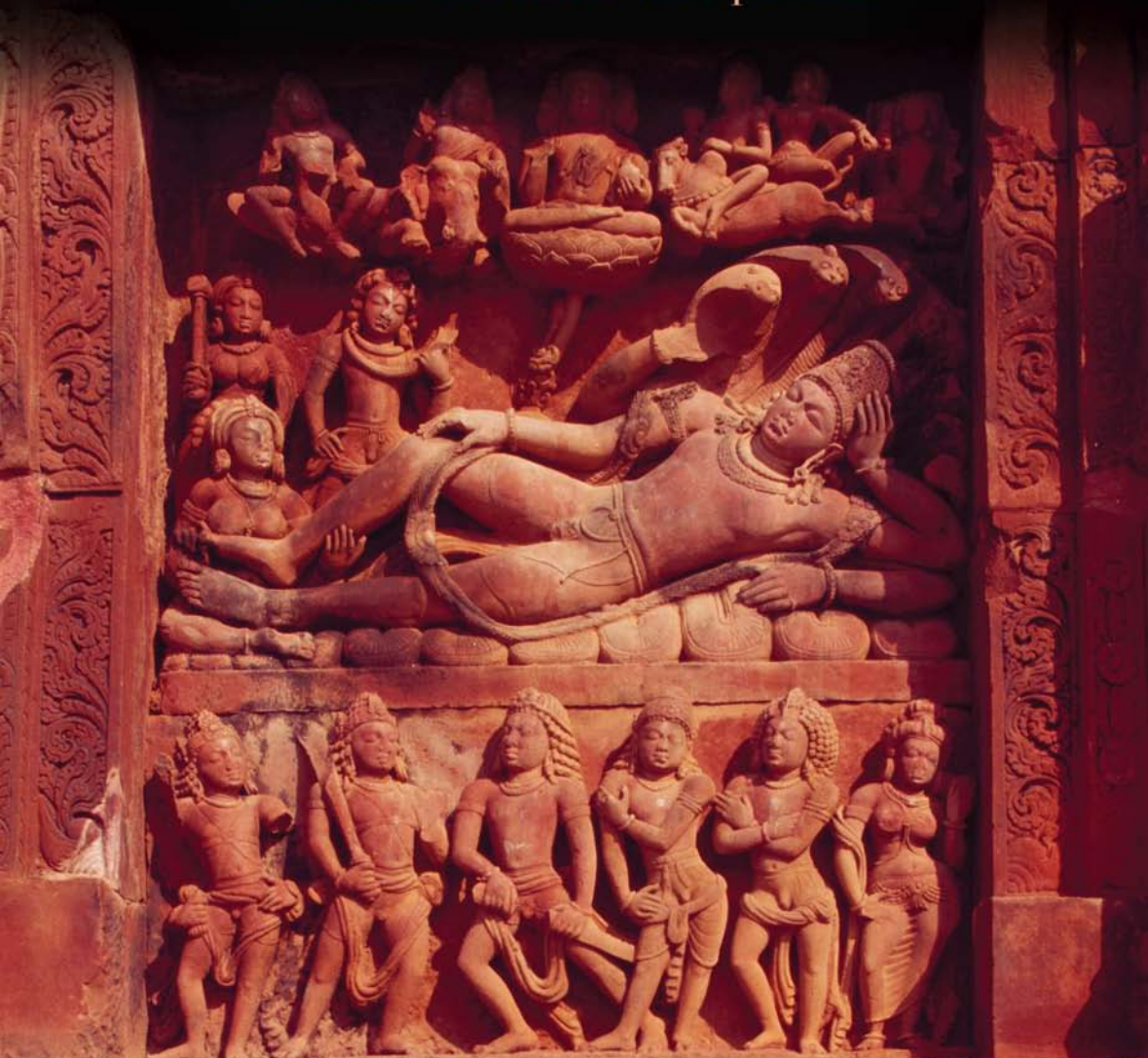


Michael Robbins

The Primordial Mind in Health and Illness

A Cross-Cultural Perspective



The Primordial Mind in Health and Illness

The universal quest to create cosmologies – to comprehend the relationship between mind and world - is inevitably limited by the social, cultural and historical perspective of the observer, in this instance western psychoanalysis. In this book Michael Robbins attempts to transcend such contextual limitations by putting forward a primordial form of mental activity that co-exists alongside thought and is of equal importance in human affairs.

This book challenges the western assumption that knowledge is synonymous with rational thought and that the aspect of mind that is not thought is immature, irrational, regressive and pathological. Robbins illustrates the central role of primordial mental activity in spiritual cultures analogous to that of thought in western culture as well as its significant contributions to numerous other phenomena including dreaming, language, creativity, shamanism and psychosis.

In addition to his extensive clinical experience as a psychoanalyst Robbins draws on first-hand contact with Maori and other shamanistic cultures. Vividly illustrated by first and second hand accounts, this book will be of great interest to psychoanalysts, those with a psychological interest in spiritual cultures as well as those in the fields of developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, neuroscience, aesthetics and linguistics.

Michael Robbins has practiced psychoanalysis for four decades. He has held professorships on the faculties of the Harvard and UCSF medical schools and is currently a member of the Boston and International Psychoanalytic Societies. He lives and practices in Amherst, Massachusetts.

