insight from work in deep non-ordinary states of consciousness to inform what is possible in any therapeutic work—in other words, if we move back from the collective to the personal—we can easily imagine that it is not only in non-ordinary states that our “individual” healing process affects the collective, but that consciousness can be integrated in *every healing endeavor*. Thus, the sense of isolation and shame which often accompanies the therapeutic process can be seen as healing work *on* that very sense of isolation and shame, potentially transforming what happens in the alchemical container of the consulting room into gold for the collective. I have long been aware that the therapeutic trope—entering an isolated room and revealing one’s most private (and often shame-soaked) thoughts, feelings and experiences in confidence to a trusted other—is repeated in countless thousands of such private rooms across time and space, with the issues under discussion being more collective than individual.

That cultural sense of emotional isolation increases the feeling of shame, making our individual struggles harder to bear. This experience appears to have roots in the particularly modern Western assumption that we are born alone and we die alone. However, upon deeper consideration, this is not accurate. We come into this world locked in the most intensely intimate struggle imaginable with the body of our mother. We could not be less alone in that process: both mother and infant are laboring together toward a common goal. And when we die, although we have presumably forgotten what that is like, the idea that we meld back into the unity from which we arose embeds us just as deeply in the body of the Mother—on a physical level as we return to the Earth, and on a spiritual level as we let go of the illusion of what Alan Watts called our “skin-encapsulated ego” and return to greater consciousness of oneness.²⁸ As Freud famously put it, the best to which we can aspire psychologically in the modern Western worldview is to turn “hysterical misery into ordinary unhappiness.”²⁹ But by developing our archetypal eye and participating consciously in unfolding the themes in the birth chart by using astrological practices, we experience ourselves as re-embedded in the cosmos, our home. The shift to seeing our complexes, as well as our cultural/sociopolitical/temporal situations, and our very incarnations, as gifts for our soul learning and growth rather than as karmic

punishments seems to me to involve the evolution of our relationship with the archetype of Saturn from merciless, punitive Yahweh-Father to stern but deeply loving teacher and Divine Mother. The potential to move from the very young emotional stance of feeling victimized by our circumstances toward a more mature, participatory role with them has remarkable implications. Our painfully embodied struggles with our “little devils” become the opportunity for God to learn inside of us, as Rilke says so beautifully.³⁰ Through the Saturnian discipline of taking ownership of material we would prefer to disown, by claiming and feeling our experience and working not to reject, project, or refuse our pain, we heal it.

Archetypal astrology is a deeply creative therapeutic tool to move us from the psychological view of the modern paradigm to a transpersonal identification with the collective in a co-creative participatory dance. Astrology relativizes our personal egoic suffering, potentially rendering it more tolerable by allowing us to glimpse its deeper meaning. By using an astrological map to become more deeply and fully ourselves, we can realize that, like some amazing wish fulfillment, we truly *are* the center of the universe. *Yet so is everyone and everything else.* Example after example of archetypal correlation provides a felt sense of cosmic containment by a universe so beautifully intelligent and richly ordered that it feels numinous beyond comprehension. When truly felt and taken in, this experience heals the wounds of our profound psychospiritual disenchantment. If the astrological principles work, which they certainly seem to do when engaged with on this deeply personal, emotional level, then all beings conscious of the archetypal principles can participate with them in unfolding the meaning of their life drama. And, with some effort, any being can learn to relate to the life drama in a less dramatic way. As Tarnas writes,

By surrendering to the naked truth of one's being, by plumbing the depths of one's most private pain, one enters awareness of the Universal. Then the birth chart is recognized not only as the diagram of one's pathology, but as the necessary structure for one's divine liberation.³¹

If archetypal astrology gives each of us the capacity to participate consciously in relationship with the archetypal complexes into which we incarnated, a relationship capable of transforming our personal pathology into divine liberation, then does this become not only our delight and our birthright, but also our responsibility?

Notes

¹ Robert Aziz, *C. G. Jung's Psychology of Religion and Synchronicity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 165.

² Carl Gustav Jung, *The Symbolic Life*, vol. 18, *The Collected Works of Carl Gustav Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, and W. McGuire, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), § 151, p. 73.

