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Nicholas G. Boeving
Alef Trust, Wirral, England, UK

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BOOK REVIEW

Decoding Jung's Metaphysics: The Archetypal Semantics of an Experiential Universe

(2021; Iff Books)

by **Bernardo Kastrup**

Reviewed by

Nicholas Grant Boeving

Alef Trust

Bromborough, Wirral, UK

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? . . . we need the books that affect us like a disaster A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.

—Franz Kafka (1958/1977, p. 16)

Only the Wounded Metaphysician Heals: Reflections on the Work of Bernardo Kastrup

Astronomers calculate the rate of star formation in our galaxy to be about three Sun-like celestial bodies per year. The appearance of a new star in any given academic discipline, however, is a far rarer event: about once in a generation. With the recent publication of *Decoding Jung's Metaphysics: The Archetypal Semantics of an Experiential Universe* (Kastrup, 2021b) a bright new coruscation has been fixed in the firmament of transpersonal scholarship, but unlike the constituents of the official 88 constellations, Kastrup belongs to a number of academic asterisms, patterns of bright light that share in several constellations. One is fixed, the other fluid—and neither this book nor the person who wrote it can be properly pigeonholed in any one disciplinary configuration. Instead, Kastrup's light shares in the pattern integrities of multiple disciplines: philosophy of mind, science of consciousness, religious studies, and transpersonal psychology, to name but a few. Nevertheless, despite the remarkable achievements of this

volume (and there are many), as well as the eight that proceeded it, Kastrup neither promises, nor presents, any kind of final theory. The universe, both for Jung, as well as for Kastrup, is dialogical, not declarative, and both philosophers expertly avoid the sweeping, hubristic extravagances of other writers who pepper their work with periods where question marks ought to have been placed instead. And yet, despite this book's dramatic interrogative subversion, there are questions Kastrup does *not* ask—questions that might require, for a full decoding of Jung's metaphysics, a full decoding of Kastrup himself.

I chose to open this review with a quote from Kafka, because I believe, as he did, that a book should affect us like a disaster. And yet, as a passionate and longtime reader of transpersonal scholarship, I can count on one hand the number of books that have woken me up with a blow to the head. The first, Ken Wilber's (1977) *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, was nothing short of a textual *shaktipat*—a near-electric transmission that announced itself as a calling, awakening me with such a voltaic jolt that I knew, long before

I had finished the last chapter, that this wild, epistemologically plural field was to be my vocation in the truest Latinate sense of the word. It was, and is, my “spiritual calling.” But in the decades of a life spent in books, there have been none that came close to approximating the intensity of that first vibrational impact I experienced at 13 while reading Wilber. That is, until now.

Transpersonal psychology was “the mouth of a labyrinth” into which I entered (through Wilber) to meet the Mystery and to become forever “changed . . . [having been] eaten and digested by God” (Weil, 1951/2009, p. 46). Philosopher and mystic Simone Weil went on to write that whoever undergoes such a transformation will remain by the entrance, “so that he can gently push all those who near into the opening” (p. 46).

This present review of Bernardo Kastrup’s (2021b) latest book is my gentle push into the mouth of the labyrinth and into the coiled complexities of Carl Jung, Kastrup himself, and the tradition of metaphysical idealism to which they both belong. And while Weil (1951/2009) was speaking of “the beauty of the world” (p. 46), we find in both Kastrup and in Jung, that the cosmos itself, in all of its manifestations, both visible and invisible, is coextensive with the mind of God. To enter the world, then, is to enter the mouth of the labyrinth, and in doing so, to enter the mind of the godhead itself.

A Call to War

Reading Kastrup is a radical experience; indeed, his books have changed me “to the root.” Because not only does he deal the five-point palm exploding heart technique to scientific fundamentalism, what emerges from its carcass is a luminous universe alive and squirming with meaning. For Kastrup, consciousness is all there is. We are dissociated alters in the mind of a dreaming god. And for that matter, everything else is, too. The collective unconscious is not some abstruse, epigenetic or immaterial plane; it is right here, all around us, in the cityscapes, mountains, and mathematics of the world.

Kastrup is a metaphysical idealist, meaning he holds mind to be the fundament from which everything arises. This is not a new idea; certainly

not in the mystical literatures of the world, but it is rare, indeed, in someone from Kastrup’s background, who entered the humanities by way of the sciences—the latter of which still traffics in crude computer metaphors for consciousness and remains entrenched in the disappointing fictions of the dominant neuronarrative. And quite frankly, we need his help.

