Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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Jung on the Meaning of Life **by Sanford Drob**

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This article, *Jung on the Meaning of Life* by Sanford Drob, examines in general the perennial theological and philosophical question regarding whether there is some hidden and intrinsic meaning in life waiting to be discovered, as Soren Kierkegaard contended, or if human existence is inherently absurd and meaningless, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggests, or as William Shakespeare put it, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” If the former is true, how does one go about finding that clandestine meaning; if the latter, how might we make our existence more meaningful nonetheless? Although the author tends to circumvent or avoid addressing this key question, he considers this eternal enigma from the specific perspective and context of C.G. Jung’s analytical psychology and personal *Weltanschauung* or world-view, touching very briefly upon several other philosophical, psychoanalytic, existential, and theological perspectives in the process. To the author’s credit, he does devote a section to some existential themes prominent in Jung’s psychology and does a decent job of asking the right questions, albeit by somewhat randomly incorporating and citing numerous verbatim quotations from Jung’s voluminous body of work regarding meaning and meaninglessness in life.

As noted, the author does well to emphasize certain existential themes in Jung’s therapeutic quest for meaning though, as I have elsewhere written (Diamond, 2018/2021), Jung himself strongly disliked and disapproved of the application of existential philosophy to psychoanalysis or psychotherapy by his Swiss colleagues Medard Boss and Ludwig Binswanger and their philosophical mentor, Martin Heidegger (see Diamond, 2018/2021). Nonetheless, Jung’s own approach to the question of meaning and meaninglessness shares, as I have elsewhere argued (Diamond, 2018/2021), much in common with existentialism, existential analysis, and what eventually came here in America to be called “existential therapy.”

As the author rightly points out, Jung’s thoughts and beliefs on this matter naturally evolved and changed over the long course of his life, but one conviction remained constant: Human beings possess an innate intellectual, psychological, and spiritual need for meaning, the frustration, denial, or repression of which results in negative symptoms, behaviors, and life consequences. As a practicing psychiatrist and analyst, Jung found that most if not all of his patients suffered from a fundamental lack of meaning, or what psychiatrist and existential analyst Viktor Frankl (1946/1984) later referred to as an

"existential vacuum," and what Jung himself saw as a spiritual crisis. If he (Jung) could help patients to discover or make some meaning in their lives, to see that their human existence amounted to something more than "sound and fury, signifying nothing," their neurotic, or in some cases, psychotic, symptoms would often dissipate or disappear. Indeed, as I argue in my own article "Existential Therapy and Jungian Analysis: Toward an Existential Depth Psychology" (2018/2021), Jung's core emphasis on the problem of meaninglessness and need for meaning prefigured and paralleled existential analysis or therapy.

Drob recognizes the frequently contradictory character of Jung's comments regarding the question of meaning, noting that such contradiction is the inevitable consequence of what Jung called the *coincidentia oppositorum,* or coincidence of opposites, which is an archetypal quality of both inner and outer reality. It is crucial here to remember that Jung preferred not to think in terms of *either/or* but rather of *either/ and or* but believed that it is crucial to be able to tolerate what he called the "tension of opposites," to simultaneously consider both objective and subjective reality, always to see both sides of a problem or its solution. For instance, the author thoughtfully cites, though incompletely, Jung's ultimate conclusion regarding, among other things, the elusive meaning of life: "…[A]ll the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. They must be, for they express the necessary polarity inherent in every self-regulatory system. They can never be solved, but only outgrown" (CW13, par. 18).

As a starting point to his exposition in this important paper, the author usefully refers to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic take on this esoteric question, stating that

Freud essentially dismissed the question of life's meaning as a "neurotic symptom," a question that one would forget after a successful analysis. According to Freud:

The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence; by asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression.[1]

For Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, the very act of questioning whether life has meaning is itself a pathological symptom of an unlived, frustrated, doubt-ridden, and unfulfilled existence and resulting state of melancholia, nihilism, or depression. That is to say, this is the meaning gleaned and attributed by Freud to the phenomenon of pondering too profoundly about life's meaning or meaninglessness in the first place. Indeed, it could be argued that psychoanalysis—from which Jung's analytical psychology was developed—is itself essentially a sophisticated meaning making system, a structured process of assigning significance to seemingly meaningless phenomena such as slips of the tongue, dreams, free associations, and sundry psychiatric symptoms via the use of psychological interpretation. Moreover, we could further conclude that it is precisely this central process of making meaning that is at least partly responsible for the therapeutic benefits of both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis.

