Research Article

Jung on the Meaning of Life

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This paper explores Carl Jung's diverse and seemingly contradictory perspectives on the meaning of life. Jung held that the need for meaning was fundamental to human existence but also expressed doubt that life has any inherent meaning at all. Nevertheless, over the course of his career he developed existential, archetypal and transcendental views of life-meaning, and saw symbols, myths, and religion as vital sources of significance. Jung contemplated the integration of chaos, absurdity, the shadow, the cognizance of mortality and the realization of archetypal values in forming a meaningful existence. Later, following the profound visions he experienced after his heart attack in 1944, he speculated about a blissful afterlife. The author argues that Jung's multiple perspectives on *life meaning* can be integrated into a comprehensive view of the *meaning of life* that rests on his understanding of the self as a *coincidentia oppositorum*. By subjectively creating meaning in our lives we are able attach ourselves to archetypal/objective values that transcend our individuality and death.

Jung held that the need for meaning was a fundamental motive in human life. He wrote that in "the same way that the body needs food…the psyche needs to know the meaning of its existence (CW 13, § 476). Indeed, after his break with Freud, Jung had a personal crisis that prompted him to question the meaning of his own existence, and this confrontation resulted in the narratives and paintings that comprise his *Red Book*. Questions regarding "meaning" became central to Jung's work thereafter.

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]

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By way of contrast, Jung held that meaning is more than "satisfied libido." He developed the view that "Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is, therefore, equivalent to illness" (MDR, p. 340) and held that the psychotherapeutic process should not only aim to relieve individuals of their neuroses but to, more importantly, help provide them with a deeper sense of life meaning.

This is not to say that Jung had a clear and univocal understanding of what constitutes life-meaning, or that he analyzed the problem of the meaning of life in a systematic or philosophically critical way. He did not, for example, carefully distinguish between the meaning of an individual life, and meaning in a wider, "cosmic" sense. Further, an examination of Jung's views on life meaning reveals that he considered, and at various times adopted, what appear to be radically different attitudes and solutions to this fundamental life question.

It is important to recognize from the outset that the notion of providing clear and definitive answers to philosophical questions was generally inimical to Jung's entire way of thinking:

> I should be prepared to make transcendental statements, but on one condition: that I state at the same time the possibility of their being untrue. For instance, "God is," i.e., as I think he is. But as I know that I could not possibly form an adequate idea of an all-embracing eternal being, my idea of him is pitifully incomplete; thus, the statement "God is not" (so) is equally true and necessary (CW 18, § 1584).

We should thus not be too surprised that Jung's reflections on life-meaning were quite varied. These reflections traversed: (1) radical *doubt*, (2) *existential*, (3) *archetypal*, and (4) *transcendental* approaches to the problem—approaches that mirror the range of perspectives that informed his psychology throughout his career. Indeed, we might say that each of Jung's perspectives on life-meaning provides an entry point into his thought and practice and, in effect, constitutes a "reading" of the entirety of his psychological project. There are those who (1) appreciate Jung for his radical openness and doubt, (2) understand him as a foundational existential/humanistic thinker, (3) are attracted to his theory of the archetypes and his interest in mythology, or (4) who come to Jung because of his openness to mysticism, the paranormal and the afterlife.

Jung's *doubt* reflected his view that there is an essential mystery, an essential unknown, that is critical to the vitality of the psyche, and that to offer solutions to ultimate questions inevitably results in a failure of full experience and understanding. Jung's *existential* approach to life-meaning involved the view that the meaning of life is tied to individuation and the realization of the self, a focus on life in

this world, a personal confrontation with death, and an embrace of absurdity, paradox and the shadow elements of the personality. His *archetypal approach* involved an emphasis on the significance and power of myth, symbols, and religion. Finally, Jung's *transcendental approach* grew out of experiences which led him to speculate that our world is only a small part of a greater, and presumably more meaningful reality. While these four approaches to life-meaning are not clearly separated in Jung's thinking, and were, in his view, interrelated, considering them each, in turn, will enhance our understanding of Jung's views on life-meaning and enable us to gain clarity regarding their relevance to our lives and clinical work.

