

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

JUNG AND MEANING: A RESPONSE TO SANFORD DROB'S "JUNG ON THE MEANING OF LIFE"

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The question of the meaning of life is a central feature in Jung's psychological project, or even, one could say, its keystone. It is explicitly mentioned in his well-known statement: "About a third of my cases are not suffering from any clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and aimlessness of their lives. I should not object if this were called the general neurosis of our age" (*CW* 16, § 83). This standpoint is reiterated in another passage: "There are in addition not a few patients who, although they have no clinically recognizable neurosis, come to consult the doctor on account of psychic conflicts and various other difficulties in their lives, laying before him problems whose answer inevitably involves a discussion of fundamental questions" (*CW* 16, § 250). These questions, says Jung, determine people's own attitude (i.e., their form of being-in-the-world), which "is bound up with certain principles or general ideas, in a word, with their religious, ethical, or philosophical beliefs" (*CW* 16, § 250). And, as long as the suffering springing from these particular psychological problems are brought to the psychotherapeutic setting, psychology cannot avoid stepping "into regions that were formerly the province of priests and philosophers" (*CW* 16, § 250). As a matter of fact, Jung was mainly interested in these "regions" as they appear in the psychological life of modern subjects (including himself). They are the homeland of the question of the meaning of life, and at bottom Jung's psychological project aimed at addressing this question, rendered extremely problematic in nihilistic modernity. It is the characteristic destruction of meaning performed by nihilism that gives birth to the "general neurosis of our age".

The centrality of the question of meaning in Jung's thought shows with undisputable evidence the relevance of Sanford Drob's choice of the subject matter for his article on "Jung on the meaning of life". Given the limits of any article, Drob obviously could not deepen the problems arising from this fundamental and thorny issue. He opted for simply collecting passages in which Jung deals with the problem of the meaning of life, on its various levels, without really discussing them. These well-chosen passages provide a most valuable map of the different kinds of perspectives or approaches to the problem of life-meaning to be found in Jung (radical doubt, existential, archetypal, and transcendental), and Drob briefly comments on each one of them. In what follows, I will simply add a few comments to what Drob offered us in his valuable piece, giving some more context to the *problem* of meaning in modernity, and rising some problems and further questions which seem to me important to the critical reflection about Jung's standpoint on this problem.

Concerning the first perspective, it should be pointed out that "radical doubt" corresponds to the essential

commitment of Jung to the requirements of modernity. Indeed, the skeptical doubt is an unalienable feature of modern consciousness. This feature is represented in Jung's epistemological standpoint for psychology.[2] Applied to the problem of meaning, it results in the rational undecidability concerning meaninglessness or meaningfulness of life. Drob stresses Jung's "ambivalence" with regards to this point, and, in the "Final Reflections" of his article (p. 14), he stands by this ambivalence. Drob's is the only acceptable standpoint in a presentation of Jung's position, if we do not want to distort or "correct" it. Therefore, for those who would like to justify their very modern hunger for meaning appealing to Jung, we should remind them of his radical doubt about this whole topic. And for those who, on the contrary, would like to align Jung with their very post-modern nihilistic dismissal of the meaning of life, we should also remind them of Jung's radical doubt about this whole topic.

Granting that "no one can know what the ultimate things are" – such as the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life –, then we must "take them as we experience them" (*CW* 11, § 167). And if "Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is, therefore, equivalent to illness" (*MDR*, p. 340), if the senselessness and aimlessness of modern life may be called the general neurosis of our age, we ought to reflect on this standpoint in the light of another famous position held by Jung: "We should not try to 'get rid' of a neurosis, but rather to experience what it means, what it has to teach, what its purpose is. (...) We do not cure it – it cures us. (...) From the illness itself we can learn so much for our recovery, and what the neurotic flings away as absolutely worthless contains the true gold we should never have found elsewhere" (*CW* 10, § 361). From Jung's perspective, "a neurosis is an expression of the 'affection' of the whole man, and it is impossible to treat the whole man solely within the framework of a medical specialism" (*CW* 18, § 839). To Jung, a neurosis involves something more than a particular and localized conflict: "If ever there were an illness that cannot be localized, because it springs from the whole of a man, that illness is a psychoneurosis" (*CW* 16, § 194). Due to this reference to "the whole man" (*totus homo*), and to the fact that, according to Jung, ultimately the roots of neuroses "are due not merely to personal defects but to collective psychic conditions" (*CW* 18, § 840), the cure of a neurosis leads the psychotherapist "far beyond its purely medical confines" (*CW* 18, § 840) – toward those fundamental questions that formerly were the province of priests and philosophers, questions related to the meaning of life.

