

## MEANING AND JUNGIAN DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

Running Head: Meaning and Jung

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#### ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the nature of meaning and a meaningful life from the point of view of Jungian depth psychology. First, I discuss the need for a connection to the Self, which is experienced via images that are identical to what has traditionally been attributed to the godhead. It involves the need to integrate experiences of the opposites. Secondly, I discuss the need for the creation of more and more consciousness, which has both a quality of Eros or relatedness and Logos or spiritual discernment and understanding. Finally, in addition to Jung himself, I give examples of meaning in the lives of four different people. I also show how both the religious and ethical attitude is of fundamental importance to leading a meaningful life.

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### Introduction

Perhaps, with some exception, all therapeutic systems are concerned with the question of meaning. In one way or another, individuals in therapy are trying to make sense out of a world that they experience as arbitrary, transitory, and full of grief, that is to say, a world that, for them, has become one of meaningless suffering. Ultimately, therapists can only respond to an individual's suffering from their own sense of being, integrity and experience of reality. The fact that there are so many different schools of psychotherapy, so many different interpretations of reality, each of which seems to "work" for a particular clientele, suggests that meaning has a subjective colouring. What is meaningful for one is not for another, at least at any given time.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of meaning and a meaningful life according to C. G. Jung. Of all the contemporary schools of psychology, only the one directly based on his approach is fully satisfying to me. By making this assertion, I do not wish to give the impression that other schools of psychology, or some offshoots of Jung, for example Hillman's archetypal psychology, don't hold value for me. They do. But, it is to Jung whom I continually turn for psychological fodder, guidance and inspiration. It is in his psychology that I personally find meaning.

### The Self and Meaning

Jung (as reported in Hoeller, 1983), saw the general neurosis of our day as that of the anguished soul suffering from a sense of meaninglessness and futility. From his

perspective it is a soul that is alienated from the Self and the experience of wholeness. The soul, in other words, is effectively divorced from the source of both Logos, which is to say discernment and understanding and Eros or relatedness. At the same time, Jung realised that the purpose of human life is the creation of consciousness (Edinger, 1984). Stated differently, for him, life itself is essentially purposive, by which he means that it is teleologically directed towards the fulfilment of the Self over space and time. Meaning comes by not obstructing this process, becoming increasingly aware of it and by participating consciously in the Self's unfolding.

Before proceeding on about the significance of the Self, it is first helpful to define the nature of the archetype. Archetypes in themselves are a purely formal faculty, which provide a blueprint for action. The word archetype is etymologically derived from *arche*, meaning original and *typos*, meaning a blow or imprint, suggesting that humans experience the archetype as coming from an "other." They are, in themselves, nodal points of energy and essentially non-representable. They consist of two poles, a spiritual pole that apprehends and a dynamic and material pole that propels towards action and realisation in the physical world. They are psychoid in nature, which is to say, they not only include a spiritual and a physical dimension, but they transcend both dimensions of being.

The Self can be defined as one's totality or wholeness that includes both the conscious and the unconscious psyche. Not only is the Self one's wholeness, but paradoxically, it is the central archetype and organising centre of the psyche itself. Empirically, it is

symbolised by images that are similar to those that represent the godhead (Jung, as reported by Jaffé, 1989). Indeed, Jung came very close to the Hindu tradition in his assertion that it is “God (who) reveals himself in the psyche as an archetypal image of the godhead” (Jaffé, p. 64).

In the final analysis life takes on meaning only when one experiences a relationship with the Self, or what has historically been referred to as God or the godhead. Jung himself best expresses the significance of this statement. In his autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, he wrote “The myth of the necessary incarnation of God ... can be understood as man’s creative confrontation with the opposites and their synthesis in the Self, the wholeness of his personality...that is the goal... which fits man meaningfully into the scheme of creation and at the same time confers meaning upon it (Jung, p338).”

Meaning, then, comes with individuation, where consciousness expands to include a growing relationship with the opposites, where “all opposites are of God” (as reported in Edinger, p. 84). It comes, that is to say, with a growing relationship with an “other” or what was originally foreign to the ego. The opposites refer to all manner of experiential phenomena such as good and evil, ugly and beautiful, truth and falsehood, love and hate, and so on. As Jung emphasised, it is ultimately not a question of reconciling the opposites “God and man” but the opposites within the God-image itself (Jung, p. 338).