Doubt and Mystery

Jung, like many of his contemporaries, had strong doubts as to whether life had any purpose or meaning at all. In his seminar on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, he stated:

> ...we don't know what the purpose of life is, don't even know whether it ***has*** a purpose... we are quite safe in believing that this life is mere meaningless chaos because that is what we see...We belittle chance and don't admit that chance is the master...the main thing is chaos and chance—that is a pretty fair picture of the world."[2]

Jung had much to say about the meaning of life, but in candid moments in his *Seminar on Zarathustra* he confessed that fundamental problems such as this are not amenable to a solution, a view that in this case was not dissimilar to Freud's:

> ... all the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble.... They can never be solved, but only outgrown... (CW13, §18).

According to Jung, when we think we have discovered an important truth we must take a step back, as, "The great thing to know is that the important things are not so important, and the unimportant things are not so unimportant."[3]

At times Jung suggested that the meaning of life is a complete mystery and that the only valid approach is a pragmatic one:

> No one can know what the ultimate things are. We must therefore take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make life healthier, more beautiful,

> more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and those you love, you may safely say: 'this was the grace of God' (CW 11, § 167).

At other times Jung suggested that it is precisely the mystery of life that itself provides life with its vitality. In a letter to Hans Schmid-Guissan written in 1915, Jung wrote "the core of the individual is a mystery of life which dies when it is grasped."[4]

In 1930 Jung wrote: "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). Again, in 1946: "The goal is important only as an idea; the essential thing is the *opus* which leads to the goal; that is the goal of a lifetime" (CW 6 § 757).

As we proceed, we will see that Jung marshaled the doubts he had about solving the problem of life-meaning into his proposed *solution* to the problem, as he was of the view that life is both *meaningful and absurd*. According to Jung, individuals can experience the world and themselves as both meaningful and meaningless or contingent. In *Psychological Types*, Jung wrote:

> The fact that there are two distinct and mutually contradictory views eagerly advocated on either side concerning the meaning and meaninglessness of things shows that processes obviously exist which express no particular meaning, being in fact mere consequences or symptoms; and that there are other processes which bear within them a hidden meaning, processes which are not merely derived from something but which seek to become something, and are therefore symbols" (*CW 6*, § 822).

Jung is here commenting upon neurotic symptoms and other psychological processes but his comments apply to the whole of human experience, which, as we will see, he holds involves an amalgam of meaning and absurdity.

Existential Perspectives

Jung took up several existential themes in considering the problem of life's meaning: individuation, life in this world, death, and the embrace of the opposites.

Individuation and the Realization of the Self

In his *Red Book,* Jung developed an existential view of life-meaning, one which reflected the influence of Frederick Nietzsche. There Jung held that individuals must pursue and, in effect, create their own meaning. In *The Red Book,* he writes: "*We create the meaning of events. The meaning is and always was artificial. We make it*" (RB 239a).

According to Jung, meaning cannot be achieved through following rules or imitating others. He writes, for example, that by imitating Christ and seeking redemption in him people have failed to learn from Christ's "awe inspiring life" (RB 456b) which teaches them to live their own lives as Christ had lived his. The lesson from Christ's life is that individuals must take their lives "into their own hands, faithful to their own essence and their own love" (RB 356a). Mere imitation is childish, but, in Jung's view, a mature reading of the New Testament would lead individuals to find a place for Christ in their hearts, discover their own nature, and in this way carry on his work (RB 356b). Jung's guide Philemon says to Christ, "Your work would be completed if men managed to live their own lives without imitation" (RB 356b).

These ideas, which helped inform Jung's concept of individuation were reprised years later in his lecture "Is Analytic Psychology a Religion:"

> We all must do what Christ did. We must make our experiment. We must make mistakes. We must live out our own vision of life...When we live like this, we know Christ as a brother, and God indeed becomes man.[5]

In his 1934 paper, "The Development of Personality"[6] Jung wrote that Christ's

> apparently unique life became a sacred symbol because it is the psychological prototype of the only meaningful life, that is, of a life that strives for the individual realization-absolute and unconditional-of its own particular law...To the extent that a man is untrue to the law of his being and does not rise to personality, he has failed to realize his life's meaning." (CW 17, § 310, 314).

Over time, Jung began to integrate his existential approach to life-meaning into a wider and even transcendental outlook. In 1942 Jung wrote that "self-realization," has a divine significance which transcends the individual:

> The goal of psychological, as of biological, development is self-realization, or individuation. But since man knows himself only as an ego, and the self, as a totality, is indescribable and indistinguishable from a God image, self-realization—to put it in religious or metaphysical terms--amounts to God's incarnation. That is already expressed in the fact that Christ is the son of God (CW 11, § 33).