If Jung is right in considering the psyche as a self-regulated system (see "On Psychic Energy", in *CW* 8), the neurotic absence of meaning is counterbalanced by the meaning-producing activity of symbol formation, both being moments of the whole psychological process. Therefore, there is an indissoluble link between meaninglessness, meaning and symbol: unfolding Jung's position, we can say that modern meaninglessness "triggers" or enhances the psychological production of symbols; on its turn, a symbol is always meaningful, and, finally, the meaning of life will be always symbolic. As a consequence, a meaningful life, in Jung's sense, requires the symbolic sensibility of consciousness.

If we agree that neuroses spring from "collective psychic conditions", they should be envisaged from a broader historical, cultural perspective. And if we follow Jung in interpreting the meaninglessness of modern life as a "general neurosis of our age", we should ask about the especial "collective psychic condition" from which this general neurosis come from. Jung's answer can be found in his Eranos lecture delivered in 1934, "The archetypes of the collective unconscious" (in *CW* 9i), where he shows how the historical modern destruction of the "protective wall of sacred images" (*CW* 9i, § 22), resulting in an "alarming poverty of symbols that is now the condition of our life" (*CW* 9i, § 23), creates a "very difficult position" for

modern man: “before him there yawns the void, and he turns away from it in horror” (*CW* 9i, § 28). The symbols destroyed by the modern iconoclasm were the reference for the meaning of life. Their destruction, thus, leads to senselessness and aimlessness as the modern “condition of our life”, so that its “alarming poverty of symbols” is equivalent to its meaninglessness. But Jung states – and here we find the deepest premise of his psychological project – that he is “convinced that the growing impoverishment of symbols has a meaning” (*CW* 9i, § 28). In other words: to Jung, and paradoxically enough, the historical creation of meaninglessness is itself meaningful. Not only that: meaninglessness, or “the void”, is the source of meaning. This very same conviction of Jung is reiterated in the Visions seminar, quoted by Drob: to Jung, “approaching the void (...) seems (...) to be the most desirable thing, the thing which contains the most meaning” (quoted in Drob, p. 7; cf. *Visions Seminar*, vol. II [31 May 1933], p. 1026). And in the Eranos lecture, after exposing the historical emergence of the “void” (in brief: nihilism), Jung gives examples of the enhancement of the activity of symbol production in the unconscious of modern men as a compensation for the previous collective/cultural/historical destruction of the “protective wall of sacred images”.

This historical-collective situation of the impoverishment of modern consciousness from its symbolic tradition leads us back to the extremely important *pragmatic-psychotherapeutic* aspect of Jung’s thought, correlative of the radical doubt, which Drob presents very briefly and that I would like to emphasize. The conclusion of *Psychology and Religion*, quoted by Drob, introduces this other side of Jung’s skeptical stance, namely his pragmatic attitude towards the problem of meaning. The pragmatic dimension of psychotherapy imposes the careful concern with the essential *symbolic activity* of the psyche, because by definition a symbol produces and/or expresses meaning, being thus the very antidote to meaninglessness (at least at some level). But here I must remark that the pragmatic reliance on experience, in tune with the skeptical relinquishment of truth on epistemic grounds, inevitably gives rise to *belief*. Jung opposes experience to belief (cf. *CW* 11, § 167), dismissing the latter in favor of the former. And to him, truly knowing something means making the “immediate experience” of this something, instead of knowing only from hearsay (similarly to Job’s statement after the hierophany of Yaweh, in Job 42,5: “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You”). This is the meaning of Jung’s bombastic declaration to John Freeman regarding his belief in God: “I don’t need to believe. I know.”

