Archetypes as Strange Attractors: Conceptual Parallels with the Attractor Framework

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Abstract

The attractor framework proposes that persistence under perturbation is the fundamental mark of reality, with corrective permeability (κ) serving as a proposed measure of a system's capacity to return to its attractor after perturbation. Van Eenwyk (1991) published a paper in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* proposing that Jungian archetypes function as strange attractors of the psyche—dynamical patterns that organize psychological experience without ever repeating identically. This paper identifies conceptual parallels between Van Eenwyk's archetype-as-attractor model and the attractor framework. Both draw on a shared upstream tradition in chaos theory. Van Eenwyk's model is itself a theoretical analogy, not an empirically validated result; the parallels identified here are therefore conceptual rather than evidential. They demonstrate consistency within a shared intellectual tradition, not independent corroboration. This mapping carries substantially lower evidential weight than the framework's mappings onto quantitatively validated methods such as

Symmetric Projection Attractor Reconstruction (SPAR) and the empirically identified hypothalamic line attractor reported by Nair et al. (2023).

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1. Introduction: Archetypes as Dynamical Attractors

The attractor framework (Galida, 2026a, self-published May 2026 at fantasyattractor.com; no DOI) proposes that dissipative attractors—stable configurations toward which systems converge and from which they resist displacement—are the fundamental units of persistent organization across physical, biological, cognitive, and social domains. Corrective permeability (κ) is a proposed measure of a system's capacity to return to its attractor after perturbation.

In 1991, John Van Eenwyk published "Archetypes: The Strange Attractors of the Psyche" in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. Drawing on the emerging science of chaos theory—Gleick, Mandelbrot, Lorenz, Feigenbaum—Van Eenwyk proposed that Jungian archetypes are not fixed images or inherited memories, but dynamical attractors: persistent patterns that organize psychological experience without ever producing identical outputs.

Van Eenwyk's work and the attractor framework were developed entirely independently; neither cites the other. However, both draw on a shared upstream intellectual tradition in chaos theory and nonlinear dynamics. The convergences identified here are therefore expected to some degree: two independent applications of the same mathematical vocabulary to human psychology will naturally produce similar descriptions. This paper identifies conceptual parallels while explicitly distinguishing their evidentiary weight from the framework's

mappings onto quantitatively validated methods such as SPAR (Bonet-Luz et al., 2020) and the Nair et al. (2023) line attractor, where Nair et al. empirically identified an approximate line attractor in hypothalamic neural population recordings that encodes an escalating aggressive state.

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2. Van Eenwyk's Archetype-as-Attractor Model

Van Eenwyk's central thesis is that Jungian archetypes function as strange attractors of the psyche. He grounds this claim in the formal properties of chaotic dynamical systems:

2.1 Attractors as Organizing Patterns. Van Eenwyk defines an attractor as "the pattern into which a particular motion will settle." Archetypes, he argues, are strange attractors: they organize psychological experience into recognizable, recurring patterns—the hero's journey, the great mother, the shadow—without ever producing identical manifestations.

2.2 Sensitive Dependence on Initial Conditions (SDIC). Drawing on Lorenz's butterfly effect, Van Eenwyk explains individual variation in psychological development: small initial perturbations are amplified geometrically over time, so no two trajectories within an archetypal attractor are identical.

2.3 Bifurcation as Transformation. Van Eenwyk describes the tension of opposites in Jungian psychology as an oscillator. When the tension between consciousness and the unconscious reaches a critical threshold, the system bifurcates—order collapses into chaos, and from that chaos, new patterns emerge. This is the "dark night of the soul"—the necessary intermediate state between an old attractor collapsing and a new one stabilizing.

2.4 Fractal Self-Similarity Across Scales. Van Eenwyk draws on

Mandelbrot's fractal geometry. Archetypes exhibit self-similarity across scales: similar themes appear in individual dreams, family dynamics, cultural myths, and religious symbolism. The mandala is a visual representation of a dynamical pattern that recapitulates itself at every level of magnification. It should be noted that "fractal self-similarity" in this context refers to qualitative thematic recurrence across scales, not to the quantitative, measurable property defined in Mandelbrot's fractal geometry.

2.5 Healthy Chaos vs. Pathological Order. Citing physiological research on heart rate variability, Van Eenwyk argues that healthy systems exhibit chaotic flexibility, not rigid homeostasis. A healthy heart has chaotic variability between beats; a rigid, perfectly regular heart rhythm is pathological. Similarly, a healthy psyche exhibits flexible attractors that can shift in response to perturbation. Loss of variability signals pathology.

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3. Conceptual Parallels with the Attractor Framework

3.1 Archetypes as Attractors. Van Eenwyk's "strange attractors of the psyche" are descriptively parallel to the attractor framework's concept of an attractor: a persistent configuration toward which the psyche gravitates and around which it organizes, characterized by self-similarity, resistance to perturbation, and sensitive dependence on initial conditions. The framework generalizes this concept beyond the psyche to physical, biological, and social systems.

3.2 Bifurcation as Basin Transition. Van Eenwyk's description of bifurcation—the tension of opposites pushing the system to a critical threshold where chaos erupts and new order emerges—is structurally analogous to the framework's phase

transition between attractor basins. The “dark night of the soul” is the chaotic intermediate state between an old attractor destabilizing and a new one forming. The framework describes this same dynamic in climate tipping points, political realignments, and personal cognitive restructuring.