There are several things to be taken from this quotation. Jung here claims that the goal of human life is self-realization but that this goal can never be *known* because one can only know the ego and cannot know the entirety of the self. In self-realization, however, one approaches something, however indescribable, that is indistinguishable from at least the "image" of God.

Jung frequently suggested that the archetype of the Self is empirically indistinguishable from the God archetype or image. It appears that he held that the realization of the Self involves the realization of that aspect of the human being that was, as per the Bible, created in the image (*Tzelem*) of the divine. This is significant in the current context because, as we will see later, Jung regarded religion to be a very significant path to life meaning.

Jung returned to the topic of existential meaning near the end of his life when he stated that each individual enters the world *with his own question*, a question that has more than individual significance and is of potential relevance for the world at large:

> I also think of the possibility that through the achievement of an individual a question enters the world, to which he must provide some kind of answer. For example, my way of posing the question as well as my answer may be unsatisfactory. That being so, someone who has my karma—or I myself – would have to be reborn in order to give a more complete answer" (MDR, 318-19).

Life in this World

Beginning with the *Red Book*, Jung emphasized that it is a full engagement in our world that provides life with its meaning: "The meaning of events comes from the possibility of life in this world that you create. It is the mastery of this world and the assertion of your soul in this world" (RB 239a).

In the *Visions Seminar* Jung stated:

> Life only has meaning when it is really lived. Otherwise, it's like a pear tree that blossoms every spring and never brings forth a pear; you remember Christ himself

> condemned that which bears no fruit, when he cursed the barren tree. People who live sterile lives are like that fig tree, they do not fulfill the will of the Lord. If they want to live they must live with the whole of their being" (***Visions Seminar***, I, 18 Feb 1931, p. 232).

Jung was largely optimistic about life in this world. In an interview that took place during the Second World War, he stated, "One comes to see that life is great and beautiful, that nonsense and stupidity do not always triumph" (Jung, 1942. p. 145).

Jung went so far as to hold that it is *objectively* important that we live our lives in the actual world. In his seminar on Kundalini yoga in 1932 he stated it is "most important that you should be born; you are to come into this world—Otherwise you cannot realize the self, and the purpose of this world has been missed. Then you must simply be thrown back into the melting pot and be born again" (Jung, 1932, pp. 28-9, 19 Oct. 1932). Here, in his discussion of the Kundalini philosophy, Jung seems to suggest that the realization of the self is not only the source of personal meaning but also gives meaning to the world as a whole.

In a brief essay, "The Real and Unreal," originally published in 1930, Jung wrote:

> Far…from being a material world, this is a psychic world, which allows us to make only indirect and hypothetical inferences about the real nature of matter… We are steeped in a world that was created by our own psyche (CW8, § 747).

We might argue that it is precisely this point of view that enables Jung to suggest that discovering or creating meaning in one's own life is tantamount to discovering the meaning of the world—a merger of "life-meaning" with "the meaning of life."

Death and Meaning

Jung recognized that death, the fact of human mortality, poses a significant challenge to life's meaning. In a 1934 essay, "The Soul and Death," he wrote:

> the question of the meaning and worth of life never becomes more urgent or more agonizing than when we see the final breath leave a body which a moment before was living. How different does the meaning of life seem to us when we see a young person striving for distant goals and shaping the future, and compare this with an incurable invalid, or with an old man who is sinking reluctantly and impotently into the grave (CW8 § 796).

Jung tells us that in the case of those who are old or infirm, "The optimism with which we judge the young man fails us." Jung's reflections here are worth quoting in full:

> Naturally we have on hand for every eventuality one or two suitable banalities about life which we occasionally hand out to the other fellow, such as "everyone must die sometime," "one doesn't live forever," etc. But when one is alone and it is night and so dark and still that one hears nothing and sees nothing but the thoughts which add and subtract the years, and the long row of disagreeable facts which remorselessly indicate how far the hand of the clock has moved forward, and the slow, irresistible approach of the wall of darkness which will eventually engulf everything you love, possess, wish, strive, and hope for — then all our profundities about life slink off to some undiscoverable hiding place, and fear envelops the sleepless one like a smothering blanket (CW8 § 796).

However, in 1927, in a more optimistic moment, Jung delivered a eulogy that included the words:

> To many death seems to be a brutal and meaningless end to a short and meaningless existence. So it looks, if seen from the surface and from the darkness. But when we penetrate the depths of the soul and when we try to understand its mysterious life, we shall discern that death is not a meaningless end, the mere vanishing into meaninglessness – it is an accomplishment, a ripe fruit on the tree of life. Nor is death an abrupt extinction, but a goal that has been unconsciously lived and worked for during half a lifetime (CW 18 §1706).

In *The Red Book* Jung struck an existential note by holding that the acceptance of death is necessary for joy in living:

> Joy at the smallest things comes to you only when you have accepted death. But if you look out greedily for all that you could still live, then nothing is great enough for your pleasure, and the smallest things that continue to surround you are no longer a joy. Therefore, I behold death, since he teaches me how to live (RB 275a).

At times Jung went so far as to suggest that an encounter with nothingness is essential for life-meaning. In the "Visions" seminar he wrote about "approaching the void, which seems to me to be

the most desirable thing, the thing which contains the most meaning."[7] However, years later, when Jung himself was an old man, he told an interviewer:

> I have treated many old people and it's quite interesting to watch what the unconscious is doing with the fact that it is apparently threatened with a complete end. It disregards it. Life behaves as if it were going on, and so I think it is better for an old person to live on, to look forward to the next day, as if he had to spend centuries, and then he lives properly. But when he is afraid, when he doesn't look forward, he looks back, he petrifies, he gets stiff and dies before his time. But when he's living and looking forward to the great adventure that lies ahead, then he lives, and that is about what the unconscious is intending to do.[8]

We will see that Jung also at times spoke about the possibility of the soul surviving death, so perhaps we can say that he was ambivalent about confronting one's utter finitude as a vehicle for arriving at authenticity and meaning. Another possibility, one that we will forthwith consider in some depth, is that confrontation with death inevitably leads to multiple perspectives and paradox, and that such paradox is essential for meaning.

Embracing the Opposites: Nonsense and The Shadow

Throughout his career Jung held that "Life is born only of the spark of opposites" (CW 7, § 78) and he was of the view that the self is a *coincidentia oppositorum* (*CW* 12, p. 186). In the *Red Book,* he developed the view that meaning involves a paradoxical merger with its opposite, absurdity. There he writes: "The melting together of sense and nonsense… Produces the supreme meaning" (RB 229b).

While the integration of evil into the self and the image of God is a familiar theme in Jung's later writings; here in *The Red Book*, Jung seeks to integrate *meaninglessness* into his conception of truth and meaning. He explains that "The highest truth is one and the same with the absurd" (RB 9 248a) and just as "day requires night and night requires day, so meaning requires absurdity and absurdity requires meaning" (RB 242a). Jung goes so far as in *The Red Book* to claim that God, traditionally thought of as the font of infinite meaning and goodness, has a *shadow*, and that this shadow is "nonsense" (RB 230a).

We can achieve insight into these ideas by considering Jung's claim (in his 1934 essay "The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious") that in "all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order, in all

caprice a fixed law, for everything that works is grounded on its opposite" (CW 9i, § 66). Indeed, in *Symbols of Transformation* Jung writes: "Every psychological extreme secretly contains its own opposite or stands in some sort of intimate and essential relation to it" (CW 6, § 81).

Years later Jung would make a similar claim about religion, holding that "paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness." Accordingly, "religion becomes inwardly impoverished when it loses or waters down its paradoxes; but their multiplication enriches because only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life. Non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible" CW 12, §18).

We should thus bear in mind Jung's appeal to the importance of opposition and the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* [9] in order to understand his at times seemingly contradictory views on our topic. In his "Visions" seminar he stated, "A truth is only a truth when it lives, otherwise it is perfectly nonsensical; it must be able to change into its own opposite, to even become an untruth at times."[10] In this way, 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.

The idea of entertaining "opposing perspectives" on important life questions has a certain practical warrant. There is an old Hasidic saying that one should always hold two sheets of paper in one's pockets, each inscribed with opposing advice or wisdom. The key to a successful life is knowing which pocket to reach into at any given time, under any given circumstance.

Archetypal Themes

The Role of Myth and Symbols

Jung regarded myth and symbols to be the vehicle of life's meaning. In *The Red Book* he writes, "There are not too many truths, there are only a few. Their meaning is too deep to grasp other than in symbols" (RB 291a). According to Jung, "man is in need of a symbolic of life" (CW 18, §62) and "the recognition of the intrinsic value of the symbol leads to constructive truth and helps us to live; it inspires hopefulness and furthers the possibility of future development."[11] Jung explicitly links symbols with life meaning when he writes:

> That gives peace, when people feel that they are living the symbolic life, that they are actors in the divine drama. That gives the only meaning to human life; everything else is banal and you can dismiss it" (CW 18, §630).