Obviously, while human beings possess the cognitive capacity to, and therefore will at times reflect philosophically on such big questions, it is the person who is living a subjectively meaningless, purposeless life or is experiencing some *existential crisis* (see Diamond, 2016, 2018/2021, 2024) that seems most prone to questioning and doubting whether life

has any discernible meaning or purpose. For instance, being confronted with one's own mortality, facing the frightening existential reality of death, can lead to despair and nihilism: the conclusion that the fact of death negates, nullifies, and precludes any and all possible meaning in life. So, though we can perceive this cosmic questioning as a symptom of suffering, we cannot simply dismiss it as an inherently meaningless and insignificant concern. In fact, from the existential point of view, it is essential to consider seriously what Yalom (1980) calls "ultimate concerns" or "givens" in life, not the least of which is the experience of *meaninglessness*. This is especially true for the psychotherapist, who is confronted regularly, whether explicitly or implicitly, with suffering individuals grappling with this quandary. Thus, even if the question of whether life has any meaning, and, if so, what that meaning might be, is in fact neurotic at its root, as Freud asserts, it is paramount for the psychotherapist to be able to properly address it and the suffering, despair, nihilism, and anxiety it engenders. This is an area of psychotherapy and Jungian analysis specifically that is neglected in this article but would enrich it considerably.

For example, consider existential psychiatrist Irvin Yalom's (1980) commentary on this predicament as it presents itself in psychotherapy:

Meaning, like pleasure, must be pursued obliquely. A sense of meaningfulness is a by-product of engagement. . . Engagement is the therapeutic answer to meaninglessness regardless of the latter's source. . . [W]hen it comes to meaninglessness, the effective therapist must help patients to look *away* from the question: to embrace the solution of engagement rather than to plunge in and through the problem of meaninglessness. The question of meaning in life is, as the Buddha taught, not edifying. One must immerse oneself in the river of life and let the question drift away. (pp. 482-483).

Mythology, for instance, is certainly a primary focus in Jungian analysis, serving the purpose of making meaningful sense of the patient's experience and putting it into some greater archetypal or collective perspective as an integral part of the human condition. As Rollo May (1991) writes,

A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Whether the meaning of existence is only what we put into life by our own individual fortitude, as Sartre would hold, or whether there is meaning we need to discover, as Kierkegaard would state, the result is the same: myths are our way of finding this meaning and significance. . . . (p. 15).

Because myths encapsulate eternal truths about the human condition emerging from our shared collective history, they can help make life richer and more meaningful and lessen our sense of existential aloneness, alienation, and isolation.

Whether one's preoccupation with wondering if life has meaning or not is pathological or an inescapable and essential consequence of the human condition, how can the clinician best help patients suffering obsessively from this enigma and their subjective sense of insignificance, meaninglessness, or nihilism? My own seemingly paradoxical response is: *By helping the patient to make some sense or meaning of this meaningless suffering.* In other words, by attempting to answer a somewhat different but related question, namely, *what might your obsessive and depressive concern, nihilism, and anxious preoccupation regarding life's meaning or lack thereof subjectively and objectively signify or mean about you*

personally? What does it say about how you feel about your life thus far, right now, and about life in general? And how might you be able to make your life more meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling?

This brings to mind Frankl's (1946/1984) famous statement:

. . . [T]he meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. . . . One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out. . . . Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather . . . must recognize that it is *he* [sic] who is asked [the question]. (pp. 130-131)

Finally, Jung (1961, pp. 358-359) writes near the end of his prolific life, "Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning, is a matter of temperament.…Probably as in all metaphysical questions, both are true: Life is—or has—meaning and meaninglessness." And, he concludes: "Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything."