

A Complete Guide to Understanding Archetypes

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What is an archetype?

How can we use them to elevate our consciousness, support our development, and improve our mental health?

This is a *deep* topic. In this first part, we'll cover what archetypes are and the role they play in human behavior. Then, in [Part 2](#), we'll address how to work with archetypes.

Let's dive in ...

What is an Archetype?

Plato may be the first philosopher to refer to archetypes. He called them *Forms*. For Plato, there were two realities: the world we live in and the non-physical realm where the Forms exist. These Forms, for Plato, are pre-existing ideal templates or blueprints. They include characteristics like roundness, softness, hardness, greenness, blackness, and so on.

Initially, Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called these forms *primordial images*. Later, he termed them *archetypes* (from the Greek for *prime imprinter*). Jung saw archetypes are the *fundamental units of the human mind*.

“Archetypes,” Jung wrote in [The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche](#), “are the living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the individual’s life in invisible ways.”¹

Personal Unconscious versus the Collective Unconscious

Where do these elusive, formless patterns reside? According to [Depth Psychology](#), the answer is the *Unconscious*.

¹ C.G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, CW, Vol 8, 1970.

But we need to make an important distinction here because different theorists use the term unconscious differently. For example, what Freud called the unconscious, Jung referred to as the *personal unconscious*.

Jung differentiated between the personal unconscious and what he called the *collective unconscious*. One's personal unconscious represents the unique memories and conditioning of an individual. It's like a secret storage place for each individual's psyche. Everything the mind-brain records—including what isn't registered by consciousness—gets stored here.

Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious

In contrast, the collective unconscious is like a repository of memories, images, and symbols of humanity's past. It is ubiquitous, universal, and on a psychic level, accessible by all. From Jung's *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*:²

The contents of the collective unconscious are archetypes, primordial images that reflect basic patterns that are common to us all, and which have existed universally since the dawn of time.

So, for Jung, these universal images and patterns called archetypes exist in an unseen repository or field that connects to each of us. For example, the mother archetype contains the entire human history of the interaction between mother and child. The mother archetype and the child archetype impart universal qualities to the mother-child relationship. But, since each mother and each child is unique, they also have unique attributes from memories and experiences that reside in their personal unconscious.

Archetypes are *Everywhere*

Jung describes archetypes as the forms or images that occur all over the Earth. These images find their way into ancient religions, myths, legends, and fairy tales. We find evidence of archetypes in our dreams, fantasies, and behaviors. Every character in both our personal dreams and collective myths is an archetype.

We can observe archetypes in the characters of the stories we read, the films we watch, and the plays we attend. Archetypes are pervasive throughout the arts, media, advertising, and pop culture. They influence our relationships and interactions with others and ourselves at such a deep level that it's challenging to articulate.

² C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol 9, I, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, 1969.

Examples of common archetypes include:

Mother	Caregiver	Actor
Father	Child	Athlete
Warrior	King	Tyrant
Sage	Queen	Tricker
Servant	Outlaw	Fairy Godmother
Saboteur	Magician	Peacemaker
Hero	Mentor	Prostitute
Bully	Wizard	Psychopath
Weakling	Artist	Vampire
Monk	Adventurer	Villain
Manipulator	Entertainer	Shapeshifter

See also: [The Ultimate List of Over 300 Archetypes](#)

Archetypes Aren't Just Characters

But ultimately, *every* word or image represents an archetype.

In addition to *archetypal characters* like the ones illustrated above, Jung identified primordial images in the form of:

- *Archetypal motifs* like creation myths, apocalypses, and "end time" prophecies.
- *Archetypal events* like birth, marriage, and death.

As Jung explains in [Man and His Symbols](#):

The term 'archetype' is often misunderstood as meaning certain definite mythological images or motifs, but these are nothing more than conscious representations. Such variable representations cannot be inherited. The archetype is a tendency to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.

Simply put, *archetypes are everywhere*.

Why the Psychology of Archetypes Is Important

Archetypes are the *secret forces behind human behavior*. Because these primordial images reside in the unconscious—the part of our psyche we aren't aware of—they influence us without us knowing it.

Jung's protege Marie-Louise von Franz writes in [Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche](#):

“The archetypes are inherited dispositions, which cause us to react in a typical way to basic human problems, inner or outer.”

From my perspective, this psychic fact is why archetypes are so important for every one of us. Archetypes influence *everything* we do, think, and feel. And they are influencing everyone around us in similar ways. They are like semi-autonomous personalities operating within our psyche.