3.3 Healthy Chaos as Corrective Permeability (κ). Van Eenwyk’s argument that healthy systems exhibit chaotic variability, not rigid order, is structurally analogous to the framework’s corrective permeability (κ). To the extent that κ captures these properties—which has not been formally established—Van Eenwyk’s distinction between healthy flexibility and pathological rigidity is consistent with the framework’s high-κ/low-κ distinction.

The evidential chain for this parallel should be made explicit. Van Eenwyk’s source is physiological research on heart rate variability (HRV)—a finding about cardiac dynamics, not psychological flexibility. Van Eenwyk then extends this to the psyche by analogy. The present paper draws a further analogical connection to κ. The chain is thus three analogical steps removed from its empirical anchor. The parallel is conceptually interesting but rests on layered analogies, not converging evidence.

3.4 Fractal Self-Similarity as Cross-Domain Scaling. Van Eenwyk’s use of Mandelbrot’s fractal geometry—similar patterns recurring at every scale—is structurally analogous to the framework’s claim that attractor dynamics scale across domains. The framework extends this logic beyond the psyche: similar basin dynamics govern biological systems, cardiac electrophysiology, climate systems, political movements, and religious belief. The framework’s claim that these dynamics extend to the fundamental structure of physical reality—including the CVU lattice and conservative persistence structures—remains a theoretical assertion under development and is not independently established. In both Van Eenwyk’s model and the framework, the cross-domain scaling claim is a

qualitative observation of thematic recurrence across scales, not a quantitative demonstration of mathematical fractal structure.

3.5 The Analytic Container as Deliberate Perturbation. Van Eenwyk argues that the therapeutic frame functions to "raise the r value" of the psychological system, pushing it toward the bifurcation point where old attractors destabilize and new ones can emerge. This is structurally analogous to the framework's concept of deliberate perturbation: the analyst, the self-engineer, or the institutional reformer applies targeted perturbations to nudge a system toward a phase transition, knowing that the intermediate chaos is productive, not pathological.

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4. Independence, Shared Lineage, and Evidentiary Weight

Van Eenwyk's work and the attractor framework were developed entirely independently. Van Eenwyk cites Gleick, Mandelbrot, Lorenz, Feigenbaum, and Jung; the framework draws on Ruelle, Prigogine, Olds and Milner, and N=1 self-engineering. Neither cites the other.

However, the shared upstream intellectual lineage in chaos theory substantially limits the evidential weight of these convergences. The vocabulary of chaos theory—attractor, bifurcation, sensitive dependence, fractal—is sufficiently flexible that almost any persistent, complex human phenomenon can be described in these terms. The convergence of two independent applications of this vocabulary may therefore reflect the generality of the vocabulary rather than a discovery about the phenomena themselves. This is a standing methodological limitation that applies to all framework mapping papers using chaos-theory vocabulary, not only to the

present paper.

Furthermore, Van Eenwyk's model is itself a theoretical analogy, not an empirically validated result. It was published in a psychoanalytic journal and has not been quantitatively tested. This distinguishes it from the framework's mappings onto the SPAR method (which achieved 96% classification accuracy for a disease-causing genetic mutation) and the Nair et al. line attractor (which was empirically identified in neural population recordings). The present mapping demonstrates conceptual consistency within a shared intellectual tradition; it does not carry the evidential weight of convergence with empirically grounded findings.

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5. Falsifiability Conditions

The following observations would weaken or invalidate the parallels drawn here:

- **Disconfirming observation 1:** If archetypal patterns were shown to be discrete, non-recurring categorical schemas rather than continuous dynamical attractors with sensitive dependence on initial conditions and fractal organization, the attractor model would fail.
- **Disconfirming observation 2:** If the bifurcation model of psychological transformation were shown to be *indistinguishable* from simpler models (e.g., linear stress-response curves, threshold models without chaotic intermediates), the chaos-theoretic interpretation would not be uniquely supported.
- **Disconfirming observation 3:** If quantitative measures of psychological variability—such as linguistic entropy, narrative complexity, or approximate entropy of behavioral time series—showed *no correlation* with therapeutic outcomes or independently assessed

psychological health ratings, the healthy-chaos/κ parallel would lose its primary empirical motivation.

Affirmative prediction (long-range): If archetypes function as strange attractors, then therapeutic interventions that successfully transform an individual's relationship to a given archetype should produce measurable shifts in the entropy and complexity of associated psychological content (e.g., dream imagery, narrative patterns, symptom expression). Approximate entropy and sample entropy have been applied to psychological time-series data in existing literature (e.g., Pincus, 1991; Richman & Moorman, 2000) and have been proposed for use in clinical monitoring of mood and behavioral variability. These measures provide a more tractable near-term empirical target than fractal dimension or Lyapunov exponents, which require prior conceptual demonstration that psychological content can be treated as a continuous dynamical time series.

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6. Conclusion

Van Eenwyk's 1991 paper and the attractor framework, developed entirely independently, converge on shared structural descriptions: archetypes are strange attractors—dynamical patterns that organize experience, resist perturbation, exhibit sensitive dependence on initial conditions, and transform through bifurcation. Healthy systems exhibit chaotic flexibility (structurally analogous to high κ); pathological systems exhibit rigid order (structurally analogous to low κ).

These convergences are conceptual, not evidential. Both works draw on the same upstream intellectual tradition in chaos theory, and Van Eenwyk's model is itself a theoretical analogy rather than an empirically validated result. The parallels demonstrate consistency within a shared intellectual tradition, not independent corroboration. The framework

remains a self-published, preliminary research program. This mapping is a contribution to its ongoing development, offered with lower evidentiary weight than mappings onto quantitatively validated methods.

References

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