Jung links the symbol with his thinking on paradox and the interpenetration of the opposites. According to Jung, the "mediating position between the opposites can be reached only by the symbol." In *Psychological Types,* he says that the symbol has a dual character that embraces what is both "real and unreal." CW 6, §178).

In connection with his own life, Jung stated that the "discovery of his personal myth was "the task of tasks" (CW 5, pp. xxiv—xxv). Indeed, according to Jung, myth is a revelation of divine life: "For it is not that 'God' is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of the divine life in man. It is not we who invented myth, rather it speaks to us as a word of God. The word of God comes to us, and we have no way of distinguishing whether and to what extent it is different from God" (MDR 340).

Religion, Meaning and Metaphysics

Jung frequently related life-meaning to religious experience. He held that "the soul possesses by nature a religious function" (CW 12, § 14). In 1934 he stated that religion provides us "a rich application for feelings," and in the process "gives meaning to life."[12]

According to Jung,

> This symbolic process within us, or that need to express unknown, unknowable, inexpressible facts, culminates in religion. Religion is the symbolic system by which we try to express our most important impressions of unknown things, say, the concept of God.[13]

In *Man and His Symbols* Jung wrote, "It is the role of religious symbols to give a meaning to the life of man." He contrasted the rich symbolic life of the Pueblo Indians with life in the West, arguing that "their plate is infinitely more satisfactory than that of a man in our own civilization who knows that he is (and will remain) nothing more than an underdog with no inner meaning to his life."[14]

Jung discussed the role of myth and religion in a patient, a Jewish woman who,

> had no mythological ideas, and therefore the most essential feature of her nature could find no way to express itself. All her conscious activity was directed toward flirtation,

> clothes, and sex, because she knew of nothing else. She knew only the intellect and lived a meaningless life. In reality, she was a child of God whose destiny was to fulfill His secret will. I had to awaken mythological and religious ideas in her, for she belonged to that class of human beings of whom spiritual activity is demanded. Thus, her life took on meaning, and no trace of the neurosis was left (MDR 139-40).

Jung's view of religion was far from traditional. He held, for example, that the "unconscious is the only available source of religious experience (CW 10, § 565). Jung was of the view that in his time a psychological archetypal approach was the best vehicle for understanding religion:

> To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again, and pour them into moulds of immediate experience. It is certainly a difficult undertaking to discover connecting links between dogma and immediate experience of psychological archetypes, but a study of natural symbols of the unconscious gives us the necessary raw material (CW 11, § 148)."

According to Jung, religious experience is multivalent because "like God…the unconscious has two aspects; one good, favorable, beneficent, the other evil, malevolent, disastrous…" (CW 18, § 1538).[15] As early as in *The Red Book*, Jung opined: "the God whom we seek in the absolute was not to be found in absolute beauty, goodness, seriousness, elevation, humanity or even in godliness" but "should [] encompass the fullness of life, which is beautiful and hateful, good and evil, laughable and serious, human and inhuman[.]" He reflects, "How can man live in the womb of the God if the Godhead attends only to one-half of him?" (RB 243b).

Jung held that,

> Man's relation to God probably has to undergo a certain important change. Instead of the propitiating praise to an unpredictable king or the child's prayer to a loving father, the responsible living and fulfilling of the divine will in us will be our form of worship and commerce with God…Man has already received so much knowledge that he can destroy his own planet. Let us hope that God's good spirit will guide him in his decisions, because it will depend upon man's decision whether God's creation will continue."[16]

Jung adopted a view regarding the intimate relationship between God and humanity, which had earlier been expressed by such mystics as the 13th Christian theologian, Meister Eckhart and the 18th-century rabbi, the Maggid of Mezirich. (Jung discussed Eckhart extensively in *Psychological Types* (CW 6, pp. 245-8) and in an interview in 1955 claimed that the Maggid had anticipated his entire psychology.[17]) In this view, God is dependent upon humanity in order to actualize His goodness and value. In 1956, Jung wrote to Elined Kotsching that "God can be called good only inasmuch as He is able to manifest His goodness in individuals"[18] Years earlier he had written that "God wants to be born in the flame of man's consciousness."[19]

It is thus humanity's responsibility to give meaning to the cosmos:

> As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being (MDR 326).

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. This paradox is implicit in Jung's dual claims that "Myth is not a fiction" (CW 11, § 648) and "The religious myth is one of man's greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrousness of the universe" (CW 5, § 343).