Through various methods, you can get to know the archetypes expressing themselves through you and others. You can learn the patterns that influence most human behavior. (We'll cover how in [Part 2](#).) When you can observe an archetypal energy operating within you, at some level, you have differentiated yourself from that archetype. This differentiation is important because when you can separate yourself from an archetype, it's less likely to influence your behavior in deleterious ways.

Illustration: The Wise Old Man

Rembrandt's *Philosopher in Meditation*

The light of the sun pours through the window.

Sitting in meditation, the Philosopher absorbs the light in its reflection on the floor.

He *reflects* on the light of consciousness, readying himself to ascend the spiral stairway to enlightenment.

The Philosopher is an archetype, akin to what Jung referred to as the Wise Old Man (who represents the Self).

What Do Archetypes Do?

Archetypes play three vital roles in our lives. They:

1. Influence our behavior
2. Trigger emotions
3. Provide us with a sense of meaning

Let's review each of these roles in more detail.

Archetypes Influence Behavior

How do archetypes influence our behavior? Jung described archetypes as “the forms which the instincts assume.” In *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, he explains:³

"[There] is good reason for supposing that the archetypes are the unconscious images of the instincts themselves, in other words, that they are patterns of instinctual behaviors."

Instincts are like biological urges. When we trigger an instinct, it activates a pattern of behavior like running a software program on a computer. Because these patterns are *pre-existing*, archetypes are predictable. For example, no matter what [image of the Hero](#) you hold in mind, certain patterns of behavior and personality traits arise like bravery, valor, persistence, and action. So when you think of archetypes, think of *set patterns of behavior shared by all of humanity*.

Archetypes Trigger Emotions

In [Man and His Symbols](#), Jung explains that archetypes “are the pieces of life itself—images that are integrally connected to the living individual by the bridge of the emotions.”⁴

When you experience an emotion, it is the emotion of an archetype. Different archetypal images evoke different emotions. Lovers are passionate. Kings are magnanimous. Warriors are courageous. Sadists are hateful.

³ C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol 9, I, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, 1969, 91.

⁴ Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 1968.

Savvy advertisers use sight, sound, and motion in commercials to trigger specific archetypal patterns within the minds of potential customers. That is, they are consciously manipulating the public by evoking emotions that lead to specific patterns of behavior.

Archetypes Provide Meaning

Archetypes influence us in two primary ways:

- Outwardly through our behavior in the external world
- Inwardly through the primordial images in our inner world

Every human being has an inner world. It's the home of our dreams, fantasies, [imagination](#), and emotional life. This inner world is the source of personal meaning. Archetypes tap into the emotions of our inner world and give life a sense of personal meaning. It is for this reason that [inner work](#) is so important. For Jung, the first half of life is meant to be *external* as we ideally develop our egos in healthy ways.

Our Secret Inner Lives

In mid-life, according to Jung, we are supposed to *turn inward* and consciously embrace the archetypal dimension of images and emotions within our inner world.

As Jungian analyst Robert A. Johnson explains:⁵

The inner life that Jung described is the secret life we all lead, by day and night, in constant companionship with our unseen, unconscious, inner selves. When human life is in balance, the conscious mind and the unconscious live in relationship. There is a constant flow of energy and information between the two levels as they meet in the dimension of dream, vision, ritual, and imagination. The disaster that has overtaken the modern world is the complete splitting off of the conscious mind from its roots in the unconscious.

Archetypes Provide An Intricate Map of the Human Mind

Archetypes provide a powerful way to understand ourselves. We tend to think of the mind as a singular unit. "My mind" assumes a unified sense of self or "I." However, a careful examination of one's mind shows this view to be inaccurate. Instead of the mind being singular, it's plural. *A pantheon of archetypal characters exists within each of our minds.*

⁵ Robert A. Johnson, *Inner Work*, 1989, 9.

Various forms of therapy seek to integrate these archetypal forces. They each have a different language to describe them.

For Jung, these characters were called archetypes, and the process he used was called [active imagination](#). In psychosynthesis, psychologist Piero Ferruci calls archetypes subpersonalities. In Internal Family Systems, they are *parts*. (We'll discuss all of these integrative therapies in Part 2.)

The Subpersonalities Inside of Us

Psychologist John Rowan defines *subpersonality* as “a semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personality capable of acting as a person.”⁶

By whatever name, we come to see our minds as a collection of these semi-autonomous personalities, or archetypes. In [Re-Visioning Psychology](#), neo-Jungian James Hillman explains:⁷

We are no longer single beings in the image of a single God, but are always constituted of multiple parts: impish child, hero or heroine, supervising authority, asocial psychopath, and so on.

We're Not Just the Protagonist of Our Own Stories

Think of a film or TV show you watched recently. Subconsciously, when we watch a movie, we tend to identify with the protagonist. That is, the ego identifies with the main hero.

