

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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For 100 years, many people have been fascinated, puzzled and sometimes utterly frustrated by the writings of Carl Jung. There has been a long history of thoughtful studies of Jung on religion, on the concept of God, on mythology. Jungians-devout followers of Jung – have based entire systems of therapy, theories of religious evolution and philosophical teaching, drawing from his published writings, his seminar talks and his private journals. This essay falls within this tradition, culling through Jung's writings to gather his varied and frequently obscure statements on a religious-philosophical theme.

What this body of literature, including this essay, lacks is any attempt to put Jung in context. What was happening in his world? In medicine, social changes, philosophy and the arts? Who was he talking with, apart from his patients and his own students? Peter Homans' *Jung in Context* tried to do this, as did James Heisig's *Imago Dei* and Demaris Wehr's *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes* all from decades ago. More negatively the links between Jung and figures such as Mircea Eliade tie both to a romantic/reactionary politics, tremendous suspicion of liberal democracy, and an imaginatively reconstructed "traditional mythic worldview." Some of these associations have been ignored by those whose religious outlooks seem wildly different from Jung's own. Christian writers such as Morton Kelsey and Mary Wolff-Salin manage to bypass the Orientalist/Gnostic Jung, and appropriate his views on personal connections with the unconscious, and individuation. Maybe the best way to describe these and other authors' works is to talk of "Jung in Contexts," as when orthodox Christians, feminists, Buddhists and deconstructionists all can glean something from Jung.

The current essay seems to want to appropriate Jung for existentialism of a sort. "Meaning" evokes Viktor Frankl, "the absurd" sounds like Camus, and authenticity vaguely Sartre-esque. None of these figures were in dialogue with Jung, and seem to have dwelt in a very different social-political milieu than his. None of them used "psyche" as the foundation stone, as he did. To overgeneralize, these existentialists did not accept "the coincidence of opposites" or any idea of a balance between good and evil. That entire imagery would have angered them; think of Dr. Rieux the hero of Camus' *The Plague*. You do not "balance," you keep fighting against the plague, against what threatens humanity and hope.

But then, what did Jung mean by "co-incidence of opposites," by the balance model? He certainly wanted his patients to accept their "shadow" the suppressed aspects of their personality. Overly rational persons could do this via dreams, art, active imagination. But when it came to examples of evil behavior, harmful acts- what did he think it meant to apply "co-incidence of opposites" to this in daily life? The imagery behind what he wrote turns out to be a mechanical balance, which avoids connecting this to human experiences while glorying in symbols such as yin-yang and those found in alchemy. And all the diagrams that appear in writings by later generations of Jungians continue this. (Note: intense scrutiny of Freud-

Jung correspondence show that moral issues, Jung's behavior, were among the reasons for their break.)

It is easy to complain about Jung and Jungians. Jung denied doing “metaphysics,” but did it all the time, and often badly. He wrote reams about religion, “the primitive mind” and gender, in ways that now appear outdated, prejudiced, Orientalist etc. For a woman, “her world outside her husband terminates in a sort of cosmic mist,” he wrote in *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*. (p.210) I remember commenting that for Margaret Thatcher, the cosmic mist ended at the Falkland Islands. The current essay avoids most of these topics, but also repeats a long tradition of de-contextualized Jung. It concludes without an assessment of how his many, confusing claims can be understood and appropriated beyond simply repeating what he said on different occasions.

List of Books Mentioned in this Review

- Camus, Albert, *The Plague*. Vintage, 2022 [1947].
- Heisig, James, *Imago Dei*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979.
- Homans, Peter. *Jung in Context*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, no date.
- Kelsey, Morton, *Healing and Christianity*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Wehr, Demaris, *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.
- Wolff-Salin, Mary, *No Other Light*. New York: Crossroad, 1986.