

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

B. Les Lancaster

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Within the context of the paper's remit, Drob performs an excellent service by collating Jung's diverse ideas concerning the meaning of life. The paper successfully constellates Jung's pronouncements on the subject into useful subdivisions of his vast output, enabling the reader to grasp the complex whole. The selection of quotations from Jung's writings is highly illuminating and expertly compiled. At a time when many, especially amongst younger generations, seem to be experiencing crises of meaning, this overview of Jung's voice on the subject is particularly relevant.

The question I will address here is whether a broader perspective could be developed. The paper does exactly what the title states; Jung's pronouncements on the meaning of life are presented and Drob has addressed their context and implications within the broad arc of Jung's understanding of the psyche. I therefore have no direct criticism. To the extent that a wider context could be illuminating, then it is not Drob's responsibility to develop it. I offer these thoughts in the spirit of building further on the foundation the paper provides.

Questions of metaphysics are notably absent from the paper. In addressing the meaning of life, many would bring a religious ontology, drawing on notions such as a divine plan and the responsibilities accompanying the view of the soul as a divine element. This contrasts with those adhering to a physicalist ontology that broadly encompasses scientific and humanistic approaches. Chance and evolution leave little scope for a meaning beyond mere survival, with perhaps some seasoning of human altruism to enrich the brew.

How do we situate Jung on a metaphysical spectrum? Of course, this is by no means a new question. Jung steadfastly emphasized his empiricism in his rebuttal of Buber and others who accused him of *psychologization* of religious ideas. And, for Buber, this is not merely an exercise in abstract metaphysical debate because a genuine I-Thou relationship can exist only when the *Thou* is absolutely other (Buber, 1988), a condition Buber considered to be compromised when the other is designated as Self (even allowing for the *reality* of the psyche as conceptualized by Jung).

When Jung writes that, "We are steeped in a world that was created by our own psyche" (CW8, § 747, as cited in Drob's article), he seems to be making a psychological statement which can be supported by scientific data. However, when he writes of *karma*, suggesting for example that each person is born with a distinct question to answer and that, if their life does not eventuate in a satisfactory answer, "someone who has [their] karma—or [they themselves] – would have to be reborn in order to give a more complete answer" (MDR, 318-19, again as cited in Drob's article), he ventures beyond empiricism. In fairness to Jung, this statement is subject to qualifications for he admits that the question of karma is obscure to him. Nevertheless, Drob's quoting of Jung on this topic raises the metaphysical issue. My point is not that we need to re-hash old controversies concerning analytical psychology and religion in general, but that the specific topic

here, the *meaning of life*, lies so centrally in this metaphysical cauldron that addressing it may bring additional insight.

Drob notes that collating Jung's writings on the meaning of life highlights several apparent inconsistencies and paradoxes. That there may be inconsistencies in Jung's thought is hardly unexpected given both the intractability of the topic and the diversity of experience Jung encountered in his life. Indeed, it seems to me remarkable that Jung's followers distilled a coherent model of the psyche from the rich complexity of his writings. Jung has sometimes been criticised for being obscure and inconsistent. But the topics into which he delved are not capable of being simply crystalised into neat categories. As Drob notes in this paper, Jung viewed paradox in positive terms as being the most effective means for grasping the deepest features of life, so it is hardly surprising that any attempt to collate his insights into a given subject reveals paradoxes.

From this perspective, Drob's concluding reflections might be upheld—that inconsistencies in Jung's writings on the meaning of life can be accommodated within Jung's own insistence that working with paradox and integrating opposites is essential for leading a meaningful life; it is a core dynamic of the individuation process. Nevertheless, this seeming resolution advanced by Drob left me dissatisfied. Perhaps it is too generous to Jung to assert that the inconsistencies be accommodated within a positive appraisal of paradox. There is genius and messiness in Jung's writings, as there was in his life, and the attempt to somehow fit his views on the meaning of life into a drawer labelled "paradox is good for you" may detract from the value of a certain disorder that can accompany genius.

After all, we know of other cases where Jung changed his views. He came to moderate his early writings about ethnic and racial differences in the psyche, for example, and admitted to Leo Baeck that he had "slipped up" in the 1930s in his statements relating to Nazism.

Is there not a difference between a paradox that gives instruction through the very contradictions it portrays and a more discursive treatment of what seems to be a question that cannot be answered empirically? A Zen koan, for example, presents a paradox with purpose—namely to guide the student towards overcoming habitual mental assumptions that limit the 'everyday' mind. The Kabbalah, which Drob has elucidated so effectively, uses the paradoxical juxtaposition of light and dark to convey the primordial stirrings of creation, which, at the same time, becomes a goal for the mystic in their path to attaining wisdom. The *Zohar* uses the Aramaic term, *botzina de-kardinuta*, in this context, which Wolski and Hecker (2017) translate as "spark of Adamantine darkness": "Spark of Adamantine darkness, Concealed of all Concealed. . . . He who attains this mystery and knows it, merits to know the wisdom of his Master" (*Zohar Ḥadash* 57a; Wolski & Hecker, 2017, pp. 417, 424). A non-paradoxical expression simply cannot plumb the depths and open the mystic to an enriched state of being in this way. And this precisely parallels Jung's understanding of the value in paradox. Indeed, Jung identifies the same paradox when he notes that entering what seems to be the *darkness* of the unconscious leads to the *light* of illumination (Lancaster, 2018).

I read Jung's statements about *karma* and the possibility of an *afterlife* differently; they are not paradoxical, but expressions of profound insight tinged with honest uncertainty. Holding to an empirical approach cannot do otherwise (although, recent research into *near death experiences* persuade many that this is no longer the case). We return, then, to the issue of metaphysics, for Jung charts a path that is profoundly informed by the certainties of religion on the meaning of

life and death but that refuses to relinquish the anchor of empiricism in order to accept those certainties. This is not paradox but integrity.

References

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