No doubt. A numinous experience indeed might be convincing, persuasive, changing the life of an individual, becoming “for him a source of life, meaning, and beauty” that gives “a new splendor to the world and to mankind” (*CW* 11, § 167). But it will always be no more than an individual’s *psychic* experience, furthering an individual’s conviction, shaping an individual’s life (and eventually influencing the lives of those close to him). Only “the symbols produced by the unconscious” are “capable of convincing the critical mind of modern man” (*CW* 11, § 167). And the symbolic experience that produces and/or expresses meaning, being “the thing that cures a neurosis” (in our case, the “general neurosis of our age”), “must be as convincing as the neurosis, and since the latter is only too real, the helpful experience must be equally real. It must be a very real illusion, if you want to put it pessimistically” (*CW* 11, § 167). But the experience is individual, it is “a thing that has become *for him* a source of life, meaning, and beauty”. It does not allow us to conclude that life is meaningful *in itself*, or that meaning is patent on a “collective, objective, ‘cosmic’ level” (Drob, p. 15). Such conclusion is forbidden within the skeptical epistemological framework of analytical psychology. It is an especial kind of belief, strongly fueled by the affective impact of the experience.

From a rigorous psychological perspective, a symbol is just a self-expression of the psyche itself. As such, it can rightly be the source of meaning of the *psychological* life, but not of life in itself, pure and simple. Or, we could say, symbols (and especially religious symbols) provide meaning, but, as long as symbols are human products of the psyche, and given the skeptical epistemological limits of psychology, all we can say is that “We create the meaning of events. The meaning is and always was artificial. We make it” (RB 239a). Symbols, and meaning, are human artifacts: this is what one can say from a rigorously psychological standpoint. Drob finds a paradox here: “We are thus left with the paradox that the value and meaning provided to humanity through the symbols of religion are intrinsic to humanity itself, and that humanity is thus responsible for providing the light and meaning in the cosmos” (p. 11). I cannot see this as a paradox in itself, unless we presuppose that meaning is not “artificial”, created by the symbolic activity of the psyche, but rather that symbols only *grasp* a meaning which, in this case, would be objective. However, this objectivity is not allowed by the epistemological limits of analytical psychology. As Drob puts it, “Jung appears to disabuse us of the notion that we can, for example, determine the meaning of life, *in any objective sense*, once and for all” (p. 9, my italics). But the *objectivity* of meaning is the real problem. As Mircea Eliade remarks, considering the position of *homo religious* (and not of his modern psychological surrogate), a truly religious experience claims for objectivity: “Religious man’s desire to live *in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion” (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 28). This could be extended to the whole question of the meaning of life.

Jung knows very well that modern man, with his intrinsically skeptic form of consciousness, “has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty” (CW 10, § 155). With regards to the ultimately religious support of meaning, the only support capable of facing the challenge that death imposes to any meaningful life, he knows that psychology cannot speak of “God”, but only of the “psychic image of God”. Hence, psychology cannot be the surrogate of religion – or at least it should not be. As a *psychologist*, Jung knows, for instance, that having a *vision* and the correspondent *idea* of this life being but a segment of existence (see Drob, p. 11-12) does not prove that this psychological event grasps an actual objective meaning of reality (not merely subjective, even if archetypal, i.e., objectively subjective). The *conviction* that followed his own visions (for instance, in 1944), as subjective persuasion, has the logical status of *belief*. The pragmatic psychotherapist does not have to worry with epistemological issues, or with the metaphysical question of truth: he only has to correctly judge and value the therapeutic effects of a numinous archetypal experience, for instance, whether it is satisfactorily convincing or not. But to the subject who makes the meaningful experience and is truly *convinced* by it, the experienced meaning is taken as objective: this is his belief, or his *pistis*, the Greek word for “faith” that Jung cunningly interprets as “loyalty to the experience” (cf. CW 11, § 74).[3]

All this has consequences to the second kind of perspectives about the problem of life’s meaning indicated by Drob: the existential ones. At a first level of the existential perspectives on the problem of life’s meaning presented by Drob, Jung’s standpoint is that a meaningful life is “a life that strives for the individual realization – absolute and unconditional – of its own particular law” (CW 17, § 310). This means that the meaning of life is equivalent to individuation, here understood as a personal process, self-realization or realization of the Self. Strictly speaking, to Jung the Self is both the *a priori*

potentiality which is the condition of possibility of the whole process of individuation AND its *telos*, its goal, and thus its meaning, so that it is both an *a priori* entelechy and an empirical synthesis (cf. *CW* 9i, § 278). In this sense, the meaning of human life is in the fulfillment or (finite) actualization of the potential wholeness inscribed in the entelechy that makes each one of us a human being, and not anything else. Jung's standpoint here provides a contemporary version to the age-old maxim coming from Pindar, in Ancient Greece: γένοι' ὅλος ἐσσι μαθὼν ("Become such as you are, having learned what that is"). And the symbolic form of self-knowledge is Jung's psychological mode of fulfilling the Delphic commandment: γνῶθι σεαυτὸν ("Know thyself").