Transcendent and Metaphysical Perspectives

Life After Death

Early in 1944, Carl Jung was hospitalized after a heart attack. He relates in his late life memoir, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, that as he "hung on the edge of death," he had a remarkable series of visions that he described as "the most tremendous things I have ever experienced" (MDR 295).[20] In one of these visions, Jung saw himself in the "garden of pomegranates" witnessing the wedding of *Tifereth* and *Malchuth*, which in the Kabbalah are two of the ten *sefirot* (value archetypes through which the world was created), and which are also said to represent the masculine and feminine aspect of God. Jung experienced himself as Rabbi Simon ben Jochai, "whose wedding in the afterlife was being celebrated," and who according to Jewish tradition is the author of the Zohar, the classical text of the Kabbalah. The vision resulted in Jung experiencing the "beatitude…of a blissful wedding" (MDR

294).[21] After his visions, Jung came to believe that life is but a "segment of existence," and that, "What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it."[22]

Jung was of several minds regarding the existence of "another world" and life after death. On the one hand, he expressed the same uncertainty about life after death as he sometimes expressed with regard to ultimate life meaning, as in this passage from *Memories, Dreams Reflections*:

> We lack concrete proof that anything of us is preserved for eternity. At most we can say that there is some probability that something of our psyche continues beyond physical death (MDR 322).

Indeed, in this same work he held that "the conception people form of the hereafter is largely made up of wishful thinking and prejudices..." (MDR 320-1) and said, "When I speak of things after death, I am speaking out of inner prompting, and can go no further than to tell you dreams and myths that relate to the subject" (MDR 321).

Finally:

> I hardly think that after death we shall be spirited to some lovely flowering meadow ... At least half the reports of encounters with the dead tell of terrifying experiences with dark spirits; and it is the rule that the land of the dead observes icy silence, unperturbed by the grief of the bereaved" (MDR 320-1).

Yet, as we have seen, Jung's 1944 visions led him to the view that this life is but a "segment of existence," and that time as it is ordinarily experienced is an illusion, since during the visions, past, present and future fused into one. Indeed, Jung describes these visions as filling him "with the highest possible feeling of happiness," and "a sense of "eternal bliss." He reports that he came away from these visions with the conviction that he had somehow been granted a glimpse into a higher reality or world. By comparison, Jung tells us, our own world is grey, boxlike, and "ridiculous." He wrote: "We shy away from the word 'eternal,' but I can describe the experience only as the ecstasy of a non-temporal state in which present, past, and future are one" (MDR 295-6). Several months after his heart attack Jung wrote: "What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it."[23]

Jung wrote to Kristine Mann, several months prior to her death, and about a year after he had suffered a heart attack and experienced the visions I have just described:

> When you can give up the crazy will to live and when you seemingly fall into a bottomless mist, then the truly ***real*** life begins with everything which you were meant to be and never reached. It is something ineffably grand. I was free, completely free and whole, as I never felt before. I found myself 15,000 km from the earth and I saw it as an immense globe resplendent in an inexpressibly beautiful blue light.... I was in the universe, where there was a big solitary rock containing a temple. I sought entrance illuminated by a thousand small flames of coconut oil. I knew I was to enter the temple and I would reach full knowledge... It was a silent invisible festival permeated by an incomparable, indescribable feeling of eternal bliss, such as I never could have imagined as being within reach of human experience. Death is the hardest thing from the outside and as long as we are outside of it. But once inside you taste of such completeness and peace and fulfillment that you don't want to return.[24]

And yet given some of Jung's musings about the horrors of death, one wonders whether at times he spoke in glorious homiletic language about the afterlife simply (perhaps even disingenuously) as a means of "reassurance." At times, Jung seemed to be of the view that death was frightening and brutal. In 1934 he wrote:

> And so it is—death is indeed a fearful piece of brutality; there is no sense in pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event, but far more so psychically: a human being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death" CW 8, § 812).

While Jung was clearly ambivalent on the question of whether the soul survives death, he regarded a conception of such survival as important for the attainment of wholeness:

> A man should be able to say he has done his best to form a conception of life after death, or to create some image of it – even if he must confess his failure. Not to have done so is a vital loss. For the question that was posed to him is the age-old heritage of humanity: an archetype, rich in secret life, which seeks to add itself to our own individual life in order to make it whole (MDR 302).