But now consider this:

All of the characters in that story—not just the hero or protagonist—are operating in your mind. They are *all* within us. For example, imagine watching *The Matrix*. You're not just Neo (hero), Morpheus (mentor), or Trinity (anima). You're also Ciper who betrays the group, potentially representing the weakling, coward, trickster, or sociopath archetype.

And All the Men and Women Merely Players ...

It becomes easy to see why the ego identifies with certain archetypal characters but not others. Some images are elevating while others are deflating. In reality, Neo, Morpheus, and

⁶ John Rowan, *Subpersonalities: The People Inside Us*, 1989.

⁷ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, 1997.

Trinity are more pure-form archetypal expressions while Cypher demonstrates more common "human" qualities that often reside in [one's shadow](#).

We begin to see how complex our minds are and the hidden, often opposing forces influencing our behavior. Shakespeare observed this reality over 400 years ago:⁸

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages.

Shakespeare's words become a visceral experience when one engages in this type of inner exploration.

A Century-Old Bias in Psychology

Why are so many people afraid of these kinds of powerful psychological insights? Jung was a visionary of his day. Yet a century later, the field of psychology barely gives his work any attention. Why?

Sigmund Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. Freud was 20 years older than Carl Jung. Early in Jung's career, Freud was a kind of mentor and father figure to him. Jung thought they should name their emerging field *psyche*-analysis, that is, an analysis of the human mind, soul, and spirit. Freud, however, opted for *psycho*analysis, the study of psychotic, crazy, or mentally ill people. Unfortunately, this decision helped set the direction of psychology for the next century.

What Did Jung See That Freud Did Not?

To Freud, his patients were mentally ill, while he as an analyst was mentally sound. Jung, with greater humility and direct experience, realized he was in a similar mental condition as many of his patients. Jung saw that *all of us* were fragmented, divided, and ruled by unconscious forces.

Today, we associate hearing voices in our heads with being "crazy." This stigma hinders our ability to get to know the archetypal forces within us. The question isn't whether you have "voices" in your head. The real issue is whether you're receptive enough to hear them and [grounded enough](#) to work with them.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII.

We Are *Mostly* Unconscious Beings

Emmanuel Donchin, Professor of Cognitive Psychophysiology at the University of South Florida, said:⁹

“An enormous portion of cognitive activity [actions, emotions, behavior, and decisions] is non-conscious, figuratively speaking, it could be 99 percent.”

Although we don't like to admit it, as a whole, human beings are mostly unconscious. We remain unaware of our [real motivations](#)—what drives our actions, thoughts, behaviors, and decisions. We are also largely unconscious of the emotions expressing themselves behind the social masks (personas) we wear in the external world.

Most of the modern methods we use to change our behavior—from neuro-linguistic programming to cognitive behavioral therapy—have limited results *over time*. Certainly, they can influence change in certain behaviors under certain conditions. But remove those conditions, and they eventually fail us. Why?

These methods fail because they rely on the premise we can *train* (or trick) the unconscious. That is, these purely conscious models are *not integrative*. They are based on the belief that we can condition these primal forces to obey our conscious will.

Archetypes: The Complexity of the Psyche

Generally speaking, we don't consider the complexity of the human psyche and the persistent nature of these archetypal patterns. Two vital dictums and psychological insights bear constant repetition:

- *What we resist in the unconscious only grows stronger.*
- *What we leave incomplete, we're doomed to repeat.*

Time combined with inner observation illuminates that ignoring or denying our unconscious content doesn't serve us.

⁹ Quoted in Daniel Goleman, "New View of Mind Gives Unconscious An Expanded Role," The New York Times, 1984. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/07/science/new-view-of-mind-gives-unconscious-an-expanded-role.html>

Illustration: Earth Mother / Goddess

Galadriel, also called Lady of Light and Lady of the Golden Wood, is a character in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

This character, played by Cate Blanchett in the films, represents the archetypes of the Earth Mother, Mother Nature, Goddess, and the feminine expression of the Self.

This archetype is powerful, dark, wise, and intuitive, able to peer into the hearts of men. She is not separate from nature and the earth; she is part of it. In fact, she is one with the flow of all life.

How Archetypes Dominate Our Behavior: An Example

Let's say you're addicted to eating junk food. You manage okay during the day, but when you're home in the evening, the impulse to consume salty snacks gets triggered.

We assume this is a battle of will: the base desires of our animal brain against our "better nature" or cerebral cortex. But we generally don't appreciate *why* this impulse gets triggered.

