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Jung on the Irrationality of "Dying of Whiteness"

"My own psyche even transforms and falsifies reality, and it does this to such a degree that I must resort to artificial means to determine what things are like apart from myself. ..."

Jung (1934)¹

"Paranoid delusions, for instance, do not depend on belief – they appear to be true *a priori* and have no need of belief in order to lead an effective and valid existence."

Jung (1916)²

"It is not possible to live too long amid infantile surroundings, or in the bosom of the family, without endangering one's psychic health. Life calls us forth to independence, and anyone who does not heed this call because of childish laziness or timidity is threatened with neurosis. And once this has broken out, it becomes an increasingly valid reason for running away from life and remaining for ever in the morally poisonous atmosphere of infancy."

Jung (1952)³

"Our way of looking at things is conditioned by what we are."

Jung (1929)⁴

"The less libido he gives to reality, the more exaggerated will be his fantasies and the more he will be cut off from the world. Typical of neurotics is their disturbed relationship to reality – that is to say, their reduced adaptation."

Jung (1913)⁵

"As against this, the scientific credo of our time has developed a superstitious phobia about fantasy. But the real is what works. And the fantasies of the unconscious work, there can be no doubt about that. ... Our famous scientific reality does not afford us the slightest protection against the so-called irreality of the unconscious."

Jung (1916)⁶

"Although, as a rule, no reality-value attaches to the image, this can at times actually increase its importance for psychic life, since it then has a greater *psychological* value, representing an inner reality which often far outweighs the importance of external reality. In this case the *orientation* of the individual is concerned less with adaptation to reality than with adaptation to inner demands."

Jung (1920)⁷

This essay derives from a conversation in a Jungian Center class about Jonathan Metzl's masterful book *Dying of Whiteness*. A professor of Sociology and Psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, Metzl spent years researching a curious phenomenon in our contemporary American society: Many people hold beliefs that cause them serious harm, even death.

¹ *Collected Works* 8 ¶680. Hereafter *Collected Works* will be abbreviated *CW*.

² *CW* 7 ¶470.

³ *CW* 5 ¶461.

⁴ *CW* 4 ¶773.

⁵ *Ibid.* ¶428.

⁶ *CW* 7 ¶353.

⁷ *CW* 6 ¶744.

... the larger narrative I've tracked in this book, regarding the kinds of mortal trade-offs white Americans make in order to defend an imagined sense of whiteness. It's a narrative about how "whiteness" becomes a formation worth living and dying for, and how, in myriad ways and on multiple levels, white Americans bet their lives on particular sets of meanings associated with whiteness, even in the face of clear threats to mortality or to common sense. A central political script then emerges in ways that, in its worst moments, defines the boundaries of white America in relation to real or imagined others who want to take what it has or be what it is...⁸

Why are people being so irrational? Jung offers some answers, and I supplement his ideas with insights from other sources. While there are multiple reasons for our current irrationality, I focus on five.

1. the myth of "Rational Economic Man"⁹

We live in a society that prizes reason, rationality and objectivity.¹⁰ The academic discipline of economics expresses this bias in its assumption that people will act in their own self-interest, and, by doing so, the "invisible hand" of the free market system will create the best of all possible worlds.¹¹ The sub-discipline of behavioral economics has shown how this assumption is nonsense:¹² We do *not* buy and sell, invest in the stock market,¹³ or even handle our daily lives in purely rational ways. We cast blame on perceived miscreants; we project our fears on supposed enemies; we stay locked into "dogma" even as we engage in scientific research.¹⁴

Jung recognized that our "individual consciousness [has]... almost limitless subjectivity [along with an]... infantile-archaic tendency to heedless projection and illusion."¹⁵ And the disdain for subjectivity in our Western world goes so far that "Many scientifically-minded persons have even sacrificed their religious and philosophical leanings for fear of uncontrolled subjectivism."¹⁶ We humans are not always rational, and we don't always act in our personal self-interest.

