

Exploring the God Function

Robert M. Ellis, *Archetypes in Religion and Beyond: A Practical Theory of Human Integration and Inspiration*, Equinox, Sheffield, 2022, 343pp, hb £75 pb £26.95 (or less)

reviewed by Dhivan Thomas Jones

This book is so unusual and extraordinary that a review has to start with some context, so that the actual book can come into focus. The author, Robert M. Ellis, has for some years been developing a practical way of life and thought that he calls ‘middle way philosophy’.¹ The resemblance to the well-known ‘middle way’ (*madhyamā pratipad*) of Buddhism is deliberate, for the author has a background in the Buddhist tradition, and he has drawn on the traditional formulation of the Buddhist middle way, although not without considerable qualification.² However, Ellis has applied his middle way philosophy well beyond what would usually count as Buddhist concerns, as a completely independent and universal philosophy of life, with its own distinctive conceptual resources and technical terminology.³ In my view, the middle way philosophy is an original and unique contribution to modern thought, the value of which is to help anyone clarify their thinking, especially in relation to practical spirituality, even if they do not entirely share its totally undogmatic scepticism. (For instance, I find myself more inclined to take certain aspects of Buddhist teaching, such as the Buddha’s attainment of Awakening, on trust than Ellis would allow).

Ellis’ 2020 book, *The Thought of Sangharakshita: A Critical Assessment*, was reviewed in *Western Buddhist Review*, vol.8, where the reviewer, Silavadin, who is a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order founded by Sangharakshita, wanted both to praise many of Ellis’ criticisms for their clarity and cogency, but also to defend Sangharakshita against some of Ellis’ other criticisms.⁴ I personally had a response similar to Silavadin’s to that book in relation to Sangharakshita, but this more recent book on the archetypes is one which it is easier to read with an open mind, as I imagine few people would naturally speak of an uncritical belief or trust in the theory of the archetypes. So this book is perhaps easier to review. In addition, it is an important contribution to our understanding of archetypes, and beyond that it is an impressive example of how middle way philosophy can be used to interpret and expand the practical value of the archetypes in human life.

The starting-point is Jung’s theory of the archetypes, which Jung conceived as universal images held in the collective unconscious of humankind, manifesting as symbols in art, as images or personalities in dreams, or as

characters and narratives in myths. Ellis does not attempt anything like a summary presentation of Jung's theory, as it is not the point of this book, but I suspect that a familiarity with the Jungian view of archetypes would be an advantage for some readers. Frieda Fordham's 1966 *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology* might still be useful. Volume 9 of Jung's *Collected Works* (in two parts) consists of various long and short essays on the concept of the collective unconscious, including explorations of various archetypes, such as 'trickster', 'hero', 'mother', 'child' and 'self'. Jung was not a great writer, but for me at least reading these essays in my twenties made a powerful impression, firstly because Jung's theory allowed me to place images and symbols from my dreams in an account of the development of the psyche towards maturity, and secondly because the theory of archetypes provided me with a new vocabulary to talk about mythology, fiction and films in meaningful ways. But at the same time Jung's own account of the archetypes is obscure: Ellis doesn't mention this but Jung describes the archetypes in one place as comparable to Kant's noumena, or things-in-themselves, which we only know about because they manifest as phenomena in our experience, as dreams, symbols, images – which are not the archetypes themselves, but only appearances. Ellis himself considers Jungian thought as a form of Platonism and goes on to liberate the archetypes from the philosophical obscurity of Jungian thought by completely re-thinking what is inspiring and meaningful about them.

The first stage is to redefine the archetypes as *diachronic schematic functions*. This is a very neat way to bring out the usefulness of talk about the archetypes in our experience, and to drop the unnecessarily metaphysical talk about the 'collective unconscious'. Archetypes are *functions* in that they have a certain active purpose in human experience. The 'shadow' archetype, for instance, has the function of allowing the recognition of evil, including the evil of suffering and death. The archetypes are *schematic* in that they gather different aspects of experience into a definite symbol or image or character. For instance, the figure of Satan in medieval Christianity is a projected image of evil in its various manifestations, allowing us to access an archetypal sense of what is to be recognised and avoided. They are *diachronic* in that the appearance of the archetype as an image allows us to identify its function for human life over time. The figure of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* has a role in a story that allows us to relate to an archetypal function.

The second stage is to simplify the apparent complexity of Jung's archetypes into four inspiring and helpful functions, which Ellis calls the *heroic*, the *shadow*, the *anima/animus* and *God*. Many readers will notice that these four are in fact drawn from Jung's work, but Ellis makes them his own by re-interpreting them as functions which taken together suffice for characterising the whole human journey to wholeness. Although I could easily understand this neat systematisation of Jung's presentation of the archetypes, I was not sure why Ellis

settled for neatness, rather than drawing on the diversity of Jung's and other thinkers' explorations of different archetypes. One might, for instance, disagree with Ellis' decision not to consider some of the further archetypes that Jung describes, such as the trickster. Likewise, there is the well-known book of pop-Jungian-psychology by Moore and Gillette called *King, Magician, Warrior, Lover: Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, which has inspired many a man to attend a mytho-poetic men's weekend and to rove in the woods at night, integrating aspects of his wildness into a larger sense of himself. On the other hand, it is possible that one could in fact interpret trickster, king, warrior, and so on, in much the way Ellis describes. This would be to take Ellis' work on the archetypes perhaps as a more open and unfinished project than it seems.