When you understand what archetypes represent, you can train yourself to listen to these voices. If you do, you may learn why these impulses occur in the first place. A voice, for example, might say you're pathetic, worthless, a loser. It might suggest you have no reason to live—to "just give up."

(Remember, it's *just* a voice.)

The Archetypal Voices of the Unconscious

Now, for the most part, we don't hear these voices for two reasons:

First, we don't know how to listen to them. That is, we haven't learned to place our attention on this type of psychic content.

Second, they are often unpleasant, and they make us feel bad, leading our minds to [repress](#) these voices.

So, instead of feeling depressed, we seek to distract and elevate ourselves, that is, to feel good. We instantly crave a dopamine kick. In this case, the impulse to consume salty snacks gets triggered. As such, it can be argued that behavioral neuroscientists are studying *effects*—not causes.

Only when we can hear the voice of these archetypes and learn to navigate around them, can we get to the problem's source. In this example, the part that might feel like a pathetic loser may have past trauma that needs to be brought to consciousness. Or, there may be regret for some past decision that hasn't been processed yet.

Archetypes and the Battle of Will

Everyone battles with impulse control in one form or another. Addictive behavior is an area of tension for virtually everyone. We invest loads of energy trying to exert willpower, restricting ourselves, or feeling ashamed of our weaknesses.

Many of us work to establish [good habits](#), improve ourselves, and "do better." But ultimately, what undermines our conscious intention to be a "better person" is often *the archetypal forces within us*. We can save time, energy, and unnecessary anguish by addressing many of these issues at their source.

Archetypes: A Doorway to Knowing Yourself

Archetypal psychology is a powerful way of getting to know your psyche. It's also a means of understanding the motivations of others.

The more you can identify the archetypes operating in others, the easier it becomes to see the patterns of behavior within yourself. Conversely, the more you can witness these behavioral patterns in yourself, the more understanding (and less judgment) you'll have for others.

The ancient Greeks were the last civilization that appreciated the power of archetypes. The Greeks called them Gods and Goddesses. Psychologists Hal and Ira Stone, authors of [Embracing Our Selves](#), explain:¹⁰

¹⁰ Hal Stone and Sidra Stone, *Embracing Our Selves: The Voice Dialogue Manual*, 1998.

In ancient Greece there was an understanding that one was required to worship all the Gods and Goddesses. You might have your favorites, but none of the remaining deities could be ignored. The God or Goddess whom you ignored became the one who turned against you and destroyed you. So it was with the Trojan war. So it is with consciousness work. The energy pattern that we disown turns against us.

Embracing the Inner World of Archetypes

Arguably, our need to understand and work with archetypes is greater now than at any point in human history. Why?

In past generations, humanity had rich mythologies and rituals designed to maintain psychic order. The ancient rituals of the past—those which modern people often perceive to be "archaic"—maintained a certain level of balance with archetypal forces within the collective unconscious. However, since the beginning of the so-called Age of Enlightenment (the 1700s), we have been breaking down these mythological structures. Now, it's becoming "every man for himself."

Many scholars from Joseph Campbell to neo-Jungian Robert Moore speak about the need to establish rituals that organize and evoke the archetypes in constructive ways.^{11, 12}

Jung's solution was to embrace your inner world in dreams and your imagination. Campbell's solution was to follow your bliss and create your own myth.[mfn]Joseph Campbell, [Myths to Live By](#), 1993.

Primordial Images and Jung's Stages of Individuation

Archetypes is a topic that can sound purely theoretical. Hopefully, the explanations above have changed that view.

Jung arrived at his insights about the archetypes and the collective unconscious because he was trying to heal his patients AND himself. As such, he focused his attention on what he considered the archetypes of development:

1. [The Shadow archetype](#)
2. The Anima/Animus archetypes

¹¹ Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor As Myth and As Religion*, 1986.

¹² Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King Warrior Magician Lover*, 1991.

3. The Self

These powerful archetypes are the primary focus of Jungian psychology. Jung argues that they are essential for healthy psychological development as well. Learn more about Jung's [individuation process here](#).

How to Work With Archetypes

Now that we have a solid foundation of what archetypes are, we can address the next obvious question:

How do we work with archetypes? That is, how can we bring these unconscious forces to consciousness? Can we integrate these archetypal forces to help us move toward wholeness?

To answer these questions, we need to explore Jung's active imagination process, which is the focus of Part 2.

Read Part 2: [A Practical Guide to Active Imagination](#)

See you there!

Further Reading on the Psychology of Archetypes

The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious by C.G. Jung

Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche by Marie-Louise von Franz

King Warrior Magician Lover by Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette

Subpersonalities by John Rowan

Archetypes Revisited by Anthony Stevens

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