

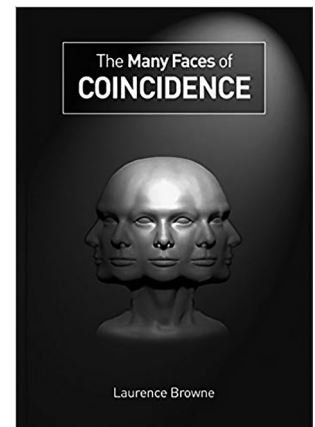
A Walk through the Manifold World of Coincidences

A Review of
The Many Faces of Coincidence, by Laurence Browne

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by Gerhard Mayer¹

Synchronicity has become a vogue expression used in many ways to denote “occurrences.” In a similar way, the term coincidence is often used in a reductionist context to eliminate meaning from seemingly related occurrences. Both terms have a contextual relation and are often used in a barely reflected way. Thus, it is a meritorious undertaking to examine the use of these terms more closely and summarize the findings to an interested readership. *The Many Faces of Coincidence* is the published version of the dissertation of philosopher and historian of science Laurence Browne on coincidences and synchronicity. It is a well-written work that provides a theoretical framework for the classification of different forms of coincidences. The book is divided into six chapters and they contained several surprises and interesting new insights.



In the first chapter, Browne deals with the introduction of the concept of *synchronicity* by Carl Gustav Jung, its genesis, and Jung’s predecessors and main influences. These include Arthur Schopenhauer with his *transcendent will*, Gottfried Leibniz and his *Monadology*, and Paul Kammerer (1919) and his *law of seriality*, as well as theologian and sinologist Richard Wilhelm (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1967) who introduced Jung familiar to the I Ching. Jung’s idea of a synchronistic principle arose within the context of this relationship with Wilhelm. However, Jung elaborated the concept of synchronicity further in the context of the fruitful exchange with physicist and Nobel physics laureate Wolfgang Pauli at the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s (Lindorff, 2004). Nevertheless, the two scholars did not always share the same opinion. For example, Pauli criticized parts of Jung’s conception of this kind of coincidences as logically inconsistent.

Jung was fascinated by specific characteristics of quantum physics that deviated from classical physics, and by the findings of experimental parapsychology, which he regarded as substantiating his model of acausal connections. Pauli recognized its potential as a possible explanation of synchronistic events, but he held the opinion that Jung did not differentiate in an appropriate manner between

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quantum-physical characteristics of nature and the findings of experimental parapsychology. He also considered the term *synchronicity* inapt because the relevant events would not necessarily have to happen exactly at the same point in time (i. e., be synchronous). However, although Jung was open to Pauli's suggestions and criticism, he kept the term, arguing that in synchronistic events the *timeless* sphere of archetypes would be connected to occurrences in the *timely* sphere, and therefore two synchronistic occurrences would not need to be synchronized in conventional time. The inclusion of the archetypal sphere into the characterization of synchronistic events makes Pauli's criticism of Jung's attempt to include the parapsychological experiments by Rhine understandable insofar as Pauli could not detect any meaningful occurrences based on archetypes in boring laboratory experiments consisting of countless trials of card guessing or die rolls. This is only one example of several conceptual ambiguities in Jung's thinking presented in Browne's book.

The important elements of the "composition of synchronicity," the title of the first chapter, include the idea that there are two types of synchronicity, namely a general principle of synchronicity as acausal connecting principle, and a narrower category of synchronistic events as specific manifestations of a general acausal order. Furthermore, there are spontaneously occurring and also induced synchronistic events – the latter occur in divinatory practices such as the I Ching, or in some magical practices. In general, synchronistic events are rather rare, and they are accompanied by an affective involvement of the people concerned.

In order to develop a classification of coincidence events, Browne first presents a variety of stunning case examples that, due to their improbability, rarity, or connection with meaning, provide reasons for musing about the nature of coincidence. His examples include extremely unlikely distributions of cards in card games and the apparently independent occurrence of inventions. As mentioned earlier, the term "coincidence" is often used to support a reductionistic or physicalistic worldview. The reign, or canonization, of probability began in the mid of the 19th century and it has lost none of its efficacy until now. The author quotes the ironic statement of noted astronomer Camille Flammarion: "The little god Chance sometimes produces extraordinary results" (p. 36). This quote refers to attempts to explain manifold coincidences on the ground that extremely rare events are indeed possible, and that even coincidences that appear to manifest outside of an evident causality chain can still be explained without resorting to meaning. However, the worldview-based reference then becomes a matter of faith, and the act of "deification" of coincidence referred to by Flammarion seems to be justified.

