

EDITORIAL

Probably, most *JSE* readers already have at least a rough idea of what the term “synchronicity” means. The concept of synchronicity—it hardly deserves its familiar classification as a theory—is usually credited to Carl Jung (Jung 1973), although Jung really didn’t do much actually to clarify the notion. I’ll say something shortly about the problems with Jung’s approach, but what he had in mind—again, very roughly speaking—is this.

We’ve all experienced coincidences in our lives: surprising combinations of events that appear to be causally unrelated. Of course, what surprises us about the events isn’t simply that they’re apparently unrelated causally. That’s true of many (if not most) pairs of events at any given time, and in fact the vast majority of events are completely unremarkable when considered in combination. The event-clusters in a coincidence attract our attention first, because something about their combination seems personally noteworthy or strange, and second because we consider that combination to be more or less improbable. In fact, the more improbable we believe the event-clusters to be, the more significant and remarkable the coincidences are likely to seem.

Nevertheless, a coincidence will often appear far less interesting after only a little reflection. For one thing, it’s usually clear that the coincidental events probably have no *common* cause. And for another, we can recognize that each event probably has its own independent—and perfectly conventional—causal explanation. Consider the following example (taken from Braude 2007). Suppose I find myself thinking about an old high school friend, Paul, whom I haven’t seen in decades, and suppose that at that moment I run into Paul on the street. On the face of it, that might seem quite astonishing. But I might realize later that there was nothing special or cosmic about our meeting. It might turn out that I was thinking about Paul because I had just read a magazine article about proctologists, and I remembered that good old Paul had (inscrutably) yearned for a career in proctology. And it might turn out that Paul was in town to attend the proctology convention that’s held annually at the same hotel. It might then occur to me that I ran into Paul because I often frequent the neighborhood around the convention hotel. In fact, when I consider how often I’m near the convention site and how regularly Paul attends his professional meetings, I might even wonder how I had missed running into him in the previous years. Moreover, since I frequently read magazine articles about medicine, and especially since I might have subconsciously noticed signs and other

indicators of the convention as I passed the hotel, it seems considerably less amazing that I was thinking about my physician friend prior to our meeting.

Moreover, it's often the case, on purely statistical grounds, that the combination of events in a coincidence isn't as improbable as we initially thought. For example, many are surprised to discover that with as few as 48 people, there's a 95% chance that two of them are born on the same day and month. But causal and statistical naiveté aren't the only reasons we overestimate the importance of coincidences. Sometimes, our judgments are colored by a kind of egocentric bias—a tendency to overestimate the significance or rarity of an event-combination simply because it happens to us (see Diaconis & Mosteller 1989, Watt 1990.)

Now, a synchronicity is not supposed to be a coincidence which some person simply happens to find meaningful. Still, some coincidences seem, even after consideration, to be too unusual and too meaningfully appropriate to our lives to be explained away in normal terms. For these event-combinations, we have trouble believing that they're not really special and that we merely, more or less innocently, happen to find them meaningful and arresting. In fact, in the most impressive cases it looks almost as if the universe is speaking to us. The coincidences have a numinous or awesomely supernatural quality, and they're astonishingly specific and remarkably pertinent to major themes in our lives. As a result, we often find ourselves thinking that no conventional explanation, no matter how intricate, will successfully normalize the experience. In these cases it seems that appeals to conceptual naiveté and observer bias are simply beside the point.

So, probably the main reason for the interest in synchronicity is that many people feel that some of the things that happen to them have a kind of significance or numinosity which, while not amendable to orthodox causal explanation, is not really fortuitous either, and in fact seems to point to something profound about the workings of nature. Probably we can provide standard causal accounts for each individual event within a meaningful group of events. (In fact, for any event, it's relatively easy to offer a multitude of conventional causal explanations—see Braude 1997.) But the unusual significance of some meaningful events, taken together, seems to demand an account of its own.

Consider an example I've used elsewhere (Braude 2002). Suppose I'm walking down the street with a friend, feeling arrogant about the way I seem to have my life under control. I joke flippantly and callously about how easily and ruthlessly I've been able to manipulate people to get what I want. And at one point I remark to my friend rather smugly, "See, life isn't as big a deal as you always seem to think. You just take things too seriously." And suppose that at that very moment a large scaffold falls from the building

we're passing, missing me by only a few inches. Imagine, moreover (to give this fictitious episode its appropriate religious completeness), that the apparently cosmically perfect timing of the scaffold's fall so impresses me that I become at once a contrite and much more serious person, awed by the enormity and precariousness of life and imbued with a sense of preciousness in every moment. And suppose, finally, that this change in my attitude leads to improved relationships with others and to an enhancement in the general quality of my life.