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Contents

<i>List of tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 The big picture	1
2 Western models of primordial mind I: Freud and Klein	9
3 Western models of primordial mind II: Jung, Bion, Matte-Blanco	32
4 Western models of primordial mind III: Piaget, Werner, attachment theory and implicit knowledge	41
5 Primordial mental activity	50
6 Dreaming	56
7 The primordial mind in everyday life	71
8 The relationship between mental processes in spiritual cultures	81
9 The mind of a shaman	89
10 Shamanism and psychosis	94
11 Special sensitivity: Synesthesia and lucid dreaming	112
12 Creativity	117

13	Psychosis	129
14	Thoughtful reflections of psychotic persons	148
15	Language, thought and communication	172
16	Neuroscience of primordial mind	195
17	Analogy and transformation in human systems	205
18	Conclusion	207
	<i>References</i>	214
	<i>Index</i>	230

Tables

5.1	Primordial mental activity in relation to thought from a perspective biased by culture and psychopathology	53
5.2	Primordial mental activity in relation to thought from an unbiased perspective	54
8.1	Mental activity in western and spiritual cultures	82
13.1	Primordial mental activity and psychosis	134
15.1	Language and communication in thought and PMA	181

Preface

Where does a book come from? My interest in the history of ideas has increased as I have noticed the changes and transformations of my own thinking in the course of my personal odyssey from student to clinician and then to erstwhile creator of ideas, and as I have become aware of how theories come and go in my own field of psychoanalysis. Ideas become popular and are embraced as truths (in “scientific” terms, validated) and even develop a cult-like following, only to be dismissed as outmoded or even as quackery or illusion when the pendulum of belief swings the other way, and they are more or less forgotten. In a generation or two they may be resurrected and christened under new names and in new guises by ostensible creators who are seemingly unaware of the precedents and prior incarnations of these ideas. In this respect western culture is very different from spiritual cultures that honor elders, ancestors, and the continuity of knowledge. One of the first things I do when I read is to look at the reference list and ask where the author’s ideas came from. Sometimes this bit of intellectual archeology leads in fascinating directions and at other times it seems that the author is unaware that his or her contribution is not original. I do not mean to point fingers, as I have been guilty of this kind of naivete earlier in my career. I can only hope I have learned from it.

I am a psychoanalyst. I became interested in the field in the romantic era of psychoanalysis, influenced by books like *The Fifty Minute Hour* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and movies like *Spellbound*. It was then generally believed that psychoanalysis could cure all mental ills. But pride cometh before the fall, and with the advent of neuroscience, the ascent to power of psychopharmacology and the movement away from finding meaning in the mind and toward finding it in pathological material processes in the brain, psychoanalysis has been marginalized in many parts of the world.

My training in psychoanalysis took place at the old Massachusetts Mental Health Center in the early 1960s, when psychopharmacology was in its infancy and lengthy hospitalization and intensive psychodynamic therapy for psychotic persons was the treatment of choice for serious

mental ills. My mentor was Elvin Semrad, whose vast influence on a generation of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts was generated by personal contact and charisma rather than the written word. He taught in an era when it was socially sanctioned to work intensively and psychologically with individual persons. He taught that one learns, understands and helps by sitting with psychotic patients hour after hour, and that bearing and helping them bear hitherto unbearable feelings and the ideas related to them is the crux of the work. His ideas had a significant impact on my own development. Such work is no longer possible in an era in which organic factors are believed to cause mental illness, psychotic manifestations are considered meaningless epiphenomena of a pathological brain, and treatment consists of medicating people to bring about rapid symptom relief, with very brief hospitalization only when essential. Therapy based on intensive and extensive human relationship that focuses on feelings is considered wasteful of resources if not actually regressive and harmful. As a result psychotherapy is no longer taught in most psychiatric training programs. Semrad never wrote about his work although perhaps he wanted to for he amassed an enormous collection of recorded consultations and therapy sessions. The basic idea he proposed, that primordial mental states do not enable bearing and thinking about painful emotions and related subjects, is something I have tried to understand and formulate in various ways, including the writing of this book.

During the latter stages of my psychiatric residency I began psychoanalytic training. After completing residency training I took a hospital job and became a psychiatrist in charge of a ward at McLean Hospital, in the Harvard system. I remained there for many years, involved in treatment, administration, teaching and consulting. It turned out to be a serendipitous association insofar as I began to integrate my psychoanalytic insights with my work with psychotic persons, an interest I maintain to this day, and I gradually developed a broader interest in the way mind works, especially in its primordial aspects.

As my personal psychoanalytically informed interest doing intensive work with psychotic patients developed, and I began to experience some success in my work, the social pendulum with regard to mental ills in general, and more serious psychotic ones in particular, shifted from the study of mind to materialism, the study of brain. No doubt psychoanalytic claims to understanding and treatment were exaggerated, as I believe those of neuroscience are today, but the pendulum swung far in the other direction and the idea that psychosis is, as Sullivan put it, a human condition and that the psychological manifestations of such illnesses are meaningful expressions of personality has become endangered.

My psychiatric training emphasized learning directly from my disturbed patients rather than from reading books about theory. I learned a certain attitude – irreverence, perhaps contempt – for book learning. Probably

some of my attitude was defensive, as theory often seemed arcane and difficult to comprehend. So I came late to theory and to the history of ideas. When I should have been intrigued with Freud and other giants of psychoanalytic history I read what I had to mostly in a *pro forma* way. I still believe that learning about human mind and therapy cannot take place like learning to cook using a cookbook. In today's anti-psychotherapy climate, where people in training do not have the opportunity to relate in an intensive and extensive way to patients, they cannot learn, no matter how good the written primer.