This argument is amplified in chapter three, *Cosmic Coincidences*, in which Browne leaves the framework of human experience and directs his analyses towards coincidences in the cosmic realm. With regard to astronomy, he describes the absolute "precision of the universe" (title of a subchapter) that, for instance, is necessary for the development of life forms of such complexity as those we find on earth; he points to the importance of Jupiter in our solar system which, together with Saturn, keeps away asteroids and other objects from earth like a cosmic vacuum cleaner, as well as the fact that the Earth is located exactly in the so-called Goldilock zone of our planet system, exactly in the habitable zone of the right distance with regard to the respective mass ratios. Furthermore, Browne emphasizes the importance of the fine-structure constant and other physical constants for the structure of the cosmos and our life form.

The author addresses astronomical coincidences because astronomy deals with completely different dimensions of chance probabilities than in the earthly sphere, for instance when discussing the possibility that a person hits the jackpot twice within a short time period. He mentions the number of possible universes as calculated by Stephen Hawking (1942–2018) and his collaborator Leonard Mlodinow – it includes the chance for the spontaneous and accidental occurrence of a universe suitable for life forms, which is supposed to be $1:10^{500}$ (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, pp. 118–119). These scientists are not the only ones who operate with chance probabilities of such a dimension that render the concept of chance absurd if applied to human conditions.

With chapter four, entitled *Enigma Variations*, the author enters the field of quantum physics. This is suggested only by the developmental history of the concept of synchronicity. Browne primarily discusses three important aspects: the phenomenon of entanglement and, closely related, the influence of the observer or experimenter on the measured or observed system, as well as the “suspension” of the everyday experience of time as a one-directional arrow of time. In the *delayed-choice* experiments of the double-slit experiments, the motion of the photon to move to one or to both slits, i.e. whether it should behave as a particle or as a wave, is decided by chance only *after* the firing of the photon by the experimenter. That means that the history of the process is not solidified before its observation. Browne cites physicist Pascual Jordan, who stated in this regard: “Observations not only *disturb* what is to be measured, they *produce* it” (p. 107). Browne’s argumentation suggests that quantum physics ultimately leads to the concept of *unus mundus*, i.e. a plane of reality in which time, space, and causality are suspended.

Chapter six, *Exploring the Tao*, is dedicated to this topic. As mentioned earlier, the I Ching and Chinese philosophy played an important role in the development of the concept of synchronicity, and with the ultimately untranslatable expression of *Tao* Jung found an equivalent to the term *unus mundus*. This chapter is an eye-opener and it provides, in addition to a helpful introduction to the understandings of *Tao*, interesting information about, for instance, the proximity of Heidegger to Taoism and his contact with Chinese scholar Paul Hsiao with whom he exchanged ideas (Hsiao, 1990). In this context, Browne mentions a well-known anecdote in Freiburg: A duck warned inhabitants of Freiburg by behaving very unusually that an air-raid was about to occur in 1944 during World War II and it thus saved the life of several people. Hsiao used this story to point at differences between European and Chinese thinking. Browne states: “[T]he European would ask why the duck was so animated at that particular time and then perhaps even look for parapsychological answers, while for the Chinese ‘the duck does not need any paranormal powers: everything is connected to everything else and in each moment there is concealed the entire past and also the open future.’ ” (p. 163) This example highlights once again why Pauli was right in warning Jung about his inappropriate mixing of parapsychological concepts and the synchronicity principle based on *unus mundus*.

Browne’s walk through the manifold world of coincidences, which excludes neither the smallest nor the biggest dimension, neither science nor philosophy, shows how useful and reasonable is a precise differentiation. He developed four categories for the classification and explanation of coincidence phenomena: random chance explanations, conventional causal explanations, paranormal causal explanations, and synchronicity explanations.

However, with regard to coincidences at an astronomical level, Browne considered the terms “conventional” and “paranormal” inappropriate, and he replaced them with “natural” and “supernatural.” These four categories are not mutually exclusive, a coincidental event can be regarded as the result of different categories, or explained plausibly with different explanations. In the afterword, Browne states that his model of categories is too sparse and that combinations and sub-categories should be developed. However, these are tasks for further analyses. Browne lays a valuable and valid foundation even if one comes to other assessments than the author regarding some questions of detail, for instance in the context of examples of coincidences at the astronomical level. In any case, Browne’s book sharpens awareness concerning the problem of “coincidences”, and differentiates between possible types of coincidence. One can only wish that the book finds many readers.

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