As early as 1925 Jung held that a "feeling of immortality" resulted from self-realization:

> When we obtain a complete realization of the self, there comes with it the feeling of immortality. Even in analysis, such a moment may come. It is the goal of individuation to reach the sense of the continuation of one's life through the ages. It gives one a feeling of eternity on this earth.[25]

Jung later held that a connection with the "infinite" is related to the question of cosmic meaning in life:

> The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon utilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance (MDR 325).

This is an interesting late-life pronouncement, especially given Jung's previous resolute refusal to engage in metaphysical speculation.

Final Reflections

In reviewing Jung's varied pronouncements on the question of life-meaning, assertions that range from extreme doubt that there is such meaning, to the view that meaning can most assuredly be found in an afterlife vision of a higher world, we may be inclined to dismiss Jung as confused or even disingenuous—adopting contradictory views that at best, changed and evolved over time, and at worst were grounded in little more than discursive or homiletical convenience. How can it be, we might ask, that the same thinker doubts whether life has any meaning at all, holds that any such meaning is the creation of the individual, believes that life meaning is grounded in the archetypes of the collective unconscious, myth and religion, and proclaims that in death we will encounter such a glorious completeness, peace and fulfillment that we will not want to return to life in this world? It would seem that Jung, in an effort to cover all the bases, ends up with the very set of contrasting possibilities that lead us to question "the meaning of life" in the first place.

Perhaps, though, if we reflect upon the matter and return to what Jung himself has to say about contradiction, we can arrive at an appreciation of, and perhaps even embrace, his multiple views on this ultimate topic. As we have seen, Jung's existential perspective on life meaning was, in part, grounded in the view that "Life is born only of the spark of opposites" (CW 7, § 78) and that the "melting together" of opposites such as 'sense and nonsense… [p] roduces the supreme meaning" (RB

229b). For Jung, because the self is a *coincidentia oppositorum* (CW 12, § 259) it contains that which results in opposition, paradox and contradiction. One is here reminded of Walt Whitman's line in "Song to Myself (51):" "Do I contradict myself? Very well then...I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)." The 13th century Kabbalist, Azriel of Gerona held that the divine *Sefirot*, the creative emanations of the Infinite, are "the synthesis of every thing and its opposite," that the Infinite (*Ein-sof*) is the root of *both* being and nothing and *both* faith and unbelief," and that the soul, "is the synthesis of all the desires and thoughts stemming from it... in thesis or antithesis."[26]

Jung drew attention to the proposition that the validation of both terms of an opposition is characteristic of much Eastern thought. For example, Jung writes in his "Commentary to 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' (The *Bardo Thodol*)" that the "unspoken assumption" of this work "is the antinomian character of all metaphysical assertions." The *Bardo Thodol* holds that consciousness is both completely void and the condition (and even "being" of) all metaphysical reality, including God. Jung writes that this work eschews the Western insistence on clear-cut solutions, it's restricting "either-or," and adopts "a magnificently affirmative "both-and." He says, that this "may appear objectionable to the Western philosopher, for the West loves clarity and unambiguity; consequently, one philosopher clings to the position, "God is," while another clings equally fervently to the negation, "God is not" (CW 11, § 833). But as we have seen, Jung later adopted the (eastern) point of view in holding that he is prepared to say "'God is" only on the grounds that the statement "'God is not' is equally true and necessary (CW 18, § 1584).

We might hold that ultimate questions are both unanswerable and answerable, and that the answers are multiple as opposed to singular. For Jung, it is a Western prejudice that the answer to our question(s) about the meaning of life must be univocal and singular. Again, in his Commentary on "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", Jung writes that it is the "psyche" that makes metaphysical assertions, explaining that "[n] ot only is it [the psyche] the condition of all metaphysical reality, it *is* that reality (CW 11, § 833). Thus, if the psyche has within itself multiple conceptions of life-meaning it may very well be that this is a reflection of the "objective psyche," the reality that, in Jung's view, both grounds and is grounded in our psychical experience.

When seen from this perspective Jung's seemingly contradictory views on the meaning of life may not be contradictory after all. As we have seen, Jung held that in a world in which meaning is doubtful and not a "given," we must create our own meaning and in doing so fulfill "the sole purpose of human existence...to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being." (MDR 326). We have seen how

this "light" transfers meaning from the individual, subjective level to the collective, objective, "cosmic" level, and we might here observe that in doing so, it connects the individual with the "archetypes of the collective unconscious, i.e. the archetypes of value and meaning that, for Jung, comprise the objective psyche. According to Jung, the archetypes are not only the "human significances" of things encountered in the world but (like Plato's Ideas) can also be understood as elements of a "higher world." In *Mysterium Coniunctionis he writes:*

> This higher world has an impersonal character and consists on the one hand of all those traditional, intellectual and moral values which educate and cultivate the individual, and on the other hand the products of the unconscious, which present themselves to consciousness as archetypal ideas" CW 14, § 673).