Ever mindful of the value of balance,¹⁷ Jung appreciated both objectivity and subjectivity, each with its place in his psychological system. Jung warned us that "the scientific credo of our time has developed a superstitious phobia about fantasy. But the real is what works. And the fantasies of the unconscious work, there can be no doubt about that. ... Our famous scientific reality does not afford us the slightest protection against the so-called irreality of the unconscious."¹⁸

In his work with patients, Jung found the "fantasies of the unconscious"¹⁹ invaluable in fostering insights into what his patient's psyche was about, thus aiding healing. Much as we might like to believe that we can insulate ourselves from the "irreality of the

⁸ Metzl (2019), 270.

⁹ Lutz & Lux (1988), 92-98.

¹⁰ CW 11 ¶785.

¹¹ Smith (1776/1976), 477.

¹² Kahneman (2011), 292-4; cf. Kahneman & Tversky (1979), Knetsch & Sinden (1984), Thaler (1980), Thaler (1985), Tversky (1977) & Tversky & Kahneman (1981).

¹³ For multiple examples of how we are *not* rational in our investment habits, see Zweig (2007).

¹⁴ Keller (1983), 5. James Watson and Francis Crick called their explication of DNA the "central dogma" of genetics, which made Barbara McClintock's research methodology heretical. She won the Nobel Prize in Medicine & Physiology in 1983. See Keller (1983) for a biography of McClintock and a vivid description of just how difficult it is for scientists who challenge traditional paradigms and dogma.

¹⁵ CW 11 ¶767.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ CW 7 ¶252.

¹⁸ Ibid. ¶353.

¹⁹ Ibid.

unconscious," we cannot. That students in our course asked why people hold beliefs that cause them harm reflects just how unconsciously the myth of rational man has seeped into our thinking.

2. societal context: immersion in a dysfunctional culture²⁰

As a social species we humans live in society and this immersion influences us in myriad ways. When our society is dysfunctional, it can warp our perception, hamper our growth, and encourage us to hold beliefs that do not serve us well. Numerous recent authors have given us examples of such cultures.

J.D. Vance, in his best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, described the Scots-Irish Appalachian subculture he grew up in, with its "unchanged family structures, religion and politics, and social lives..."²¹ Where the rest of the United States has more or less abandoned cultural traditions of old, this part of the country has retained "an intense sense of loyalty, of fierce dedication to family and country."²² It is a region that does "not like outsiders or people who are different from us, whether the difference lies in how they look, how they act, or most important, how they talk.... Our men suffer from a peculiar crisis of masculinity in which some of the very traits that our culture inculcates make it difficult to succeed in a changing world."²³

Jung understood what this means, in terms of influencing our perception: "Our way of looking at things is conditioned by what we are."²⁴

As for the tight family ties and loyalty to one's kin that characterize hillbilly and other insular subcultures, Jung had words of warning:

"It is not possible to live too long amid infantile surroundings, or in the bosom of the family, without endangering one's psychic health. Life calls us forth to independence, and anyone who does not heed this call because of childish laziness or timidity is threatened with neurosis."²⁵

And Jung reminds us that "... in neurosis there is never an actual loss of reality, only a falsification of it."²⁶ So the proliferation of "fake facts" we see in our current world should not be a surprise.

Another example comes from the work of sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild,²⁷ who spent five years engaged in field work in another American subculture, the Louisiana bayou country, another dysfunctional region. Hochschild identifies three reasons why these Americans hold on to beliefs that are killing them:

"Since 1980, virtually all those I talked with felt on shaky economic ground, a fact that made them brace at the very idea of "redistribution." They also felt culturally marginalized: their views about abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag all were held up to ridicule in the national media as backward. And they felt part of a demographic decline; "there are fewer and fewer white Christians like us,"... They'd begun to feel like a besieged minority."²⁸

The words "brace," "marginalized," and "besieged" suggest just how intensely emotions run in this subgroup--another group manifesting "reduced adaptation,"²⁹ in their refusal

²⁰ By "dysfunctional" I mean a culture marked by poor levels of health, drug use, food insecurity, poverty and other manifestations of pathology.

²¹ Vance (2016), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ CW 4 ¶773.

²⁵ CW 5 ¶461.

²⁶ Ibid., ¶200.

²⁷ Her research was written up in Hochschild (2016).

²⁸ Ibid., 221.

²⁹ CW 4 ¶428.

to see the value of the EPA, which could aid in protecting them from the ravages of the oil, gas and chemical industries in their midst.

