I'd like to say a few words about Carl Jung's psychanalytical theory, and about the flaws of some skeptical objections to that theory.

Jung believed that there were certain basic mental patterns, or "archetypes" as he called them – patterns of information that exist in all human minds and that are part of the heritage of the human race. He thought that the contact of the conscious mind with these patterns, or the intrusion of the patterns into our consciousness, gave rise to the mythologies and religions of the world.

Now, some skeptics have claimed that Jung's archetypes couldn't really be inherited – that they couldn't be part of our genetic heritage, but instead would have to be transmitted from culture to culture. These skeptics argue that you can explain all the coincidences of mythologies and religions of the world just by assuming that the mythic and religious ideas are transmitted from culture to culture, instead of assuming that there are basic patterns in the brain that give rise to them. And the skeptics claim that because you can explain the coincidences in mythologies and religions around the world by cultural transmission, Jung's theory is wrong.

My first reply to this skeptical criticism is: So what?! So what if the archetypal ideas spread through the human race by cultural means instead of by genetic means? Most of Jungian psychoanalysis still could be correct! There are two ways that living organisms can transmit information to each other. One is by genetic transmission. The other way is by communication of one kind or another. Now, suppose that people around the world currently tend to believe in, or think and dream in terms of, certain mythological or spiritual symbols and stories – but because of cultural transmission of myths and symbols around the world, instead of genetic inheritance. So what? The information is still in our brains! And it’s still part of our common heritage.

Jung thought of the archetypes as genetically inherited. However, his theory can be right in almost every respect without this hypothesis. The argument about whether the archetypes are transmitted genetically or transferred culturally is beside the point for the debate over whether Jung's theory is
basically right. Jungian analysis will work whether or not there is a genetic component to the transmission of the archetypes.

Also, there is a way that the archetypes could be genetically transmitted even if all the ideas of mythology and religion are culturally transmitted.

Suppose that the ideas of religion and mythology are culturally transmitted. Then we could ask: why did those ideas take hold in us, when other ideas go around that don't take hold in us? Perhaps there's some genetic predisposition that lets us believe certain myths, or sets of myths, more readily than others. (That isn't exactly a new idea.) Could those predispositions be the real archetypes? Jung’s theory favors a “yes” answer to this question. In Jung’s psychology, the mythical beings themselves (like the sun god, for example) are not the archetypes. Rather, they are the results of contact of the conscious mind with the archetypes. The archetypes are something within us that inclines us to invent certain mythic images, believe certain myths, dream certain dreams, and sometimes even experience certain mythic entities in a visionary way. The archetypes are not the mythological entities, but are more like predisposing factors that give rise to belief in mythological entities. Given this view of the archetypes, why not identify the archetypes with genetic, biological predispositions that incline us to believe just those culturally transmitted myths that did take hold, rather than other myths? In this case, the genetic transmission of archetypes becomes much more plausible, and could take place even if the myths themselves spread only by cultural means.

I’d like to make a further point about Jungian psychology.

Some skeptics scoff at Jung because he seemed to believe in all sorts of gods and demons. This is silly. Jung did not believe that those beings were literally real! It’s perfectly clear from Jung’s writings that he analyzed the concept of God and the various concepts from mythology in terms of the functioning of the human mind – specifically, the unconscious mind. Jung’s concept of God and the gods was psychological. I don’t think there's anything in that concept that requires belief in the supernatural. I don't think Jung even believed in the supernatural.

In regard to belief in the supernatural: It’s true that Jung was interested in so-called paranormal phenomena. Jung, along with the noted physicist Wolfgang Pauli, developed the concept of “synchronicity,” which was meant to interpret or explain certain coincidences that people sometimes label as “paranormal.” However, there is no reason to think that synchronicity, if it existed, would be supernatural. Synchronicity was what we today would call a naturalistic explanation of so-called paranormal phenomena. It was meant to bring seemingly paranormal events into the framework of nature. No matter what you think of the idea of synchronicity, that idea is NOT evidence that Jung believed in the supernatural. Quite to the contrary – it shows that he was looking for lawful explanations of odd phenomena. This is true whether the hypothesis of synchronicity is right or dead wrong – and whether or not the phenomena Jung was trying to explain had other explanations.

It’s also true that Jung had some odd experiences, including one in which a loud explosion-like noise took place in a bookshelf. I’ve shown elsewhere that Jung did not consider this experience supernatural [1].

Now, to the question of whether Jung really believed in God, or whether he only believed that we have a shared idea of God. From Jung’s writings and statements we can safely infer that Jung thought God
was real. But what kind of God did Jung have in mind? Did he really believe in the supernatural God of theism? If you read his writings even a little, it’s clear that the supernatural God of theism is NOT what he had in mind. Jung meant that the idea of God has a psychological reality – that certain ideas, deeply embedded in the human mind, have an objective existence of their own, but in an intramental way instead of in an external, physical way. There is nothing inherently supernatural about this concept. Jung was trying to be scientific in his approach to psychology. Of course, there’s an ongoing debate about whether psychoanalytic theory ever is scientific. But aside from that debate, we can safely say that Jung was trying to be scientific. He did not jump to a supernatural conclusion from the scientific data he found. Nevertheless, he did think that God had a psychological reality that went beyond mere fantasy. He thought this way because he thought that mental contents can be objective in some cases. That doesn’t mean externally, physically real; it just means objective – part of our common world in some way, not a mere product of personal fantasy. In other words, there are psychological ideas or patterns that have an objectivity of their own by virtue of their existence in many human minds. Jung thought there are things in our imaginations that we don’t personally put there – images that we find through imagination but that we didn’t invent for ourselves. This is a psychological claim, and perhaps it suggests a philosophical claim – but it is not a supernatural claim. It doesn’t require the existence of anything supernatural.

Philosophically speaking, Jung’s psychoanalytical theory seems to involve an ontology that is an extension of the ontology of the external world. There is nothing necessarily supernatural about that. You can interpret Jung’s ontology rather simply by identifying the objectively psychologically real entities with abstract entities. (I've written a lot about abstract objects elsewhere, so I won't say more about them here.) If we took God to be an abstract entity, and assumed that we have intuitions of that entity because of some basic pattern or predisposition (archetype) in our brains, I think that would come very close to what Jung thought about God. It’s pretty clear from his writings that Jung thought God was real, but not externally real. God is not a “thing,” natural or supernatural. God is real, but is part of the internal world of the mind, not of the external world of material objects.

In summary, here are the conclusions about Jung that I’m trying to state in this talk.

First, the idea of the genetic transmission of the archetypes is not essential to Jung’s psychoanalytic theory. The greater part the theory can stand without this idea. And even if myths and symbols are culturally transmitted, the archetypes (which are not identical to the myths and symbols) still might be transmitted genetically.

Second, I don't think Jung believed in the supernatural. I think the skeptics are silly to accuse him of that. What is more, Jung’s theory can be true whether or not there is anything supernatural.

And third, Jung had a much stronger ground for belief in his psychological version of God than we usually realize. If God were an abstract entity intuited by the mind, then our knowledge of God could be as solid as our other abstract intuitions, such as our knowledge of colors or perhaps even our mathematical intuitions.

My main points in this talk are that we don’t need to believe in anything supernatural to believe Jung’s psychological theory, and that the existential commitments of Jung’s theory are much milder and more conservative than we usually realize.
References