Now ordinarily we'd assume that there's no connection, much less a causal connection, between my glib behavior and the falling scaffold. No doubt we could give separate causal accounts of why the scaffold and I happened (almost fatally) to cross paths on the sidewalk. We would mention such things as that my friend and I were taking the direct route from location X to our intended destination, location Y, and that the scaffold hadn't been properly secured, so that a strong gust of wind (say) caused it to fall when it did.

But to someone impressed by the apparent appropriateness of what happened, these sorts of independent causal accounts might not suffice. A further matter might seem to require explanation—namely, the appropriateness of the falling scaffold to my behavior. We might characterize it as a coincidence, a *meaningful* coincidence. But according to the “theory” of synchronicity, that wouldn't mean that it was a mere chance occurrence that happened to occasion great surprise or some other intense feeling or reaction. In fact, synchronicities aren't supposed to be chance occurrences at all. Nor on this view are they occurrences upon which we simply impose an interpretation or point of view which renders them meaningful for us. Instead, the meaning in a meaningful coincidence is supposed to transcend any limited human perspective. This meaning is supposed to exist objectively and independently of the human psyche. Jung claims, in typically obscure passages, that synchronicity is a “factor in nature which expresses itself in the arrangement of events and appears to us as meaning” (Jung 1973: paragraph 916), and “Synchronicity postulates a meaning which is a priori in relation to human consciousness and apparently exists outside man” (Jung 1973: para. 942). So meaningful coincidences are supposed to instantiate a kind of noncausal natural principle that explains the numinous appropriateness of particular events for particular lives.

A famous example of a synchronicity concerns an exchange between Jung and Freud. In 1909 Jung visited Freud in Vienna, and at one point he asked Freud his opinion on ESP. Although Freud later changed his mind on the subject, at the time he was unsympathetic to the idea of ESP. According to Jung,

While Freud was going on in this way, I had a curious sensation. It was as if my diaphragm was made of iron and becoming red-hot—a glowing vault. And at that moment there was such a loud report in the bookcase, which stood next to us, that we both started up in alarm, fearing the thing was going to topple over on us. I said to Freud: “There, that is an example of a so-called catalytic exteriorization phenomena.”

“Oh come,” he exclaimed. “That is sheer bosh.”

“It is not,” I replied. “You are mistaken, Herr Professor. And to prove my point I now predict that in a moment there will be another loud report!” Sure enough, no sooner had I said the words than the same detonation went off in the bookcase. (Jung 1963:152)

Here’s another example, also from Jung:

A certain M. Deschamps, when a boy in Orléans, was once given a piece of plum-pudding by a M. de Fortgibu. Ten years later he discovered another plum-pudding in a Paris restaurant, and asked if he could have a piece. It turned out, however, that the plum-pudding was already ordered—by M. de Fortgibu. Many years afterward M. Deschamps was invited to partake of a plum-pudding as a special rarity. While he was eating it he remarked that the only thing lacking was M. de Fortgibu. At that moment the door opened and an old, old man in the last stages of disorientation walked in: M. de Fortgibu, who had got hold of the wrong address and burst in on the party by mistake. (Jung 1973:15, n.26)

Unfortunately, Jung’s attempted explanation of the concept of synchronicity has some needless and arguably harmful conceptual baggage. One is an apparently naïve and limited grasp of the concept of causality (Braude 2002, Price 1953). Jung claimed that synchronicities are *acausal*—that is, somehow outside the realm of causal explanation. But Jung seemed to believe that two events are causally connected only when they’re contiguous or adjacent in space and time (like billiard ball collisions), and perhaps also only when there’s some rationally evident connection between the events.¹ However, that view has been seriously questioned at least since David Hume’s discussion of causality in the eighteenth century, and it’s at odds with the way virtually every scientist and philosopher talks about causal connections. So it’s not surprising that when Jung analyzed specific examples of synchronicities, he apparently couldn’t help but rely on causal language. That is, Jung himself seemed unable to describe synchronicities except in causal terms. Nevertheless, Jung’s followers on the topic of synchronicity continue to claim that those coincidences are *acausal*.²

Another problem is Jung’s reliance on his notion of *archetypes*, components of the collective unconscious that he claimed are inextricably

linked to synchronicities. But Jung's concept of an archetype is quite fuzzy, arguably causal (though not in the needlessly limited sense of "causal" Jung apparently has in mind), and linked to deep confusions (or at least unclarity) about the nature of meaning. As I've argued elsewhere (Braude 2002, 2007), it's actually incoherent to claim, as Jung and many others do, that synchronicity is a principle *in nature* that organizes events into meaningful clusters. That's because meaning can exist only relative to the perspective of some *agent(s)* or other. Nature has no privileged description into any categories whatever—much less into meaningful categories. That's why I argue for a controversial—but I believe unavoidable—position: namely, that if genuinely nonrandom meaningful coincidences occur, this would be best explained, *causally*, in terms of a refined, extensive, and potentially very intimidating form of large-scale psychokinesis.

But I'm not interested here in lobbying further for my take on the issues, and I still recommend that we try to adjudicate those issues by looking at promising candidates for impressive synchronicities. And because an intriguing new example was recently brought to my attention by Peter Sturrock and Brazilian astronomer Pierre Kaufmann, I want to share it with *JSE* readers.

This ostensible synchronicity has to do with Rogério Marcon, an optics expert and gifted amateur astronomer working in the X-ray Diffraction Laboratory at Campinas State University (Unicamp) in São Paulo. And it concerns the following two images:



I quote from an email sent by Kaufmann on July 29, 2016 (with a few editorial adjustments to Kaufmann's English).

Rogério was assisting a physics graduate student (Fernanda) at his laboratory at Unicamp, on a day in November 2015. For some reason Fernanda became intrigued about how photographic images were obtained using old-fashioned methods.

To demonstrate, Rogério picked an old negative film stored in an old box at the lab where he works, dated 1975, to show how to develop and produce a print on photographic paper.

They obtained the attached black-and-white picture. It shows a VW bug, very common in the 70s, parked in the same parking lot that still exists today.

[Then] they left the laboratory, and went outside to locate the parking lot area and view it from about the same field of view [as in the old photo].

There was a vacancy—very rare today at that place, at 10 a.m. Then suddenly an old VW bug approached and parked in the vacant spot. See the color picture they took as they went outside the building. It parked exactly at the same place the other VW was parked in the 1975 picture.

Kaufmann also translated for me Rogério's description:

As I said to you, Fernanda and I got this old negative found in a paper box, forgotten there at our laboratory, and decided to make a copy on photographic paper in the old fashioned way. She has never seen this. As we went out to the street to confirm the scene, one (VW) Bug appears suddenly in the corner and parks exactly in the same position, and at the exact moment we were observing.

A Bug is already very rare to be seen (these days). A parking free space at 10 a.m. is also rare. I never have seen a Bug parked at that street. The chances for a coincidence are very low.

My interpretation of this is of a psychological "shock," showing that time is meaningless. It was a kind of message for me to stop being worried about the elapsing time.

Now is this just a nifty, but non-synchronistic, coincidence? If not, would my PK- or other psi-mediated approach have any merit in this case? Clearly, one would have to do some serious psychological digging to figure out whose interests would have been served (or best served) either by psychokinetically arranging for a VW to appear at that moment, or for making timely use of psychically gathered information about the existence and destination of the VW. Presumably, Rogério would be the prime suspect in such scenarios. He certainly found the event meaningful, but it remains to be determined how much he had been reflecting or worrying about the

passage of time. Moreover, one might wonder why Rogêrio felt the need to go outside to inspect the area shown in the old photo. That seems to have been peripheral to the prior task of demonstrating how to produce conventional photo prints. Had he been unconsciously psychically scanning the vicinity and noting that a VW was en route to the parking area? I don't mean to suggest that we should easily resort to paranormal scenarios here, but these are the sorts of questions that I believe must be asked if we're to properly evaluate a case like this.

In any event, I'm happy to leave those questions open for now, and simply present this case to those *JSE* readers who also collect ostensible synchronicities. More grist for the mill.

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I would like, once again, to conclude my end-of-year Editorial with sincere thanks to my hardworking team of Associate Editors and our still regrettably small but trusty stable of referees. Despite my repeated demands on their valuable time, I count on them to help maintain the high standards of the *JSE*, and they do a really splendid job. And of course, kudos (as usual) to Managing Editor Kathleen Erickson, who keeps the whole machine running smoothly and thereby somehow succeeds at the thankless and heroic task of preserving the illusion of my editorial competence.

Notes

- ¹ H. H. Price also noted this similarity between Jung's discussion of causality and the quaint perspective on causal relations adopted by seventeenth-century Rationalists (see Price 1953).
- ² For an alternative approach to the concept of causality, see, e.g., Braude (1997, Chapter 6), and Scriven (1975).

—STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

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