I have had a longstanding interest in creativity, one of the themes of this book. As time permitted I have done some wood sculpting. In 1969 I published my first psychoanalytic paper, which was on the subject of artistic creativity. In retrospect I think the ideas were naive and trivial, but for some reason they got the enthusiastic support of Phyllis Greenacre, one of the pioneers in the field.

Gradually, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I became interested in how mind works and how psychoanalytic theory might help me to better understand what I was doing. This was before the work of Melanie Klein, which had already made a substantial impact in the UK and South America, was widely known in the United States, which was a bastion of more classical "Freudian" thinking. One of the first theorists who made an impression on me was Otto Kernberg, a dynamic, charismatic, thoughtful person who was trying to work with seriously ill persons and formulate theory about it. His early papers on borderline personality organization made a substantial impact on me. Only later did I realize Kernberg, who had trained in a Kleinian institute in South America, was struggling to reconcile those ideas with others. On the surface he was critical of Klein, and believed himself to be aligned with Fairbairn, whose ideas are very different. Yet, as it took me some time to discover, his theory of borderline personality is a thinly disguised presentation of Kleinian theory. Although he would have denied it at the time, I credit him for introducing Kleinian theory to an orthodox Freudian American audience.

I slowly learned about the work of Klein, Fairbairn, Mahler, Kohut and others and began to develop some ideas that in retrospect were not so original as I thought. I did not yet appreciate the profundity of Klein's contribution, perhaps because of her "unscientific" personalized conceptual language as well as the negative way in which I was introduced to it. My first paper on what I now think of as primordial mind (1976) was a critical response to Kernberg's ideas. In retrospect I was more focused on what I opposed than what I proposed, which I hardly yet knew. I wonder if I was repeating with Kernberg what he had done with Klein and her ideas. In any case, just as I owe Elvin Semrad a debt of gratitude for teaching me how to work with patients and learn from them, I owe Otto Kernberg a similar debt for teaching me the importance of theory and for directing me toward the

fascinating subject that this book is about. In 1980 I began approaching primordial mind more directly and wrote a paper comparing and contrasting Fairbairn, Klein and Kohut. I was still in the early stages of learning.

Over the decade of the 1980s I wrote a number of papers, some from a developmental perspective using observational data from my own children. I compared the concepts of Klein, Fairbairn, Mahler and Kohut and tried to formulate a theory of my own about what I chose to call the primitive personality disorders. Combining Mahler's concept of symbiosis and Klein's concept of projective identification, I proposed what I called possession configurations – pathological symbiotic bondings. The concept was an attempt to incorporate Klein's intrapsychic theory with Mahler's interpersonal model of separation and individuation. My ideas have changed a great deal since then and I look upon many of the earlier ones as trials or beginnings.

In the whirlwind of the ascendancy of neuroscientific reductionism and related mechanistic treatment of psychosis with drugs and re-education, the belief that psychosis is a disturbance of personality and that in some instances psychoanalytically informed treatment can bring about results far beyond these newer and "more scientific" methods has been obliterated. I am a fast typist and for many years after the end of my own training I took elaborate notes on therapy with patients in the ten minutes between sessions. Often I wrote as much as a single-spaced page. It was a form of self-supervision as well as an effort to improve the accuracy of my memory by comparing the notes with tape recordings of sessions from time to time. I gradually realized I was creating an archive of evidence of the potential value of psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy of psychosis at a time when, in a sense, the libraries were burning down and wisdom was being lost, perhaps forever.

In the late 1980s, and with what I hope was an adequate degree of humility, I decided to write a book that Semrad, who had by that time died, might have written had he been able. It was to be a clinically oriented book. Believing that there are very few really detailed reports of therapies from start to finish, nor any that detailed failures as well as successes, I went through successive condensations of my notes and came up with five lengthy reports of entire treatments. Later, in the writing of *Experiences of Schizophrenia* (1993), I decided to append a section on theory of psychotic mind and its treatment. I did this ambivalently, because I knew my own ideas on the subject of psychoanalysis and psychosis were still not thoroughly crystallized.

In the ensuing years I have been influenced by the philosophy of science and cultural anthropology. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the sway of postmodernism, I became aware of General Systems Theory and then of Chaos or Complexity Theory. I began to think of human personality in terms of a hierarchy of systems from microscopic to macroscopic,

related by principles of analogy and transformation: brain, the individual psyche, the familial and interpersonal field, society, and, at the macroscopic end, one's culture. The beginning of cultural awareness in turn led me to realize that psychoanalytic theory is in some respects indigenous rather than being so universally applicable as I had believed. In *Experiences of Schizophrenia* I proposed what I called a hierarchical systems theory, and in 1996 I published *Conceiving of Personality*, in which I examined various systems that comprise personality and the disciplines appropriate to understanding each, including but not exclusive to psychoanalysis. I proposed the concept of self-centric (western) and socio-centric (spiritual) cultures. In that book I also wrote a bit about the history of ideas in psychoanalysis and how much of the accepted wisdom of the moment is influenced by fad and fashion.