The third stage of Ellis' argument is to create a context for understanding how someone can work with these four functions. Ellis does this by dwelling at length on how we, both as individual human beings in our personal lives, and as social beings participating in cultural forms, *project* the archetypes onto external images or people or movements or symbols. Whereas Jung describes the withdrawal of projection as part of the process of psychic maturation (perhaps in the context of therapy), Ellis does so in much broader terms, as part of a mature philosophy of life, or as what he calls 'practical religion', which is to say, a meaningful way of life. For instance, it is all too common for the God archetype to be projected as metaphysical absolute, as a source of religious authority, and indeed as a supreme being and creator of the universe, etc. But this all too easily becomes mistaken for something external, as if images of God weren't the product of the human mind. Ellis is extremely good at identifying the process of what he calls 'absolutization', whereby helpful and inspirational appearances of the God archetype are mistakenly turned into dogmas. By contrast, it may be that the Wordsworthian sense of 'something beyond', of the intuition of infinity in the aura of the everyday, is actually more inspiring and helpful than the image of God. As Ellis argues, some of the Buddhist images of perfection, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Indo-Tibetan tradition, do function well as images of the God function, which the practitioner would consider as produced by the human mind (exemplified by the Buddhist tradition) yet at the same time as inspiring and helpful symbols of potential human development.

I have dispensed here with summaries of each chapter, partly because Ellis provides a good summary of the book on his own website.⁵ But in the second half of the book he turns to what he calls 'examples' of the archetypes, firstly in the great religious traditions. In this long chapter, Ellis does not hesitate to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these traditions in relation to his own account of the archetypes. I found this chapter the least convincing of the book, in that I did not feel that a six-page or so summary of a religious tradition was necessarily enough of a basis for a convincing generalisation about its handling

of the archetypes. But perhaps one should read these accounts as examples of how his analysis of the archetypes translates into an evaluation of the potential usefulness of some mainstream religious ideas for the process of integration that he believes is our human potential. Perhaps Ellis' very acute and detailed criticisms of particular religions need to be read as numerous examples of what one could call an 'archetypal critique of religion', that is, a critique of how well a particular religious tradition expresses the four main archetypes in potentially helpful and inspiring ways.

My own favourite chapter concerns secular rather than religious examples of archetypes, such as truth, beauty, goodness, health and democracy. This extension of the analysis shows off the power of Ellis' account, and offers some highly instructive examples of the archetypes. For example, Ellis describes how truth is often interpreted as something expressed in the form of propositions, that demands our attention along with an attitude of belief. The truth, projected in this way, may become a version of the God archetype absolutized in a form which we demand that others agree with. And yet truth in this sense is a symbol. The practical approach that Ellis proposes as an alternative is altogether more sceptical, more alert to the embodied process of enquiry, into the truth as a final knowing which is not something we could ever be sure we have reached. This whole account made me think of my own field of research, early Buddhism, in which it is all too easy for the scholar to think they have reached the 'truth' about the meaning of some difficult teaching, as being 'what the Buddha really meant', when in fact it would be more accurate to say they have reached some new and creative interpretation of early Buddhist texts, guided by the archetype of truth, an interpretation which they believe is more helpful in understanding the Buddha's teaching.

I hope that this brief review of *Archetypes in Religion and Beyond* has suggested some of its originality. It is one of those rare books that makes you re-think your assumptions, in this case, by using Jung's account of the archetypes in a completely re-imagined practical religious sense to envisage how to navigate life in a meaningful and inspired way. It is not really an introduction to Ellis' middle way philosophy, but rather an illustration of its considerable hermeneutic potential. Given the non-dogmatic outlook of middle way philosophy, this book on archetypes could be, and possibly ought to be, read in a sceptical and critical way. With that in mind, I wondered why Ellis didn't discuss Anthony Stevens' well-regarded work, *Archetype: A Natural History of the Self*, which presents Jung's ideas in the context of biology and evolution, liberating Jung from some of the limitations of his conception of the unconscious. I also wondered about the absence of any discussion of James Hillman, whose work on archetypal psychology has built on Jung's theory in creative ways. One of Hillman's emphases (in *Revisioning Psychology* and elsewhere) concerns how the archetypes manifest as *personifications* in and of the psychic world. It is the appearance of the

archetypes as *persons* that is surely crucial in understanding the compelling power of archetypal projection. I was not always sure that Ellis' analysis of the archetypes always caught that weird sense of a completely compelling projection of, for instance, one's *animus/anima*, in the form of a personification of the archetype. Such, at least, was one of my more critical reflections as I read through Ellis' compellingly original account of the archetypes, those images and symbols that inspire us to greater life.

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¹ This philosophy forms the shared viewpoint of the Middle Way Society, the website of which includes full introductions

(<https://www.middlewaysociety.org/middle-way-philosophy/middle-way-philosophy-a-quick-guide/>).

² This is the subject of his 2019 book, *The Buddha's Middle Way*

(<https://www.middlewaysociety.org/books/the-middle-way-in-buddhism-books/the-buddhas-middle-way-by-robert-m-ellis/>).

³ These concepts and terms are fully explored in a series of books on middle way philosophy, still in process of publication

(<https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/middle-way-philosophy/>).

⁴ See WBR Vol.8 (<https://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/current-issue>).

⁵ See <https://www.robertmellis.net/lesson/archetypes-in-religion-and-beyond/>.