³ Barbara Hannah, *Jung: His Life and Work* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1997), 80-81.

⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 2nd ed., vol. 8, *The Collected Works of Carl Gustav Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, and W. McGuire, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), § 201, p. 96.

⁵ Jung made clear that the ego was only one complex among many:

“By ego I understand a complex of ideas which constitutes the centre of my field of consciousness and appears to possess a high degree of continuity and identity. Hence I also speak of an ego-complex. But inasmuch as the ego is only the centre of my field of consciousness, it is not identical with the totality of my psyche, being merely one complex among other complexes.” Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Types*, vol. 6, *The Collected Works of Carl Gustav Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, and W. McGuire, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), § 706, p. 425.

Clinically, psychological complexes are experienced as upwellings of psychic material which have not yet been integrated into the ego-complex, the complex which believes it is running the show.

⁶ I owe much of the material in this list to personal communications from Chauncey Irvine, M.D. and Linda Cunningham, Ph.D.

⁷ The wife had a very tight Moon-Saturn-Pluto conjunction in a tight square to an exact Mercury-Venus conjunction. Their fights often centered around her mother-in-law, who she saw as judgmental and withholding of affection, and how her husband did not stand up for her the way she wanted him to. The husband also had a Saturn-Pluto conjunction, but square his Mars. His stated value for keeping the peace was informed by both a not-very-conscious emotional sensitivity (his Moon was square Neptune) and a deep repression (Saturn-Pluto) of his aggression (Mars).

⁸ Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, § 200, p. 94.

⁹ Daniel J. Siegel, "Appendix III," in *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007).

Margaret Wilkinson, *Changing Minds in Psychotherapy: Emotion, Attachment, Trauma and Neurobiology* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).

Leon Petchkovsky, et al. "The fMRI Correlates of Psychological 'Complexes': Exploring the Neurobiology of Internal Conflict," *Journal of US-China Medical Science* 8(11) (November 2011): 647–60.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

¹¹ Rick Hanson, *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Creativity, Love and Wisdom* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Books, 2009), 38.

¹² Hanson, *Buddha's Brain*, 87.

¹³ Stanislav Grof, "Holotropic Research and Archetypal Astrology," *The Birth of a New Discipline. Archai: The Journal of Archetypal Cosmology* 1 (2009): 60.

¹⁴ Stanislav Grof, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 96-97.

¹⁵ Richard Tarnas, "Archetypal Cosmology: Past and Present," *The Mountain Astrologer* (June/July 2011): 66.

¹⁶ Stanislav Grof, *The Adventure of Self Discovery* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 11-31. For a description of this phenomenon, please see Grof, "Holotropic Research and Archetypal Astrology."

¹⁷ Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (New York: Viking, 2006), 449.

¹⁸ Harry F. Harlow, "The Nature of Love," *American Psychologist* 13 (December 1958): 673-85. Harlow's seminal study on the necessity of maternal nurturance placed baby monkeys who had been separated from their mothers in a cage with a choice of two artificial "mothers," one constructed of wire mesh and the other covered with cloth. The study showed that the babies vastly preferred the "contact comfort" of the cloth mother to the wire mother who provided food.

¹⁹ Of course, no planetary archetype is actually *personal*, since each is equated with a god, but perhaps some gods are more familiar to us at present than others.

²⁰ Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 95-100.

²¹ Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 105.

- ²² Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, 87.
- ²³ Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Oxford, UK: Routledge Classics, 2001), 49-50.
- ²⁴ Richard Tarnas, *Prometheus the Awakener* (unpublished typescript manuscript, long version, 1980), 205-06.
- ²⁵ Niebuhr was born June 21, 1892 in Wright City, MO.
- ²⁶ Stanislav Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy* (Pomona, NY: Hunter House, 1980).
- ²⁷ Christopher M. Bache, *Dark Night Early Dawn: Steps to a Deep Ecology of Mind* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 311.
- ²⁸ Alan Watts, *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks 1960-1980* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1994), 76.
- ²⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Studies on Hysteria," in vol. 2, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 305.
- ³⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Just as the Winged Energy of Delight," in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 175.
- ³¹ Tarnas, *Prometheus the Awakener*, 142.

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