One need only glance at the shocking disparities between endowments in graduate programs for the arts versus the sciences to see how the financial eclipse of the former by the latter mirrors a cultural one—the great divide and epistemological civil war that British novelist and scientist C. P. Snow first identified in his 1959 lecture *The Two Cultures*. The bald, uncomfortable truth is that we still have quite a way to go before reaching any kind of cultural accord between Snow’s (1959) “two cultures.” Kastrup has emerged as a strong proponent of metaphysical idealism, and his own uncollected works may together be read as a significant textual advance in the dialogical process of understanding consciousness:

Humorously enough, Kastrup’s dissertation supervisor in the philosophy department for his second Ph.D. (the first one being in computer engineering) gave him the name of “the belligerent philosopher” (Kastrup, 2021a). The sobriquet fits him like a Starfleet uniform. The word belligerent comes from the Latin *belligerare*: to wage war. And make no mistake about it, Kastrup is at war with materialism—not simply because it is spectacularly wrong and obscenely unfounded (although these are both certainly true); he is at war because he understands the devastation and disenchantment that materialism has wrought upon the world. Kastrup knows precisely what is at stake here—the future of humanity. And he understands the humanities themselves as being integral not only to understanding fully the ways in which consciousness itself is prismatically refracted in and through culture, but also how the humanities are requisite for writing the emerging meta-myth of who and what we are—nothing less than dissociated alters in the mind of the living God.

Like so many others, once I had read some of Kastrup, I read as much of Kastrup as I could get

my hands on. I had to. As someone who has devoted his professional life to studying comparative cartographies of consciousness and culture, and teaches them in a transpersonal graduate program, it was exhilarating to discover someone outside of the humanities or social sciences who appreciates the former as, “the study of consciousness coded as culture” (Kripal, 2019, p. 45).

Kastrup understands that any approach to the study of consciousness that fails to include the humanities is anemic at best, and quite possibly dangerous. He writes with a palpable emotional urgency because he knows precisely what we stand to lose:

From the perspective of the collective unconscious, humanity still has time and opportunity—through diligent self-inquiry—to bring its own shadow side under the lens of self-reflective examination and realize the insanity of its ways. There is still time for us to recognize our drives and compulsions for what they are, assume deliberate volitional control of them, and ultimately adjust our behavior before the destruction is complete and irreversible. (Kastrup, 2021b, p. 41)

His philosophical precision and economy of words is both lucid and refreshingly crisp. He is uncompromisingly empirical, his arguments elegant and parsimonious, and, from the expanded geometry of his mind-only metaphysic, he offers the most satisfying answer to date to the hard problem of consciousness described by David Chalmers to express the still-unsolved mystery of how the brain produces phenomenal experience. Kastrup has worked for the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), written for *Scientific American*, and is widely regarded as the leader of the emerging renaissance of mind-only philosophy.

But does this make him qualified to read Jung? Yes. In fact, it makes him *uniquely* qualified to read him. The polymathic Jung had many manifestations: mythologist, psychiatrist, historian, artist, alchemist—and yet in order to see his ideas taken seriously, he quite consciously distanced himself from anything smacking of metaphysics and philosophy. Instead, he carefully crafted the

image, both in person and in writing, of being an empirical scientist. And yet he was a philosopher, “even a very good one,” as Kastrup (2021b) wrote (p. 7).

What Kastrup (2021b) finds in Jung is an elegant metaphysical system in which the arbitrary, almost procrustean fictions of form—atoms, bodies, planets, quarks—are part of “an ecosystem of communicating conscious agencies, in which ego-consciousness is merely one of the participants” (p. 29). In other words, the universe itself is the dream of a sleeping god that only awakens through us. Kastrup identifies and unpacks this hidden *telos* which is nothing short of a promethean undertaking. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (Jung, 1948/1969) which Kastrup reread “for the third or fourth time” (Kastrup, personal communication, December 9, 2021) in preparation for his 2021 book sprawl over 20 volumes and 60 years. If the *Collected Works* are a labyrinth unto themselves, then Kastrup is our Ariadne. This is no mere textual analysis, but a genuine gnostic encounter with the text itself.