By "kindling" a spark of meaning in the "darkness of being," we, in effect, attach ourselves to the eternal values that comprise that "higher world," and produce a meaning for our lives (and a meaning of life) that transcends our death.

Footnotes

[1] Letter to Marie Bonaparte, 13 August 1937; *Letters of Sigmund Freud*. T. and J. Stern trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

[2] J. L. Jarrett, ed., *Jung's Seminar on Zaarthustraa, Abridged Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 199-200.

[3] C. G. Jung, *Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930-34*. Vol I (3 June 1931), p. 390.

[4] *The Question of Psychological Types: The Correspondence of C. G. Jung and Hans Schmidt-Guissan*. 1915-16, pp. 140-41, 6 Nov 1915.

[5] In *C. G. Jung Speaking*, ed. W. McGuire and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936/1977), p. 98.

[6] The editor of Jung's Collected works notes that this essay was, "First delivered as a lecture entitled "Die Stimme des lnnern" at the Kulturbund, Vienna, in November 1932. Subsequently published under the title "Vom Werden der Penonlichkeit" in *Wirklichkeit der Seele* (Zurich, Leipzig, and Stuttgart, 1934)."

[7] C. G. Jung, *Visions*, Vol. II (31 May 1933), p. 1206.

[8] "The 'Face to Face' Interview" (1959), *C. G. Jung Speaking*, p. 438,

[9] On Jung's views on "Coincidentia Oppositorum" see S Drob, *Archetype of the Absolute: The Union of Opposites in Mysticism, Philosophy and Psychology*, Santa Barbara: Fielding University Press, 2017, Ch. 4.

[10] C. G. Jung, *Visions, Vol II* (21 Feb 1934), p. 1311.

[11] "Preface to Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology" (1916), CW 4, 1.

[12] "The World on the Verge of Spiritual Rebirth" (1934), C. G. Jung Speaking, p. 69.

[13] C. G. Jung, *Visions,* Vol II (15 June 1932), pp. 742-743.

[14] "Approaching the Unconscious," (1964) *Man and His Symbols*," p. 89.

[15] "Letter to Pere Lachat" (27 March 1954).

[16] Letter to Elined Kotsching, 30 June 1956, *C. G. Jung Letters*, ed. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973, Vol. II, p. 316.

[17] C. G. Jung, An Eightieth Birthday Interview," in *C. G. Jung Speaking*, pp. 271-272.

[18] Letter to Elined Kotsching, 30 June 1956, *C. G. Jung Letters,* Vol. II, p. 316, 202.

[19] Letter to Walter Robert Corti, 30 April 1929, *C. G. Jung Letters*, Vol. I, pp. 65-66, 204.

[20] On Jung's kabbalistic visions see S. Drob, Jung's Kabbalistic Visions. *Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice,* 7(1), 33-54, and S. Drob, *Kabbalistic Visions: C. G. Jung and Jewish Mysticism,* 2nd expanded edition. (London: Routledge, 2023).

[21] Jung's vision continued with what he described as "the Marriage of the Lamb" in Jerusalem and concluded with Jung in a classical amphitheater situated in a verdant chain of hills: "Men and woman dancers came on-stage, and upon a flower-decked couch All-father Zeus consummated the mystic marriage, as it is described in the Iliad.")

[22] Letter to Frau N., July 1944, *C. G. Jung Letters*, Vol I, p. 343

[23] Letter to Frau N., July 1944, *C. G. Jung Letters*, Vol I, p. 343.

[24] Letter to Kristine Mann, 1 February 1945, *C. G. Jung Letters*, Vol. I, pp. 357-58.

[25] C. G. Jung, *Introduction to Jungian Psychology: Notes of the Seminar on Analytical Psychology Given in 1925*, p. 154.

[26] Azriel of Gerona, "The Explanation of the Ten *Sefirot*," in Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, trans. Ronald C. Kieber (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1966).

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- MDR = C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé (New York: Random House, 1961)
- RB = C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, trans. Mark Kyburz, John Peck, and Sonu Shamdasani (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009)
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