3. the impact of the Internet

Jung was not a fan of modern technology.³⁰ He did not go to the movies or watch television. In his personal lair at Bollingen, he had no electricity, central heat, nor indoor plumbing. He cooked on a fireplace and used candles for illumination.³¹ Given how he chose to live, we can imagine he would be less than enthused about the rise of modern technologies like computers, the Internet and cell phones.

This is especially likely given the side-effects of these technologies: disintermediation, the fragmentation of a collective sense of reality, and the growing spread of addiction to video games and social media. By "disintermediation" I refer to how, over the last few decades, there has been the elimination of intermediaries in our lives: travel agents, real estate agents, stock brokers, librarians--specialists trained to provide services along with an accumulation of wisdom that might protect us from folly. I recall how, years ago, when I wanted to research something I would go to the library and ask for guidance from the librarian. In university libraries there were specialist librarians whose task was to curate a collection of reliable, quality books and other tools. Now, thanks to disintermediation, we turn to the Internet, but who is curating it? How do we determine what are quality, trustworthy sources? This difficult task is up to us, and, for most people, it is a herculean, if not impossible job. The result? The rise and spread of "fake news" and "alternate realities."

How would Jung react to this? I suspect he would be horrified, and would remind us of what I quoted above: "... the real is what works."³² From his 60+ years of work with the mentally ill, Jung knew that life does not go well when one is out of touch with reality. People who are hysterical or "under the influence of emotion" lose "all the functions of reality, the feeling of and pleasure in reality, confidence and certitude."³³ Jung observed mass movements (e.g. big rallies, political gatherings etc.) and noted their "stage-realism," which was "nothing but a pose,"³⁴ and when promises made at such meetings never materialized, the leaders explained "away the failure by means of lies, ... immediately invented and believed"³⁵ by the masses who were caught up in "mass-mindedness."³⁶ Given how often political leaders these days lie, extol fake facts and indulge in fantasies, it should not surprise us that many people hold beliefs that are harming them: It requires finely honed critical thinking these days to distinguish what is safe and true.³⁷

4. "informational phishing"³⁸

³⁰ Cf. CW 11 ¶869, CW 18 ¶1405, and "Letter to Dorothy Thompson," 23 September 1949; *Letters*, I, 536-7.

³¹ Hannah (1976, 153-4.

³² CW 7 ¶353.

³³ CW 1 ¶319.

³⁴ CW 10 ¶426.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ CW 10 ¶s 719 & 723. Cf. CW 14 ¶s 9n & 346, & CW 18 ¶1387. Mass-mindedness was one of Jung's bugaboos.

³⁷ For insight as to what critical thinking entails, see the book I co-authored with Richmond Shreve: Shreve & Mehrtens (2019).

³⁸ Akerlof & Shiller (2015), xi.

This term comes from the work of two Nobel laureate economists, George Akerlof and Robert Shiller, in their excellent book *Phishing for Phools*. By "phishing" they refer to the lamentable phenomenon of scamming by tricksters eager to dupe us in all sorts of ways. Advertisers manipulate us (e.g. the "hidden persuaders" described by Vance Packard),³⁹ shady financiers deceive us (e.g. Michael Milken, Bernie Madoff),⁴⁰ drug companies push hazardous products (e.g. Vioxx, OxyContin).⁴¹

This scamming is "informational" in that we, the general public, lack the technical training or behind-the-scenes data that would make it possible for us to recognize the scam for what it is. This is why people like Elizabeth Warren pushed so hard for government regulation, e.g. with the Consumer Financial Protection Agency. When we are naïve, out of our area of expertise, or simply unable to access the information necessary to determine what is in our best interest, we risk being "phished" in the informational sense. Akerlof and Shiller feel this type of phishing can be remedied if we are aware of it, willing to be skeptical about claims too good to be true (like Madoff's promise of 12% interest), prepared to question and exercise critical thinking, and able to give time and energy to doing research.⁴²

Amid all the demands for most people with busy lives, who can do this? So we must consider that at times we just might hold beliefs that can cause us harm: Is that doctor-prescribed medicine *really* safe? Who paid for the research that said it was? Are those corporate AAA rated bonds *really* a solid investment? Or did the company bribe one of the bond-rating agencies to get that imprimatur?⁴³ Informational phishing is all around us, and the only words to the wise are "caveat emptor."

