

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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Drob's paper is a very thorough inquiry into C. G. Jung's richly diverse, if at times strikingly inconsistent, assertions throughout his writings on the meaning of life. This is a natural topic of inquiry given how deeply entangled notions of meaning and life are in the fabric of Jungian thought. Drob examines the issue through a series of lenses, specifically radical doubt, existential, archetypal, and transcendental perspectives, employing a synoptic approach that samples widely from Jung's voluminous writings over the course of his career. While Jung's assertions on the topic do not coalesce into any systematic theoretical framework, they do, according to Drob, exemplify a comprehensive view of the meaning of life as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, i.e., as a locus of paradox, opposition, and contradiction.

This conclusion should not be surprising given the fundamentally *hermeneutic* character of Jung's methods. While Jung's attitude toward hermeneutics as a tradition of inquiry was decidedly ambivalent, there is no doubt that, in practice, his approach to inquiry was essentially hermeneutic (see Smythe & Baydala, 2012). There are two aspects of this that are especially relevant to the present discussion. The first is Jung's method of *amplification*, which consists of fleshing out symbolic parallels and analogies to the material under analysis. This procedure, wrote Jung, "widens and enriches the initial symbol, and the final outcome is an infinitely complex and variegated picture" (CW 7, para. 493). This is certainly consistent with Drob's observations about the *coincidentia oppositorum* and the multiplicity of meaning. A second noteworthy aspect of Jung's hermeneutic method is the importance of *context*. In a later work, again with reference to his interpretive method, Jung wrote: "The picture is concrete, clear, and subject to no misunderstandings only when it is seen in its habitual context. In this form it tells us everything it contains. But as soon as one tries to abstract the 'real essence' of the picture, the whole thing becomes cloudy and indistinct" (CW 9i, para. 307). Drob's synoptic approach, which samples from Jung's writings across diverse contexts without addressing any of them concretely and in depth, thus overlooks some important considerations.

The critical contexts for Jung's observations about the meaning of life are arguably in his therapeutic work and also in his own extraordinary experiences in mid-life. In the context of therapy Jung argued, in his essay "Psychotherapy and Philosophy of Life" (CW, 16, para. 175-191), that issues concerning the meaning of life as a whole are inescapable in the treatment of the psyche. These issues become especially acute in mid-life when the meaning of life tends to become problematic, as the values and meanings that inform the first part of life become unsustainable in the second; as Jung famously observed, "we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie" (CW 8, para. 784). Jung once referred to the sense of an overall meaninglessness and purposelessness of life as "the general neurosis

of our age” (CW 16, para. 83) and found it to be pervasive among those who sought analysis in the second half of life—at least two thirds of his clientele by his own reckoning. While Jungian analysis offered no easy solutions to the chaos and confusion of mid-life for these individuals, it did provide means for bringing these issues to expression by way of engagement with the shape-shifting dynamics of the collective unconscious and its archetypes.

Jung’s own engagement with issues of meaning in mid-life is documented extensively and compellingly in *The Red Book*, a multilayered work consisting of graphic elements, pictorial illustrations and calligraphy, layered onto imaginary dialogues, narratives, and interpretative commentary. The work documented Jung’s own “confrontation with the unconscious” at a critical stage in his life and, again, provides no easy answers to issues of life’s meaning but, rather, presents a rich symbolic tapestry by which to engage with the problem. As I have elaborated at greater length elsewhere, the work is fundamentally both *expressive* and *polyphonic* in character (Smythe, 2018). It is *expressive* insofar as it seeks to *constitute* meaning through enacting or illustrating it rather than by way of conceptualization. It is *polyphonic* in that it presents a multitude of dialogical voices in conversation rather than a singular point of view. When Jung himself appears in the work as narrator and protagonist, it is as a character in his own drama rather than an “author” in the usual sense. Jung’s assertions in *The Red Book* cannot, then, be taken on par with statements from his other, more theoretical writing, as Drob seems to do in this essay.

More importantly, the mid-life situation, as portrayed in Jung’s *Red Book* work or in his therapeutic engagements, remains an essential context for understanding Jung’s assertions about the meaning of life. The complex, chaotic, and contradictory character of the mid-life experience is effectively mirrored in Jung’s later formulations of the meaning of life, which do not merely drop out of the thin air of theoretical abstraction but are, rather, grounded in quite concrete and specific experiences and engagements. While Drob’s synoptic approach is useful in conceptually organizing Jung’s thinking on the issue, this work needs to be supplemented by further inquiry into the concretely lived background from which his thought originated.

References

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