

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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Commentary on Sanford Drob's paper "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

It is with pleasure that I'm able to offer a few words of commentary on Dr. Drob's edifying paper. To offer some context, I fell in love with Carl Jung's work in my twenties, right after completing undergraduate studies in philosophy, psychology and religion. But that was many decades ago. At the time, western academic psychology was riding a wave of behavioral research with rats and pigeons, trying to extrapolate results to human behavior while also remaining true to methodologies of the "hard sciences" whose foundation rests upon validity, reliability and statistical analysis. As a young man interested in the human psyche with all its depth and diversity, I was appalled by the dominance of B.F. Skinner's "black box" of internal reality and instead switched to studying European philosophy, existentialism and psychoanalysis. It was there I found inner experiential reality being given its due.

In my comments that follow, I will first underline a couple themes in Dr. Drob's paper that deserve special emphasis, as I believe they accurately reflect the project of Jung's work as a whole. Afterward, I will touch on areas that the reader might wish to explore further.

I'll begin by complementing Dr. Drob on his clear and cogent use of language— a style that allows the reader to immediately grasp the issues at hand. The ideas presented carry the reader along while also offering insight into their interconnections. Dr. Drob accomplishes this by not only contrasting aspects of Jung's difference with Freud, but also by contextual examples that allow the reader to understand what is meant by existential, archetypal and transcendental views of life-meaning. These categories help to circumscribe discrete areas while also alerting the reader not to expect them to remain so. Afterall, overlap and interconnection are hallmarks of both psyche and emotional life. The neat and tidy categories of the natural sciences, as useful as these are for investigating objective events that display regularity, are not well suited to the fluidity, spontaneity and ever evolving nature of psyche, with its ability to adopt, contain and express radically different angles of perspective, including contradiction and paradox.

Unlike the physical body, our psyche is partly woven from infinity because it never ends or stops. Its depth is unfathomable. A simple thought experiment will highlight what I mean. If we try to imagine human psychology and psyche eventually succumbing to becoming completely "known" or predictable, then by that very fact we limit the possibility of any future growth or development. New ideas would cease. Dr. Drob quotes Jung who acknowledged this:

"The serious problems in life...are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so it is a sure sign that something

has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seem to lie not in its solution but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and petrification" (CW 8 § 771).

But there is an even deeper issue, and an unavoidable circle: Psyche (the thing being investigated) is itself doing the investigating. There is no outside, objective, Archimedean point from which to study ourselves. Is it any wonder that Freud the neurologist was doomed to fail in his early project for a "scientific" psychoanalysis? The physical reflex arc might be amenable to prediction and control (it's a neuro-physiological event), but the human psyche is of another order of reality, and one that cannot be pinned-down except in specific contexts and circumstance. (Dr. Drob's forensic work using psychological testing instruments to answer specific diagnostic questions is but one example).

The self-reflective capacity of our psyche is the foundation of meaning-seeking beings. We observe, reflect and question things from an early age. Has there yet been a child born who has not pondered questions like "what am I doing here... how did I come to be, and what is the meaning of all this...?"

Thus Jung, along with many others, alert us to the fact that throughout history and in every culture, there has always been a search for meaning and value, which finds myriad channels of expression through mythology, symbol, art, religion, music, literature and more... We know that psyche timelessly holds and expresses the infinite because its products continue to speak to us even after thousands of years— through art, religion, language and ideas. Our physical body may be finite, but psyche is not.

Emotional reality and our experience of it provides another area worth noting when it comes to multiple perspectives, because we often possess contradictory feelings, conscious or not. Emotional experience itself is rarely pure, containing different strands and nuances. I can love my spouse and be very angry with her at the same time. I might indulge my shadow side a little and still be a good citizen. Multiplicity and the ability to see things from different perspectives often appears saner and a good deal safer than univocal absolutisms held with fanatical conviction. On the other hand, those who hold absolute convictions often *believe* they are safer for doing so, but often at the cost of doing violence to whatever is outside their circle of belief. Jung consistently acknowledged the need to "take back our projections" in the service of accurate reality testing, rather than assume and jump to conclusions. Developing this kind of "psychic muscle" appears lacking and sorely needed in our era.

The "magnificently affirmative both/and" that Dr. Drob references from Jung has a long history, and has become further elaborated in contemporary psychoanalytic language by the likes of D.W. Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, and Michael Eigen over the last 50 years. All three authors expand our knowledge of psychology and paradox. Both/and is not a simple oneness, but an interconnectedness between antimonies that invites elaboration of the qualities of *relationship* between them. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the ancient Jewish mystical tradition of *Kabbalah*. Bion famously said to Eigen that Bion used Kabbalah as a framework for psychoanalysis.

The fact that our lives are both meaningless and meaningful is a paradox that is off-putting to many, yet it is not the only paradox we must navigate and struggle with. Having both a mind and body (interconnected psyche and soma), or the realization that self and other are inextricably intertwined from the beginning of life... these are fundamental antimonies

upon which all human life is based, even if never acknowledged. Paradoxical thinking may feel awkward and messy, but it remains closer to our experience of lived reality than abstract theory and statistical analyses. As Einstein is said to have quipped: Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.

Carl Jung's work introduces us to the rich and timeless life of psyche, and Dr. Drob has done a service by elaborating some essential aspects for a new generation of readers.