5. psychological reasons

Akerlof and Shiller say "We can limit information phish; psychological phish is yet more difficult;..."⁴⁴ Why so? Because this form of phishing is personal, within each of us, based on the "mental frames" or "scripts"⁴⁵ we hold unconsciously. Some of these we inherited from our families or our culture, e.g. the hillbilly mistrust of outsiders.⁴⁶ Some are part of our human nature, e.g. "loss aversion" (how we instinctively avoid what feel like losses, even though in some situations this works against our self-interest).

Financial advisors are very familiar with "loss aversion,"⁴⁷ as Jason Zweig explains:

"... it's hard to be strictly logical in these [financial] choices, because the idea of losing money triggers potential regret in your emotional brain....Doing anything--or even *thinking* about doing anything--that could lead to an inescapable loss is extremely painful."⁴⁸

This feature of our human psychology sets us up to make poor decisions that might, and often do, cause us harm.

Another psychological reason for our holding on to beliefs that harm us lies in the nature of our time. We are living in an era of intense emotionality, as politicians stage

³⁹ Ibid., 7, 53-4.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 125-133 & 157-159.

⁴¹ Ibid., 87-90 & 210 note 45.

⁴² See Shreve & Mehrrens (2019) for more on what is involved in tackling informational phishing.

⁴³ Alan Blinder describes how the credit-rating agencies were paid by the outfits they were charged with evaluating; Blinder (2014), 79-81.

⁴⁴ Akerlof & Shiller (2015), 146.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ Vance (2016), 3.

⁴⁷ Zweig (2007), 194-196.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 195.

rallies, participate in debates and foment polarization. This has, at times, led to riots, anger, even death.⁴⁹ As the public face of fear,⁵⁰ anger can morph easily into paranoia, fear of "the other," the stranger, the immigrant, the germ from elsewhere.⁵¹ And, as Jung reminds us, such fears can provoke "the well-known loss of reality."⁵² Such loss makes it almost impossible for us to differentiate helpful from harmful beliefs--even if we were so inclined to try.

Such attempts are unlikely because (as Jung reminds us) our "own psyche even transforms and falsifies reality, and it does this to such a degree that [we] must resort to artificial means to determine what things are like apart from [ourselves]."⁵³ We have an amazing capacity for self-deception⁵⁴ and, unless we have had a long analysis, such that we are much more conscious than the average person, we won't be able to stand "apart from ourselves" to be objective in analyzing where our self-interest lies and how best to serve it.

According to Jung ours is a time of widespread neurosis. Jung went so far as to state that we all are neurotic,⁵⁵ and "typical of neurotics is their disturbed relationship to reality--that is to say, their reduced adaptation."⁵⁶ Yet we are living in changing times, times when adaptation to reality is essential to well-being. But the more neurotic we are, the more likely we are to resist these changes--as Arlie Hochschild found among the bayou residents of Louisiana, and J.D. Vance in hillbilly country. In these and other places--places Jonathan Metzl identified in his research⁵⁷ for *Dying of Whiteness*--individuals were embedded in a subculture that hampered adaptation to mainstream reality (i.e. the world of gay marriage, abortion rights, feminism, transsexuals, black lives matter etc.). The norms of the local society do not mesh with these current trends, so, feeling like "strangers in their own land,"⁵⁸ people choose unconsciously to cling to irrational beliefs which cause them harm, even death.

Conclusion

The five reasons above could be supplemented with many other examples of our irrationality. If you are interested in exploring this in greater depth, I heartily recommend the books listed below, and especially the works of Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, Richard Thaler and others in behavioral economics.

Bibliography

⁴⁹ E.g. the white supremacist neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August of 2017, which led to the death of Heather Heyer.

⁵⁰ Tippet (2016), 180.

⁵¹ We are seeing this now (March of 2020) in the growing concern about the coronavirus, but Trump has been inflaming anti-immigrant feelings for years.

⁵² CW 5 ¶192.

⁵³ CW 8 ¶680.

⁵⁴ Ibid. ¶699.

⁵⁵ CW 7 ¶16.

⁵⁶ CW 4 ¶428.

⁵⁷ Metzl focused on Missouri, Tennessee and Kansas.

⁵⁸ This is the title of Hochschild (2016).

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