I am reminded here of Coleman Barks’ own gnostic conversations with an imaginal Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in preparation for his sublime translations (Rūmī, 1996). In a process that Jung would have called the active imagination, Kastrup writes with an unconventional intimacy, having, at various emotional nadirs in his life, sought council from the master by visualizing himself in conversation with him. The emotional immediacy of these gnostic dialogues imbues this book with a certain sense of closeness that I’ve never experienced in reading Jung qua Jung. In many ways, Kastrup does not so much decode as reveal Jung, just as he is reciprocally unveiled by the Swiss psychiatrist himself.

This slim volume not only meets but exceeds Kastrup’s (2021b) authorial intention to tease out Jung’s metaphysics and elucidate them from the immensities of his labyrinthine textual corpus. This he does with the surgical precision of an analytic philosopher. He also liberates Jungian theory from the glass bead game in which it has been entombed for far too long and in doing so makes Jung far more relevant to the razor’s edge

of today's science then he ever was before. Kastrup legitimizes metaphysical idealism as not only viable in our modern-day marketplace of ideas, but convinces the reader of its inevitability. In his own words:

Each work in this long idealist tradition reinforces, clarifies and elaborates ideas already expressed in other works, together constituting a solid, reliable, robust philosophical platform. The tradition makes clear that metaphysical idealism isn't merely a fashionable, idiosyncratic or ephemeral point of view, but one that the human mind has discerned again and again throughout history, with uncanny consistency, despite the vulgarity and superficiality of the spirit of the time. (p. 121)

In many ways, Kastrup argues that his own work completes the projects of Schopenhauer and Jung, both of whom studied and integrated their own understanding of classical Indian philosophy, in particular of nondual spiritual realization in which Brahman alone is real and the phenomenal world is the result of our ignorance (*avidya*). And yet, as the following line from Swami Vivekananda's translation of the Vedic *Hymn of Creation* (1989) seems to suggest, these Western readers may have missed something quite important: "First desire rose, the primal seed of mind" (p. 129). Desire. There it is hidden in plain sight. The mind-only philosophical tradition turns out to be not mind-first, but *eros*-first.

Not incidentally, I began reading *The Collected Works* (Jung, 1948/1966) in an independent study with my first graduate advisor Kripal, a lifetime ago. Kripal wrote in his introduction to Kastrup's 2019 release *More Than Allegory*: "any future, truly adequate philosophy of mind or science of consciousness will have to go through the study of religion, and in particular the comparative study of mystical literature" (p. 4). Which, of course, Kastrup does. And yet I am left to wonder, does he go far enough?

Questions of a Primordial Trauma

As a consummate philosopher who takes seriously the claims of the world's mystical

literatures, acknowledging the intrinsic truth of religious metaphor as a way to communicate actual truths beyond the merely allegorical, I am perplexed at how Kastrup reconciles his evolving, pre-pubescent, Whiteheadian, godhead with the primordial myths of departure and return, divine forgetting, the erotic love-play between Perusa and Prakriti, and the cosmic orgasm that beget—and continues to beget—it all in each moment of eternal, erotic recrudescence.

All of these traditions allude to a primordial self-inflicted trauma and an erotics of consciousness that Kastrup (2021b) neither engages nor acknowledges. And yet these traumatic/erotic dimensions seem to be implied in his work, just as the figure-ground vase, developed by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin, implies the shape of two faces regarding one another.

Kastrup (2021b) uses symbolically charged language to speak of how we, as human beings, are crucified on the dimensional axes of time and space (a gnostic doctrine if ever there was one) but stops short of plumbing the symbology all the way down (or up): that God sacrifices himself as man, as in the doctrine of the incarnation. As Kastrup puts it: "Ours are indeed sacrificial lives, therein residing their profound meaning" (p. 134). Our purpose in waking ourselves up is to wake up God.

This is a profound and profoundly ennobling idea, but again, we are left with a kind of ontological Planck time beyond which we cannot theorize, reframing the classical theological conundrum of how a god who is all good and all powerful could have created a world in which evil often prevails, as: if we are thoughtforms in the mind of a dreaming God and our purpose is to wake ourselves, as well as God, up, then why did God go to sleep in the first place? To follow his line of argument to its natural conclusion, that we experience ourselves as independent conscious entities in the same way dissociated alters experience their own independent consciousness in the minds of people with dissociative identity disorder, we must consider the potential part that trauma played in the creation of the cosmos. *Dissociative identity disorder* (DID) does not spontaneously arise. According to the American Psychiatric Association

(2013), in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5), DID is resoundingly the result of significant trauma. And while the origins of this complex condition have been linked to calamitous events such as accidents and war, the majority of reported cases involve some history of significant trauma—90% of them, to be exact (Wang, 2018).