Over the ensuing years I have continued to study cultural anthropology. In the last couple years I have been fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of two shamans, and to be welcomed into a community of Maori healers. These experiences have served to de-center me in a way that has been disconcerting but also eye-opening.

I cannot conclude this personal odyssey without commenting on what has remained constant in the face of all the changes I have described. It is the idea that Semrad taught me, that one learns about how mind works through intensive experience with other human beings, mostly one's patients. Important as my reading of other people's theories has become, in the "last analysis" my patients have been my teachers, and what I have learned about how the mind works I owe to them.

Acknowledgments

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To my patients who have taught me most of what I know about primordial mind. I owe special thanks to Jacob, Kay, Lisabeth and Caroline, who bridged the worlds of personal psychosis and thoughtful understanding to provide me with their retrospective understanding, and were courageous enough to give me written permission to publish what they wrote. You know who you are even though respect for your privacy precludes me from disclosing your real names.

To a remarkable Maori shaman, Egan Bidois, who has become a friend during the course of preparing the book, and whose unsparingly honest and detailed account of his life in the context of his culture has helped me to bridge the worlds of western and spiritual cultures, of shamanism and psychosis, and of western medicine and spiritual healing. He has challenged my limited western cultural perspective and I hope his contribution will have a similar impact on you, the reader.

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Most important, my love and appreciation to Karen Sheingold. Your devotion and support, your editorial efforts, and most of all our dialogues about the ideas on which the book is based that helped me to clarify my own thinking, have made this a better book.

The big picture

There is a *whakatauki*, or proverb, in Maori culture that states
“Nga hiahia ai ki te timata aa ka kite ai tatou te mutunga”
(You must understand the beginning if you wish to see the end)

In the pages to come I present the thesis that there is a normal primordial form of mental activity that operates continuously from the inception of life alongside and in relation to thought. It accounts for a rich diversity of human phenomena ranging from the unremarkable to the extraordinary, from things looked upon as “normal” to others labeled pathological. Often its activity is undetectable unless we are trained to look for it, but its most obvious manifestations include dreaming, the mind of infancy and early childhood, the bonding behavior of infants and their caregivers, the modal mental activity in spiritually based cultures, some kinds of creativity, and the psychotic spectrum of illness.

At first glance this may not seem like a new idea. After all, psychoanalysis is based on theories about the relationship between a conscious, thoughtful, symbol-using part of mind and a repressed or otherwise defended against unconscious part. However, these theories were created from the perspective of western rational thought, which is equated with psychic consciousness or awareness. From that perspective the primordial aspects of mind are looked upon as inferior – *un*-conscious, irrational, immature and primitive. I argue and illustrate that a new model of primordial mind in relationship to thought is necessary – one that appreciates both that and how it is different from thought and not inferior to it, and that in complex interactions with thought it contributes in significant ways all the time to all our lives.

Origins of the western view of mind

As western culture evolved out of its tribal and spiritual roots it has come to value change and progress, and to put its infancy behind it. Objectivity and

rationality are among its cherished goals and science and technology are at the apex of its accomplishments. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and the evolution of the culture has been repeated in the development and maturation of each of its members. Western cosmology – one might even say western mythology – believes that it is normal to expect development of a relatively self-sufficient individual who adapts to a world of separate others and external reality. This individual self or psyche has internal complexity or stratification. “Within” it rational logical thought and related moral sense or conscience are looked upon as the highest or most mature strata. The “lower” stratum of self, which is related to our tribal origins and to infancy, is believed to consist of unconscious forces that are immature, irrational and uncivilized, and to have the potential to be disruptive to the social order and the community.

The conception of a self stratified into conscious and unconscious components originated with the birth of western culture in ancient Greece and subsequently was elaborated by Kant. Plato (1927) envisioned the *psyche* as a spectrum ranging from reason to impulse, divided into rational, spirited or affective, and appetitive parts. The appetitive part was believed to emerge while the rational part sleeps, and was said to be characteristic of children and responsible for dreaming. It is described as sensory-perceptual, somatic, sensual, concrete and unbounded; a realm of shadow and illusion where meanings are in a state of flux or oscillation and contradiction abounds.

Kant (1781, 1798) postulated a tripartite mind model consisting of reason, understanding and sensibility, which resembles Freud’s superego, ego and id respectively (Brook, 1997). Kant believed that much of the mind’s operation is unconscious. The conscious world is phenomenal and the unconscious, which one can never know directly, is *noumenal*. In his view the process of becoming conscious involves abstraction and conversion of intuitions from the sensory-perceptual or phenomenal world into representations by a process of understanding. These representations possess the quality of reason, the dimensions of time and externality/internality, and can be expressed in language and remembered.

Freud gave these ideas contemporary credibility. His study on hysteria (Breuer and Freud, 1893) was the basis for what in 1895 he called a “scientific” psychology, a “topographic” model of consciousness and unconsciousness modeled after the neuroscience of his time. His study of dreaming (1900) led him to expand on his model and postulate primary and secondary mental processes. The lower or irrational appetitive part of the Platonic mental spectrum Freud called unconscious – *das es* or the “it.” In Strachey’s effort to lend scientific credibility to Freud’s work it is translated into science-like terminology, the *id*. The *id* is the unconscious “place” or aspect of mind ruled by the primary process, a set of operations that produce hallucinatory or dreamlike phenomena; experiences that seem

quite real to the subject. Freud believed that the primary process accounts not only for dreaming, but for the mental activity of infancy and early childhood, and for schizophrenia, but he never explored the subject of psychosis.