Self-realization or individuation has the world as its necessary stage. Being *in-the-world* is an essential structure of the human mode of existence, so that a human life necessarily involves the world. Consequently, the realization of a human life (and thus, in this sense, its meaning) is only possible through "a full engagement in our world" (Drob, p. 6). And, inasmuch as "world" is understood by Jung as a creation (or, we could say, an extension) of the psyche – "We are steeped in a world that was created by our own psyche" (*CW* 8, § 747) –, the question of life's meaning is from the outset answered on the strictly psychological level. For the psyche is essentially a meaning-producing activity, and in this sense one can resume once more the passage from the Red Book quoted by Drob: "We create the meaning of events. The meaning is and always was artificial. We make it" (*RB* 239a).

However, and as Drob points out, Jung gives a wider significance to this first and fully human existential perspective on the meaning of life. In keeping with the tradition unfolding from Antiquity through the Middle Ages and at least until early modern times, Jung wants to attribute to self-realization a "*divine* significance which transcends the individual" (Drob, p. 5, my italic). And *this* would be the *ultimate* source or level of meaning attributed to individuation in Jung's view. This is hardly assimilable by the epistemological skeptical limits established by Jung himself to psychology. The empirical indistinguishability between the image of human totality (Self) and the psychological image of God should lead us to suspend our judgment about the ultimate nature of such images, as well as about their supposed referents. As a psychologist, self-conscious of what his discipline is allowed to claim theoretically, Jung does exactly this. But as a psychotherapist, devoted to the cure of souls suffering from the modern meaninglessness of life, he crosses the borderline separating psychology from religion and pragmatically relies on "experience", as long as it "helps to make life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and those you love" (*CW* 11, § 167).

We should stress that, from connecting "the individual with the archetypes of the collective unconscious, i.e., the archetypes of value and meaning that, for Jung, comprise the objective psyche" (Drob, p. 15), to the postulation of a *real cosmic* (without the quotation marks cautiously used by Drob), objective level of meaning, there is a hugely problematic jump. Therefore, we are left with the unsolved problem of the objectivity of the experience of meaning in Jung's stance. The claim for this objectivity, not admissible within the skeptic epistemological framework adopted in analytical psychology, is nonetheless unavoidable on existential grounds, and thus, *malgré* Jung, it is reallocated to the experientially-based belief, *pistis* (cf. *CW* 11, § 167). The only form of trying to go beyond this limit within Jung's thought would be in taking up the whole problematic of the theory of synchronicity, unfortunately not even mentioned in Drob's article. For synchronicity ventures beyond the confinement of any experience to the subjective sphere, admitting an acausal *meaningful* coincidence between psychic and physical events. This points to a possible objectivity of human

meaning. But even here Jung continues to be cautious: “Although meaning is an anthropomorphic interpretation it nevertheless forms the indispensable criterion of synchronicity” (*CW* 8, § 916). The correlative *speculation* about *Unus Mundus* as well as about the psychoid nature of archetypes, which, as I see it, clearly opens up again the doors to the realm of metaphysical thought, leads psychology beyond its original epistemological limits. Perhaps the question of the meaning of life cannot be satisfactorily and completely formulated without this bold step accomplished in Jung’s mature thought. If the question of the meaning of life is a keystone in Jung’s psychological thought, the theory of synchronicity has a decisive architectural function on it.

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[2] See my “Empiricism, Skepticism, and Belief in Jung’s Epistemology”, in J. Mills, ed., *Jung and Philosophy*. London/New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 86-108.

[3] *Pistis* (belief, trust) and *peitho* (persuasion, conviction) come from the same root, so that being convinced by something means believing and trusting this something. However, persuasion/conviction does not eliminate the whole problematic of *truth*, which is simply skeptically dismissed and pragmatically dealt with in Jung’s stance.