

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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This essay offers an effective overview and taxonomy of the various approaches Jung adopts in his reflections on the “meaning of life”—or indeed, its absence. These four approaches are divided neatly into the categories of i. “radical doubt” (or “mystery”); ii. the “existential” encounter with death and absurdity alongside the creative affirmation of the self in the face of meaninglessness; iii. The re-presencing of objective “archetypes” from trans-individual sources (from the “unconscious”; from the “word of God”) in the individual; iv. transcendental speculations on life after death. These four dimensions are developed sequentially with clarity, their internal and mutual contradictions unfolded, before they are finally synthesized into a Jungian epistemology and ontology of the cosmos as “coincidentia oppositorum,” with even a suggestive hint of panpsychism: “not only is the psyche the condition of all metaphysical reality, it is that reality” (p.14). The essay handles the task it sets out to do rather well, and offers the reader a satisfying summary of Jung’s thoughts on the “meaning of life.”

The strengths of this essay are arguably also its weaknesses. The essay’s main purpose appears to be to offer a clear, concise, somewhat dehistoricized reading of Jung. It does this effectively enough but does not take us any further. There is, for instance, little historical contextualization of the development of Jung’s thought (which would presumably offer some explanatory resources on the contradictions raised); nor is there a sustained critical-theoretical or philosophical-theological analysis of the contradictions and consequences of Jung’s claims. The tensions across the terms “symbol,” “myth,” and “archetype,” for instance, are not developed, though these seem to offer a key resource to think through the disconnect between, say, the elements of voluntarist subjectivism (in “existential” affirmation and creation), and the more “objective” dimensions of non-agential revelation of the archetypes through the unconscious. Many theological notions are also raised—including for example, “incarnation,” imitatio Christi, revelation, and of course “God”—which could be profitably developed through closer engagement with theology (through which Jung’s own idiosyncratic interpretations could be illuminated through comparison). In cleaving so closely to Jung’s own system, this essay works largely within its logic and carries over its contradictions rather than bringing forth new insights from them. In sum, this essay serves as an effective, clear, and concise introduction to Jung’s thought.