Being and knowing in spiritual cultures

Because the western view of person and cosmos is indigenous and not universal, models that iterate its assumptions need to be reconsidered. Whereas science, based on objectification, is the ideal product of western culture, spiritual cultures specialize in other ways of knowing and healing. Beliefs and perspectives in the world's many spiritual cultures are quite different. Most of us know what is meant by western industrialized culture, but spiritual cultures are more difficult to categorize. Mostly they are indigenous tribal cultures that practice shamanism, of which there remain an astounding number in the world (Bourguignon, 1973). However, there are important ways in which spirituality has determined mind and social behavior in large eastern cultures that are based on Buddhism and Hinduism as well.

Western and spiritual cultures have very different perspectives on the nature of the cosmos and the relation of the person to the world. Spiritual cultures are socio-centric (Robbins, 1996); they are based on the spatial or existential idea of a unitary collective consciousness, consisting of the animate and natural worlds and the ancestral world. Members of such cultures appear self-effacing to western eyes but they are not. They do not aggrandize themselves as individuals or stand out in relation to others because they believe that it is the timeless eternal collective of which they are a part that is important. What is stratified vertically within a separate self in western culture is conceived of existentially or laterally in the spiritual cosmos. While they distinguish between the corporeal body and the soul, distinctions between inner self (subjectivity) and outer world (objectivity), internal layers of mind, waking and dreaming, past and present time, are not made in the same way as in western culture; these are simply different realms of a unitary experience that have equivalent "reality" value. In western culture passions, rages, conflicted impulses and wishes to be repressed are believed to exist mostly in a suppressed unconscious part of the psyche and to emerge in disguise in nocturnal dreaming. In spiritual cultures such things are perceived as good and evil forces existing in the natural and social (spiritual) world, a cosmos that is animated as a geographical underworld in which the person journeys or travels and struggles in waking life. The dream state is not distinguished in terms of waking and sleeping, rationality and irrationality, but is considered an essential source of information about individual and community. What in the western psyche are conceived of as memories are similarly distributed

in the cosmos; the ancestral world is alive and active. While death of the body is accepted, ancestors continue to exist in spirit as audible and visible presences, voices and visions that are just as real and present as any other experience. The disciplined awareness and use of these primordial mental processes is considered the highest form of development in such spiritually based cultures; something that enables and enriches community life.

All the existing models of primordial mental activity are of necessity constructed through the epistemological lens and bias of western rational thought – which is assumed to be *the* way of knowing about self and world – some more than others. The generally accepted western model of thought and the unconscious, with its implicit devaluation of primordial mind, does not seem adequate. Jung's perspective, which was heavily influenced by his hospital work with psychotic persons at the Burghölzli clinic, is less judgmental though impressionistic. Perhaps because he himself struggled with psychosis (Jung, 2009) and came to have respect for the potential richness and creativity of primordial mind he did not judge it according to conventional western ideas. He believed that mind has two qualitatively different manifestations that are in continuous dialectical relationship throughout life; a rational realistic aspect and a creative, fantastic mythopoetic one (Jung, 1956). He anticipated relating mind and culture with his belief that western mind's mythic aspect is the residue of human evolution from tribal-spiritual origins. More recently Matte-Blanco (1975, 1988) addressed the limitations inherent in the necessity of viewing mind through the lens of logical thought. He made the bold assertion that primordial mind is not lesser and irrational. He proposed that mind uses two qualitatively different kinds of logic in a variety of dialectical permutations. He concluded that it is not possible to know primordial mind directly, only through the ways in which it perturbs what he described as the asymmetric logical mode that is the predominant element of ordinary thought. The concept of logic, however, still carries implicit connotations of thought. When all is said and done it is not clear that it is possible to adequately and fairly conceive of a fundamental way of knowing oneself and the cosmos through an epistemological lens that is qualitatively different.

Pathological bias in existing models of mind

The western cultural bias inherent in theories of primordial mind is reinforced by another bias related to the clinical psychoanalytic background of most of the theorists. Freud formulated his model of normal mind for the most part from his clinical work with mentally ill adults, including a theory about infant mind and about normal development. Melanie Klein, the other theoretical giant in this area, derived her model of primordial mind from work with persons she believed to be psychotic. A quarter century after Freud described the primary process and seemingly

without awareness of its relationship to her work, Klein formulated her model of the paranoid-schizoid position and phantasy, in dialectical relationship with the more mature depressive position. Other than my own work (2004, 2008) and a couple of peripheral references that I note in Chapter 2, there has been no direct comparison in the literature between Freud's model of the primary process and Klein's of the paranoid-schizoid position and phantasy. Their striking similarities have gone unrecognized. One of the similarities that is not surprising in light of their common data source is that both models portray the "normal" infant as psychotic, at war with its own impulses and with reality, and development as a kind of therapeutic process.

Confusion between thought and primordial mental activity and problems of conceptual language

There is a further source of confusion that pervades these and other efforts to model primordial mind. In his formulation of the primary process it is not clear whether Freud intended a single model of unconscious mind or two. In some places he describes repressed thoughts or memories which are a symbolic part of the thought system, and in others he outlines a mental process of sensory-perceptual actualization or hallucination which is entirely different from thought. A similar confusion between normality and psychosis pervades Klein's model of the phantasy-dominated paranoid-schizoid position and Kleinian clinical practice.

