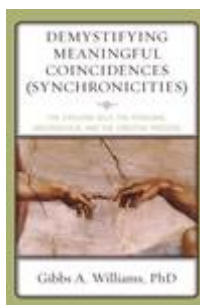


Coincidence Studies: A Freudian Perspective

A review of



Demystifying Meaningful Coincidences (Synchronicities): The Evolving Self, the Personal Unconscious, and the Creative Process

by Gibbs A. Williams

Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2010. 319 pp. ISBN 978-0-7657-0702-4 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-7657-0704-8 (e-book). \$70.00, hardcover



Reviewed by

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Jung's lifelong work on synchronicity is blossoming into a multidisciplinary field, including psychology, physics, mathematics, and literature. The general public has become increasingly interested since the rock band Police recorded their *Synchronicity* album in 1983.

Gibbs Williams, a Freudian psychoanalyst in New York City, has studied meaningful coincidences for more than 40 years through personal experiences and observations of his psychotherapy patients. In his early years he studied meaningful coincidences through occult–Jungian perspectives, seeking the mystical through these hard-to-explain events. As his understanding evolved, he found himself more aligned with Freud than with Jung, invoking the early 20th-century arguments between these one-time colleagues over the place of mysticism in the evolution of psychoanalysis. Freud's “obsession with sexuality” played

an important role in Jung's desire for separation, but Freud also warned against the "black tide of the mud of occultism," (p. x), which Jung was determined to embrace.

Williams continues the Freud–Jung argument by offering intriguing evidence for Jung's personal need to develop a mystical theory arising from his early separation from his mother. Williams also provides compelling arguments against Jung's notion of *acausality*, which was central to Jung's understanding of synchronicity. Acausality became for Jung a way of explaining how two apparently random events could be meaningfully connected. For him, synchronicities indicated the existence of the collective unconscious and the archetypes he believed it held; a synchronicity was somehow constellated (activated) by an archetype. Williams places causality and meaning within the mind of the observer rather than in an acausal relationship to archetypes of the collective unconscious.

During his career Jung offered different definitions of synchronicity (for a thorough review, see Clark, 1997). Like Jung, Williams defines a meaningful coincidence as two parallel–similar events that take place closely in time: One event is intrapsychic, and the other is external outside the self. For Williams, a pair of similar events becomes a meaningful coincidence because the subjective observer declares them to form a meaningful coincidence. For Jung, the activated archetype infuses the coincidence with meaning.

Williams's exclusive emphasis upon a thorough analysis of a subject's prior experiences makes *Demystifying Meaningful Coincidences (Synchronicities): The Evolving Self, the Personal Unconscious, and the Creative Process* unique in coincidence studies. The person's past history, current context, and crucial psychological challenges together increase the likelihood of a coincidence emerging with the purpose of helping the person resolve a currently intractable dilemma. The coincidence is created by connecting an unconscious element with a conscious need to find a solution. The numinous feeling, the feeling of awe, wonder, and connection to something greater that sometimes accompanies coincidences, is for Williams a connection to warded-off personal unconscious elements, not to some greater Mind.

Other researchers have found statistical correlations between personality characteristics and proneness to detect coincidences (Coleman & Beitman, 2009). For Williams, the coincidence-prone patient is stuck in preoedipal timelessness, seeking merger with a mother who was not available. Jung becomes his prototype. With his mother in a sanatorium when he was three years old and a cold and distant father, Jung developed a theory that reflected his personal need for union with the great oneness.

In his patients and in himself, Williams sees this longing for connection as a fundamental driver to find brief mystical union, to merge self with other out of an early childhood predisposition to find connectiveness. He resonates with Freud: "Occult powers are to be sought in the depth of the psychic life, and psychoanalysis is destined to clarify this problem in the same manner in which it has previously clarified other 'mysterious' happenings in the human psyche" (p. 199).

What are the data from which Williams theorizes? He critically reviews Jung's paradigmatic scarab. A patient who was highly resistant to his interpretations had a dream of being handed a golden scarab. While she was discussing her dream, a similar golden beetle buzzed at the window of Jung's office. He opened the window, caught the beetle, and handed it to the woman, saying, "Here is your scarab." According to Jung, her resistances broke down. Williams criticizes Jung for missing many elements of standard psychoanalytic treatment: What was the nature of the patient's resistance? What follow-up effect did this intervention have? Wasn't this experience highly important to Jung? Why was this event not dated, as was much of Jung's other case material (pp. 48–49)?

Williams provides numerous coincidence vignettes from his patients and 19 from his own experience. Unlike Jung, he provides extensive, detailed contexts for each one. However, he pays little attention to the quality of these meaningful coincidences. He pays far more attention to the meaning they generate than to the coincidences themselves. The coincidence triggers an emotional response that activates self-awareness, activates the search for something meaningful, and drives the search for a solution to the intractable problem that (Williams believes) helps create the fertile ground for coincidence emergence. He emphasizes the human need for mirroring—empathic reflections, smiles from intimate others, sympathy, understanding—and shows how coincidences provide a direct form of mirroring through the environment.

In Robert Perry's (2009) study of coincidence, detailed definition and objectivity guide coincidence finding. The two parallel events must have numerous similarities to qualify, and outside observers should be able to agree upon interpretations. Williams takes the opposite tack. Concerning a possible coincidence experienced by Patient D, he states, "We aren't interested in what anyone else feels about this event—only D" (p. 270).

In declaring that only D's feelings are important, Williams reduces the objective definition of meaningful coincidence to idiosyncratic inconsistency and partially negates the science he is claiming to extend. His theories have no consistent connection between the content of the coincidence and the interpretation except that which he or his patients declare to be relevant.

Williams's book extends coincidence studies in a much needed way. He insists that we do not jump immediately to collective unconscious, fate, and Higher Powers to explain coincidences. He urges us to stay here on earth and to look into our own psyches for the coincidences we see—a radical personal responsibility. Yet, some coincidences seem so strange, so weird, that personally driven healing provides an unsatisfactory explanation. One of his coincidences could be explained by precognition: He had a fantasy about a building being gone and then soon afterwards found one of his favorite coffee places burned down (p. 206).

Coincidence research indicates that there may be many origins and many functions. Origins may include the following: (a) random events; (b) in large populations, low probability events regularly occur—"law of large numbers"; (c) *psi* (telepathy, clairvoyance,

precognition); (d) group mind; (e) mind–environment connections; (f) acausal connecting principle involving archetypes and the collective unconscious; (g) quantum entanglement; and (h) Greater Mind. Functions may include the following: (a) fostering psychological development; (b) providing opportunities for school, work, and professional advancement; (c) opening human minds to unappreciated connections with each other and our environment; and (d) evidence for a Greater Mind.

Demystifying Meaningful Coincidences would have been more accessible had it been more sharply edited, and the discussion of psychoanalytic theory is repetitive. The author's autobiographical sections are excessively detailed. He often quotes himself, and he once even repeats the same self-quotation (see pages 193 and 195 on split-off feelings). The patient discussions are derived from clinical notes that are often unclear. Readers able to plow through these thickets will be greeted by useful summaries of psychoanalytic concepts and may learn, as I did, from the author's agonizing efforts to heal himself.

Through his theoretical, personal, and clinical perspectives, Gibbs Williams has clarified a crucial function of meaningful coincidence—to help activate self-awareness in the search for solutions to intractable problems. His work will encourage future researchers to gather the psychological histories and current contexts that are likely to increase the appearance of coincidences. In addition, researchers can test his hypothesis that coincidence-prone people are seeking connectedness because of preoedipal abandonment. Williams has helped further the development of the emerging field of coincidence studies.

References

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