To circle back to Rūmī (1996), it is only through our woundedness that we encounter the light within. If we are, in fact, alters of a dissociated godhead, then this seems to imply some type of primordial injury. “Let there be light” may be just another way of saying, “let there be trauma.” It is difficult to ignore these elliptical implications in Kastrup’s thought; tellingly, they require a bit of decoding. The pioneering work of psychologist Robert Romanyshyn may serve as a possible cipher here, as he suggests in his 2007 book *The Wounded Researcher: Research with the Soul in Mind* that academics choose their individual subjects because of their unique, individual wounds. For Romanyshyn, research is an alchemical process through which trauma is transformed into something wondrous and sublime.

And while Kastrup has spoken openly of his own personal *daimon*, an autonomous psychic energy Jung (1970) described as a “numinous imperative . . . a far higher authority than the human intellect” (p 453), Kastrup (2021b) refrained from offering any self-reflexive explorations of the role that his own personal wounding may have played in the formation and development of his professional life.

Kastrup (2021b) also neglects to explore the ways in which Jung’s autobiography may have given shape to his metaphysics. Above all, Jung was a mapmaker; the architecture of his theory only fully made visible by hermeneutical excavations into the archeology of his life. While we may never comprehend *in toto* the body of Jung’s work, the more we discover about the anatomy of his life enables us to understand, with greater clarity and depth, the interiorities of his thought.

Of all Jung’s works, *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009) is probably the most personal and, therefore, the most archaeological. To read it is an initiatory

experience in the grand theological traditions of Dante Alighieri, William Blake, and Emmanuel Swedenborg. A record of his own *katabasis*, this textual map of his journey to the underworld was “no aimless and purely destructive fall into the abyss, but . . . a descent into the cave of initiation and secret knowledge” (Jung, 1966, para. 213, pp. 139–140). Speaking of this initiation, Jung added:

It all began then; the later details are only supplements and clarifications of the material that burst forth from the unconscious, and at first overwhelmed me. It was the primary material for a lifetime’s work. (Jung, 1961/1989, p. 199)

In other words, analytical psychology was birthed from a personal crisis—a series of traumatic experiences and events. One of the many unfortunate consequences of modern psychology’s feverish quest to assert itself as a proper science has been a kind of disciplinary amnesia that intentionally overlooks, or conveniently forgets, the actual lived experiences (read: stories) of the individuals who forged the field. The result is that it has been whitewashed of its wounds; purified of its pathos. But as we see in the case of Jung, the wound is where it all began.

The same was true of Gustav Fechner, a name every psychology major knows by the end of their studies for having put psychophysics on the map. What is lesser known, however, is that Fechner suffered a severe and debilitating creative illness from which he emerged religiously transfigured, driven by a *daimon* to discover the mathematics of the mind-body monad.

Fechner’s monistic mysticism, born from a spiritual crisis, undergirds all of his later work and is threaded throughout the history of psychology as a hidden history, only visible through his biography which has been often neglected, forgotten, and sometimes purposely suppressed.

I opened this review with a quote from Kafka about books wounding us and through that wounding, waking us up by, “breaking open the frozen sea inside.” The sea is Jung’s favorite symbol for the psyche; indeed, he wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that, “it has all the dreams of the soul within itself and sounds them over” (Jung,

1961/1989, p. 369). For Kafka, we awaken through the wound. For Jung, we are wounded through our awakening. It is precisely the emergence of consciousness that, for Jung, creates the problem of suffering.

Kastrup (2021b) closes with a gnostic reading of the Genesis myth as the emergence of self-reflexive consciousness:

The fall from paradise marked the end of the unconscious human being, living from instinct with no problems, and the beginning of psychological suffering. The Fall represents the inception of our lives of sacrifice to God. (p. 133)

Our lives are meaningful insofar as they are sacrificial.