Significant contributions to the nature of primordial mind have been made by developmental psychologists, most notably Werner (1948) and Piaget (1936). Their work is limited because it is based entirely on the study of normal individuals. There are more recent contributions by observers of infancy and proponents of attachment theory as well, both psychoanalysts and psychologists, but they have yet to be woven into a comprehensive theory of primordial mind.

For the most part these important contributions seem to be efforts to describe a common primordial phenomenology. However, the models are difficult to compare and to reconcile because each theorist has adopted an idiosyncratic conceptual language that has little or no connection to any of the others. Werner and Piaget have gone furthest toward formulating concepts that are widely understood and readily shared.

A preview: Primordial mental activity and thought

The authors whose work I have mentioned have achieved major insights into the workings of primordial mind. My reasons for proposing yet another model rather than elaborating on one of those are addressed in

detail in the first part of the book. For now I should like to make a brief introduction to some of the characteristics of what I call primordial mental activity (PMA), which I shall be referring to throughout the book. Thought is the aspect of mind that represents and reflects about itself and about the body, and that represents specific emotions. PMA is the body's mind. It is driven by raw affect and is sensory-perceptual and except in dreaming, involves motor activity. It makes and receives deep impressions. As it is a concrete operation it communicates not by exchanging meaning but by pressure and induction; acting on or feeling acted upon. It is not a modality of expressing and receiving meaning but rather of expressing and assimilating belief and certainty. Primordial mind is holistic and does not differentiate what in western cosmology is within the self from what is in the external world. It creates a sense of actuality that we call belief rather than mental event. Perception and narration is in sequences determined by inner affective states rather than logic or rationality, so from the standpoint of thought it is not integrated. Experience is immediate and stimulus-bound, without a sense of time and memory. It does not observe thoughtful or logical distinctions involving time, space and causality. PMA is readily confused with thought because it has access to and utilizes whatever content the person may have learned, including language and socio-cultural experience, albeit in their concrete forms rather than the abstract, symbolic, representational way that characterizes thought.

PMA operates continuously from the inception of life, both when awake and asleep, and in a variety of permutations related to thought ranging from dissociation to different forms of integration, it accounts for such disparate phenomena as I have enumerated, including infant mind, attachment behavior, dreaming, creativity, cultural differences and psychosis. The labels we give to the manifest phenomenology and the judgments we make about them depend on a number of variables: the context in which they occur (waking or sleeping, interpersonal, social and cultural); their adaptive or maladaptive function in that context; and whether they are under the control of thoughtful mind or are dissociated from it.

PMA is the mental adaptation of infancy because thought, which develops separately, is rudimentary and matures slowly over the first decade of life. PMA is not transformed into thought; however, in the ordinary course of development thought gradually plays an increasingly prominent role. PMA comes under the regulation of thought with regard to the times, places and purposes for which it is employed. A complex set of variables – including constitutional factors, the nature of the infant attachment experience and related interpersonal processes of infancy and early childhood, the degree of integration or dissociation between PMA and thought, and the personal, social and cultural context within and outside of the primary family – determines whether the ultimate behavioural outcome for a given individual is adaptive or maladaptive, or considered normal or abnormal.

In spiritual cultures there is much more recognition and reinforcement early in life for manifestations of PMA, which are looked upon as ways of knowing and communicating that are beneficial to the community. Although thought, as we know it in western culture, is less valued, it is still relied upon to control the time and place for using PMA and the purpose to which it is put. When members of spiritual cultures are required to function in western culture, which not only does not offer a supportive community role for PMA, but actually defines some of its manifestations as psychotic, disaster can ensue (see Chapters 13–15).

There is evidence to suggest a more or less common neural substrate to the diverse phenomena I have noted and hence for primordial mind. I present possible constitutional elements in Chapter 11, and in Chapter 16 turn to contemporary neuroscience and findings based on newer technologies such as functional neuroimaging. These investigations are as yet in an early stage and differences in the phenomena under investigation and the methodology and language used in various studies make the results difficult to interpret, but the evidence is both suggestive and exciting.

The organization of the book reflects a tension between theory and exemplification. The first part of the book is weighty with theory. Especially during the twentieth century and beginning with Freud a number of important models of primordial mind have been proposed by persons including Klein, Bion, Matte-Blanco, Jung, theorists of attachment, relationship and implicit knowledge, and developmental psychologists, including Piaget and Werner. In highlighting their strengths and limitations I provide the rationale for proposing the model of primordial mental activity that is the foundation for understanding the examples that are presented in the latter part of the book. The remainder of the book has theory as well, but much more in the way of illustration. This includes biographical and autobiographical accounts, numerous examples from my clinical practice with psychotic and less severely ill persons, dreams of my own and of my patients, and remarkable, thoughtful first-person reflections about the nature of their psychoses from patients in advanced stages of therapy. There is an extraordinary account written for this book by a Maori shaman who left the family and culture in which he grew up in order to get a western education. He developed symptoms which were diagnosed by the western mental health system as psychosis and was treated unsuccessfully with western medical methods. Eventually he was healed by Maori methods and has gone on to achieve a remarkable degree of maturity. He holds a position as cultural counselor to Maori patients in a clinic which uses western medicine and is an advocate for the preservation of Maori culture.

