

**Foreword to**  
**Richard Jung**  
**Experience and Action:**  
**Selected Items in Systems Theory<sup>1</sup>**

It is truly an honour, as well as a pleasure, to write a foreword to this collection of essays, “Experience and Action”, that represents the thinking of Richard Jung over a period of half a century.

I first met Richard Jung in the late 1970s, already nearly 20 years after he had begun to formulate the first of the thinking that is to be found here. I had recently graduated with a PhD from, and he was an eminent visiting professor in, the Department of Cybernetics at Brunel University in the UK. Although this Department only survived little over a decade, it was, during its short life, a home to some very radical thinking and some very radical people. None were more radical than Jung, although I scarcely noticed this at the time.

Jung’s thinking exhibits, I believe, two remarkable aspects that stand above all others and which bring outstanding distinction and the highest standards to his work. These are breadth of knowledge; and systems thinking of the highest quality. In this introduction, I shall discuss both, briefly, to justify the claims I wish to make for Richard Jung.

Let me start with his breadth of knowledge. Jung demonstrates, to those of us who do not come from this tradition, all that is best in old European, and particularly German influenced, education: the mastery of languages (after almost 30 years I am still surprised English is not his native language) that opens up the widest range of sources and the ability to read the original—in Greek, Latin, German, French, English and a number of other languages that the accidents of his life have caused Jung to master. An example of such an accident: to leave Czechoslovakia, Jung travelled from Finland

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<sup>1</sup> R. Jung 2007e. *Experience and Action: Selected Items in Systems Theory*.

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to Norway, stopping in both to study and thus, by accident, learning fluent Norwegian. Before leaving Czechoslovakia he had studied Agronomy and gained a PhD in Economics and Law from Charles University, and then pursued what we might nowadays describe as a more spiritual path, studying, for instance, Indian Philosophy with Swami Siddheswarananda in Paris, and Philosophy and Ethics at the Woodbridge Quaker Study Centre in the UK.<sup>2</sup> The deep influence of this spiritual element is clearly apparent in the material Jung presents in this book. Whenever I am in his company, I am in awe of depth and breadth of his reference base.

Having finally moved across the Atlantic to the United States, in the mid 1950s Jung was awarded a scholarship at Harvard to complete a second PhD in Sociology (with minors in Social and Clinical Psychology and in Social Anthropology). Naturally it was written in fluent English, as he mastered the Anglo-American tradition at the moment it came into its ascendancy. And so it is that, in Jung, we have one of those rare individuals who has mastered both traditions, and at the highest level. He brings to the currently dominant Anglo-American tradition all that is best from the older European tradition.

Part and parcel of what he brings is the humility of the true scholar. Jung can be dismissive of work, but only because he finds its authors arrogant and ill-informed. His generous devotion to the work of earlier scholars, his insistence on examining their work in depth, testing his understanding again and again in order to refine it, together with his generosity towards and respect for colleagues, demonstrates a shining and true scholarly humility. This quality is unassumingly apparent in the essays that make up this book.

The second is the infusion in his work of systems thinking of the highest order.<sup>3</sup> By this I

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<sup>2</sup> More details of Jung's life and achievements may be found in his CV, in the Appendices.

<sup>3</sup> He describes his current research as an attempt at a comprehensive formulation of a General System Theory

refer to the deepest considerations of the implications of systems and cybernetics that have lead Jung to both develop and support the field—for instance through the Centre for Systems Research he directed between 1985 and 1992 during his long association with the University of Alberta (where he also worked alongside Ludwig von Bertalanffy), and, later, in directing the International Centre for System Research (since 1993/4). He has also continuously developed and refined his thinking. It is typical that some of the essays published here have their origins in unpublished work from the early 1960s, and most (even published texts) have been extensively reworked so that they are more consistent, better expressed, and fit together coherently to provide a world view of great power, intensity and beauty. In this manner, his own systems thinking has been subject to the same powerful critique and testing that he has applied to the work of others, becoming, in this manner, reflexive.