Yet however brilliantly Kastrup decodes the rich complexities of Jung's mind-only metaphysic, I can only help but feel that it remains incomplete—and that a full decoding may require a full decoding of Jung himself. Put differently, in order to explore the role that trauma may have played in the formation of the cosmos, (as implied in the work of Jung, by way of Kastrup) we must look to the role that trauma played in the life of Jung himself, the exact nature of which Jung made quite clear in one of his earliest letters to Freud:

[I]t is rather that my veneration for you has something of the character of a "religious" crush. Though it does not really bother me, I still feel it is disgusting and ridiculous because of its undeniable erotic overtone. This abominable feeling comes from the fact that as a boy I was the victim of a sexual assault by a man I once worshipped. (Freud et al., 1974, p. 95)

Freud's response is lost to the ages, but from reconstructions of all the available evidence it appears to have been cavalier, cold, and dismissive (Gasker, 1999). Not exactly off brand for Freud. How much of this early trauma (and then later retraumatization through the invalidation from his mentor and "religious crush") impacted Jung's metaphysics? We can only guess. Jung (1961/1989) himself reflects in his memoirs that, "My entire

youth can be understood in terms of a secret . . . Today I am a solitary, because I know things and must hint at things which other people do not know, and usually do not even want to know" (pp. 41–42). With some creative psychbiographical extrapolation, we may begin to wonder how integral a role this early trauma played in the formation and development of Jung's experiential universe.

A New Psychology of Awakening

I read Kastrup (reading Jung) as a psychology of awakening. Which is why I think we need a new word that encapsulates the *telos* of waking up within the dream. The Greek verb *anistemi*, which means "to awaken; to rise" (as in "and on the third day he shall rise again"; *King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Luke 18:33) seems a synergistic fit. It is a resurrection verb. And in the words of Ken Wilber, transpersonal psychology should, "disband or, at the very least, come up with a different name" (MacDonald & Friedman, p. 1). Put differently, we need a resurrection and rebranding. I propose *anistmeic psychology* as a new psychology of awakening, for Kastrup's (2021b) book signals a sea change in transpersonal theory that in many ways, completes it. And in many others, wakes it up.

Kastrup's work helps us to integrate our premodern, modern, and now postmodern worlds such that the sciences and humanities are now on equal footing, deeply engaged in a gnostic love-play of their own: dialogue. It champions a new kind of religiosity without being naïve. It is critical yet refuses to be reductive. There is no ineluctable Omega Point here. Neither are there any guarantees. Instead, we have real stuff at stake: the future of humanity and, by extension, the fate of God. After all, we are God's way of doing shadow work. Our lives are endowed not only with a sacred purpose, but an urgency to awaken inside the dream. A dream from which there is no "out," only an awakening "within."

Tibetan Buddhist scriptures have entire textual traditions of dream yoga in which waking up within the dream of life is the primary practice. They also speak of certain treasure texts, called *terma*, that are hidden within the mindstream of the guru, intended to be revealed in perilous

times as wellsprings of renewed wisdom and strength. These are tantric texts, written in *dakini*-script, which means they require decoding by the inheritors of an unbroken lineage of continuous revelation—treasure-text revealers called *tertöns*. Treasure texts are understood, according to Tibetan Buddhist traditions, as textual time capsules and are never publicly declared right way. They require the right conditions; they require a readiness to receive (Freemantle, 2001, p. 19). I read Kastrup (2021b) as a kind of Western *tertön*, translating the *dakini*-script of Carl Jung at the 11th hour of our Holocene Epoch and in doing so, giving the world a new psychology of awakening.

In the final analysis, *terma* texts require *tertöns* to decode them: they are open loops, semantic ecologies in which the boundaries between the guru, the text, the revealer, and those to whom the revealer reveals, are blurred. Given that our primary religious and mystical experiences and expressions have undergone a significant key change into the register of scientific language and theory means that any *tertön* of today must be a disciplinary polyglot, epistemologically fluent in the languages of science, mathematics, and the arts—which Bernardo Kastrup certainly is. But thankfully we do not have to be; he has done the treasure hunting for us. All we have to do is read. And wake up.

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Nick Boeving, PhD, is a faculty member of the Alef Trust/Liverpool John Moores University graduate program in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology. A collaborating scientist at the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, his research focuses on transpersonal, psychedelic, and existential approaches to substance use disorder and seeks to push past the limiting binaries of traditional recovery models. Dr. Boeving is also the Executive Director of Clinical Operations at Sacred Healing North America, a holistic rehabilitation facility that utilizes plant and other existential medicines to help identify, transform, and heal the traumas and emotional losses from which all addictions originate. His work has been published in *Pastoral Psychology*, *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*, *Religious Studies Review*, *Tikkun*, and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*.

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