I have had misgivings about the order of the book but I think the theory is necessary in order to fully appreciate the examples. I anticipate the book may be of interest to two kinds of readers, some for whom theory is very

important, who realize that significant attempts have been made to model primordial mind and wish to understand why I believe these models are not adequate and another model is necessary; and some who are more interested in phenomenology and are willing to consider the model I propose on its own merits. For the first group the first section of the book, through Chapter 4, will be essential, whereas the latter group might wish to begin with Chapter 5, in which I propose the model of primordial mental activity (PMA) and contrast it with thought, and then move on to the illustrations.

Western models of primordial mind I: Freud and Klein

In Chapter 1 I noted that conceiving of a person as a separate individual psyche stratified in layers ranging from psychological consciousness to unconsciousness is an artifact of western self-centric thought. In western culture knowledge and the epistemological perspective from which it is attained is defined in terms of conscious logical objectification, and aspects of mind and behavior whose meanings and significance are not thoughtfully evident are presumed to have unconscious correlates. Such phenomena are labeled “irrational” and “unrealistic.” Spiritually based cultures do not distinguish the individual from an external world, reality from fantasy, and rationality from irrationality, nor do they conceive of a psyche that has both conscious and unconscious aspects. What needs to be known relates to meanings that reside in the natural, spiritual and ancestral worlds, not in the self, and it is to be known by expert interpretation, not scientific objectification.

It is important not to overlook the implications of the fact that this book is written from my perspective as an embedded member of western culture, specifically scientific culture. Since ancient Greece western thinkers have attempted to conceive of primordial mental activity. During the twentieth century and especially following Freud’s groundbreaking contributions such efforts have intensified and taken on increasingly scientific attributes of exemplification, objectification and verification. In this section of the book I explore the major western models of primordial unconscious mind, including those of Jung, Freud, Klein, Bion and Matte-Blanco, theorists of attachment and implicit knowledge, and the developmental psychologists Piaget and Werner. I try to highlight their similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses in order to show why I believe another model is necessary.

A western observer who is attempting an objective “scientific” conceptualization of primordial unconscious mind encounters a barrier that is serious precisely because it is relatively invisible, not readily apparent. What is viewed as unconscious from the perspective of western thought may also be seen as a way that mind experiences, knows, and expresses itself that is qualitatively different from thought. The “scientific” observer cannot

conceive of it directly precisely because he or she is confined by another, thoughtful way of knowing. Even if it were possible to shift perspective and abandon rational scientific thought the result would be a different experience and not a thoughtful conception. A book written from such a perspective might make interesting reading as an illustration of the workings of other minds but would contribute little to an understanding of what is going on. Further along in the book I have included first-person illustrations, but only after proposing a conceptual framework in which to understand them. As a consequence of this cultural myopia it is easy to get the two mental activities confused and to speak of primordial mind in the language that gives thoughtful mind a pride of place and unwittingly implies that this other process is deficient because it “lacks” some of the essential aspects of thought; it is labeled un-conscious rather than different-conscious. It is important to try to find a way to think about a mental activity that is not thoughtful without confusing the way one thinks about the process with the process itself. This confusion permeates most psychoanalytic theories. It can be illustrated by the difficulty distinguishing the dream *experience* from the product that remains when it has been re-cast in thought in order to contemplate and talk about it. Another example that is elaborated in Chapter 15 is the tendency when talking with a schizophrenic person to “make sense” of strange utterances by means of projection of the interpreter’s thoughtful mind; that is, assuming the productions are thoughts that the person intends but is unable to articulate clearly rather than a qualitatively different form of expression. As I elaborate in Chapter 3, Matte-Blanco was the only western theorist who directly recognized and struggled with this seemingly insoluble epistemological conundrum.

A few words about the nature of psychic consciousness and unconsciousness will serve as a preamble. It is necessary to understand what is meant by consciousness in order to comprehend unconsciousness, for it is only through the lens of conscious thought that we can contemplate what is unconscious. Psychic consciousness is a state of self-awareness that presupposes an organizing or integrating self and the capacity to think and to reflect. In western culture one of the subjects for reflection may be “interior” mental states that seem different or unusual and whose significance may not readily be apparent; in spiritual cultures similar phenomena are looked upon as existential relationships with the cosmos. While psychic consciousness can only occur in a waking state it is not synonymous with being awake. People who have recovered from psychotic states or emerged from trances have been conscious in the physical sense, but often talk about the experience of “waking up,” implying a retrospective sense that they were unconscious. Persons in such “altered” states have the illusion or belief that they are conscious.

In the psychoanalytic situation that Freud devised it is assumed that symptoms and states of distress whose causes are not understood, and

observed behaviors that from the perspective of a presumed rational objective observer seem extraordinary or abnormal, are unconsciously determined. This requires postulating objectivity in the observer, an assumption that the postmodern perspective of relativity, context and relationship has taught us is questionable. Evidence to confirm the hypothesis of unconscious motivation and meaning is retrospective and consists of such things as uncovering of new meaning through free association, an “aha” experience on the part of the analysand, or subsequent information about ensuing life change that implies the efficacy of an interpretation. This inferential process is not hard science and there is much room for the play of other unconscious factors that comprise the biases of subjectivity. As a result many psychoanalysts now maintain that it is not possible to reach objectively reliable conclusions about the unconscious components of an individual mind, and have relegated the concept of individual unconsciousness to the status of convenient heuristic fiction, like the concept of infinity in mathematics.