In this reflexive respect, Jung's expression catches the central theme of circular thinking: that the passage round the circle means we both do and do not end up where we started, for on the way we learn. There is in systems thinking, as well as distinctions and oppositions, a necessary self-reflective dimension, a search for improvement. Jung could not succeed at this if both his own way of thinking, and his expression of it, were not thoroughly cybernetic. Perhaps this is a major reason it has taken Jung so many years to find a place and a way to make this material available. The work is rich and is of enormous value both as showing a way of thinking, and for the outcome in the form of arguments and insights.

An introduction to a book usually discusses that book, at least in outline. This book is divided into three sections. The first, "Systems and Significance", is a profound treatise on Systems Theory that culminates in Jung's introduction of his "Postmodern System Theory". The second, "The Rape of Indefiniteness", is a radical examination of intention and its partner orientation, which by bringing the intense and focussed clarity I have come to expect from Jung is deeply revealing. The third, the appendix, contains what Jung refers to as

outlines and personal information, although the outlines are much more than the sketches some of us might make under this heading.

There is little need for me to try to develop an interpretation of the content of this book, for Jung has himself done this in the chapter “Instead of a Preface” directly following this text. In this he outlines and assembles the basis for the work he presents here. Part of its power and charm comes from the way Jung expresses his argument, which is on occasion terse and somewhat declamatory, and often metaphorical and deeply poetic (in both senses of that word), pulling the reader in by use of these means. In his “Instead of a Preface”, Jung distinguishes a sequence of types of systems he will discuss, using allegory rather than definition. These systems are not abstracted formal systems, but rather cultural, encapsulating a world view and ways of acting formulated “soberly and rigorously” (as he puts it), which may in consequence appear abstract and even assertive. In fact, an apparent assertiveness is expressed, also, in one of the interesting devices of argument Jung uses: linked tables. As I understand it, in these he sets up pairs related through the concept “sive” that he has acquired from Spinoza and since developed, establishing as it were stacks of tables of such related pairs between which the reader should construct the links (s)he can use to create an own understanding. This technique is powerfully used in, for instance, the final paper in this volume, paper 13 “Orientation”, which immediately precedes the Appendices.

Jung’s work deserves to be better known, and we will benefit when it is. What you see in the essays here presented is exquisite and honed thought being practised in the most sophisticated and elegant manner—a manner that seeks the greatest possible clarity and simplicity without losing subtlety. Jung’s achievement is to attain this over such a range (which includes, for instance, both “The Logic of Construction” and “Naturalism and Humanism”) and at such intensity. I believe that both what Jung has to say, and the way in which he says it, are central and crucial: the content of this book is central to the thoughts and problems of our time, and the way this content is

expressed is crucial to our learning how to express such thought, and to the highest aims we may have in such expression.

Jung is not at self-publicist, nor is he motivated by expedience. I remember him, at a conference in Acapulco, walking out of a meeting of Czech systems theorists in exile in a state of dismissive wrath: to have stayed would have been the political adroit and self-advancing course, but he was incensed at what he felt was the poor thinking and general smugness being paraded under an exile's flag. As a quiet, behind-the-scenes activist, he was the only one of those exiles to return to Czechoslovakia in the Velvet Revolution, taking very senior posts in Government and Academia until one day, again disgusted at the dishonesty and can't he saw, he drove round Prague handing in letters of resignation from all appointments. This is the behaviour of a man of principle, not one whose main interest is self-advancement who places publicity before content. His concern is for the human and the humane, as I remember from an occasion when, reading a not very good draft of mine, he shifted my direction towards the humanitarian, and thus helped me transform a somewhat drab paper into something which is worth writing, and, I hope, reading.

Yet this book does promote his work and its content, and promote it well. In my opinion, this collection represents, and makes available to a far-too-unknowing public, a distillation of some of the very best thinking in the field. Here is an original and important voice, a voice that has not been well heard before, except within a select group. I hope that the reader, reading this work, will come to value it, and its author Richard Jung, as highly as I do. And that the reader will enjoy the breadth and beauty that are contained within its integrity.

If history is alert, it will come to recognise Richard Jung as one of the key philosophers of cybernetics and systems theory, especially in human social systems.