Freud

Freud was the first psychoanalyst to model primordial mental activity and psychic unconsciousness, and his insights laid the groundwork for the developments and contributions that have followed, including my own. His model of the primary process was his initial attempt to explain unconscious mind. Although it is not generally recognized, he entertained two very different conceptions of the primary process. He vacillated between describing it as a qualitatively unique form of mental activity and conceiving of it as a variant of thought. One model of unconscious and primary process involves repression of consciously unacceptable thoughts and feelings in a way that preserves their unique quality as representational symbolic thoughts and emotions; another is a primary reflexive avoidance of affective-instinctual excitation and over-stimulation and transformation of such excitation into a qualitatively unique form of mental activity that is concrete, undifferentiated and unintegrated, and sensory-perceptual-motor in quality. Finally there are attempts to model a transformational process by which unacceptable thoughts and memories are qualitatively transformed into sensory-perceptual-motor experiences.

The primary process as a qualitatively distinctive mental activity

Freud described the primary process and the characteristics that distinguish it from the mature thought that he called the secondary process in a series of papers on aphasia (1891, 1895); as part of his neuro-psychological theory entitled *Project for a scientific psychology* (1895/1950); in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), especially Chapter 7; and in *Formulations on the two*

principles of mental functioning (1911a). It is the mind's attempt to process somatic-affective experience that he called instinctual tension. At first he called the regulating factor the unpleasure principle but subsequently (1911a) renamed it the pleasure principle.

The primary process is ontologically primary. Freud writes:

When I described one of the psychical processes occurring in the mental apparatus as the 'primary' one, what I had in mind was not merely considerations of relative importance and efficiency; I intended also to choose a name which would give an indication of its chronological priority. It is true that, so far as we know, no psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only and that such an apparatus is to that extent a theoretical fiction. But this much is a fact: the primary processes are present in the mental apparatus from the first, while it is only during the course of life that the secondary processes unfold, and come to inhibit and overlay the primary ones.

(Freud, 1900, p. 602)

The primary process is said to result from repression of an accumulation of what Freud variously called excitation, affect, instinct and anxiety, which the immature infant is helpless to satisfy or cope with (1895, 1915a). It transforms this state of excitation into a state of satisfaction or tension-relief by creating a sensory-perceptual-motor experience that Freud called wish-fulfillment. Freud writes that:

The infant. . . probably hallucinates the fulfillment of its internal needs; it betrays its unpleasure, when there is an increase of stimulus and an absence of satisfaction, by the motor discharge of screaming and beating about with its arms and legs, and it then experiences the satisfaction it has hallucinated. Later, as an older child, it learns to employ these manifestations of discharge intentionally as methods of expressing its feelings. Since the later care of children is modeled on the care of infants, the dominance of the pleasure principle can really come to an end only when a child has achieved complete psychical detachment from its parents.

(1911a, p. 218f)

At night the primary process preserves sleep by forming dreams or "hallucinatory" experiences, avoiding disturbing thoughts that would keep the subject awake. In the waking adult state in which motor discharge is possible the result is kinds of actions and expressions that Freud called acting out, which have a delusional flavor and characterize the psycho-analytic transference.

Freud modeled the process of wish-fulfillment after an electrical current flowing from negative to positive:

A current of this kind in the apparatus, starting from unpleasure and aiming at pleasure, we have termed a 'wish'; and we have asserted that only a wish is able to set the apparatus in motion and that the course of the excitation in it is automatically regulated by feelings of pleasure and unpleasure.

(Freud, 1900, p. 597)

In his earliest description of the primary process Freud writes that "it is a question of an indication to distinguish between a perception and a memory (idea)" (1895, p. 325). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) he states this distinction in a number of places, for example, "The primary process endeavors to bring about a discharge of excitation in order that. . . it may establish a 'perceptual identity.' The secondary process, however, has abandoned this intention and taken on another in its place – the establishment of a 'thought identity'" (1900, p. 602). He describes the characteristics that distinguish the primary process, which in this formulation is synonymous with unconscious, as follows: "exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process (mobility of cathexis), timelessness, and replacement of external by psychical reality – these are the characteristics which we may expect to find in processes belonging to the system Ucs" (1915a, pp. 186–187). He writes that

The strangest characteristic of unconscious (repressed) processes, to which no investigator can become accustomed without the exercise of great self-discipline, is due to their entire disregard of reality-testing; *they equate reality of thought with external actuality*, and wishes with their fulfillment – with the event – just as happens automatically under the dominance of the ancient pleasure principle.

(1923, p. 225, italics mine)

He describes "a complete hallucinatory cathexis of the perceptual systems" (1900, p. 547) and adds that "the dream. . . represented. . . a situation which was actually present and which could be perceived through the senses like a waking experience" (ibid., p. 533). He further states that the "dream-work proper diverges further from our picture of waking thought than has been supposed. . . it is completely different from it qualitatively and for that reason not immediately comparable with it" (ibid., p. 507). In elaborating the differences he writes that: "One is the fact that the thought is represented as an immediate situation with the 'perhaps' omitted, and the other is the fact that the thought is transformed into visual images and speech" (ibid., p. 533).