In addition, as Jung suggested, the relationship to the Self needs to be both receptive and active, that is creative. Individuation is a process of “coming to terms with” (Edinger, p. 12) the unconsciousness, a continuing effort at creatively integrating new aspects of the unconscious into awareness and one’s activities in life. Along these lines, in a beautiful letter to a young man, Jung (as reported in Jaffé, 1989) wrote “My inner principle is: God and man ... God needs man in order to become conscious, as he needs limitations in time and space. Let us therefore be for Him that limitation in time and space, an earthly tabernacle (p. 69).”

As implied here, it is difficult if not impossible to follow Jung without both a genuine ethical and religious attitude. The ethical nature has to do with character development and the discovery of one's inner essence. It is based on the search for the Good, and the need to discern between good and evil in one’s life, that is to make choices for “right” conduct. It should be noted, however, that in the process of individuation, “good and evil lose their sharply defined contours” (Jung, as reported in Jaffé, p. 89), indicating the need for increasingly greater powers of discernment.

The religious attitude is required to carefully and conscientiously take account of numinous messages from the unconscious or the Self and expressions of synchronicity (Jung, 1975, p. 483, 484). According to Jung (1975, p. 482) the word religion is etymologically based on the Latin *relegere* or *religere* meaning “to ponder, to take account of, to observe.” He was also fully aware that the Church Fathers thought it was derived from the Latin, *religare*, meaning “to bind, to reconnect (to God)” giving it the

same significance as the Sanskrit word yoga meaning “joining: union with the Divine” (Sri Aurobindo, p. 83, 84).

Paying careful and due regard to the unconscious increasingly reveals that the Self or God, is a complexio oppositorum, a complex of opposites, including what we experience as good and evil. Here, Jung is following in the tradition of the Gnostics and the natural philosophers of the middle ages, the alchemists, especially the latter. Therefore, as Jung (as reported in Edinger, p. 90) wrote: “God can be called good only in as much as He is able to manifest his goodness in individuals” (Jung, as reported in Edinger, p. 90). Jung went on to say that for God to incarnate he depends on humankind’s moral qualities, its conscience. Psychologically, that is to say, there is, first, a need for the religious moment and then genuine ethical conduct, requiring moral discernment for the application of what is “good” in life. It is relevant and noteworthy that the word conscience has the identical etymological roots as the word consciousness. Consciousness and meaning, in other words, are conferred upon life through a creative encounter between the ego and the Self or God.

### The Creation of Consciousness and Meaning

If a meaningful life involves not only an inner relationship with the Self, but its purposive unfolding over space and time, how does this specifically relate to consciousness? As noted above, for Jung, the purpose of life is the creation of consciousness (Edinger, p. 17). Furthermore, as Jung has written the archetype comes

with two poles, the spiritual pole that apprehends or “takes hold of” through awareness, and the dynamic pole which inherently seeks effective realisation.

The experience of the Self, the principle archetype and organising centre of being, accordingly, comes with both a drive for realisation and intelligence or consciousness. Life as a creation of consciousness, therefore, depends upon the actualisation of the Self over space and time, or “an incarnation of God” (Jung, as reported in Jaffé, p. 80). Not only does consciousness increase but, in the process, the “psyche as a whole” is afforded “the optimum degree of life and development” (Jung, as reported in Hoeller, 1982, p. 202).

Jung (1965) wrote that “man’s task ... is to become conscious of contents that press upward from the unconscious ... his destiny ... to create more and more consciousness,” (p. 326). In this view, the goal of therapy is to maximise consciousness. What, then, does Jung mean by consciousness and what are the implications of his assertion? He defined consciousness as “the function or activity which maintains the relation of psychic contents to the ego” (Jung, as reported in Edinger, 1984, p. 36). The goal of maximising consciousness suggests that the process of individuation involves more and more psychic contents becoming related to the ego and ego awareness, as indicated above, more of the opposites.

Ultimately, the Self propels all psychic contents toward consciousness. All psychic contents, that is to say, are potentially conscious aspects of the Self. Moreover there

is, in the process, a mystery whereby the ego itself, along with all the functions of consciousness -- thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition, is transformed. By that I mean that the functions of consciousness become more refined and the ego gains access to a greater realm of phenomena, both inner and outer.

The difficulty in precisely defining the nature of consciousness rests on the fact that, as Sir William Hamilton (as reported in Edinger, p. 35) observes, consciousness itself "lies at the root of all knowledge." An examination of the etymology of the word, however, opens up intuitive insights into its meaning. The word conscious is derived from the Latin *conscire*, that is from *con* or *cum*, meaning "with" or "together" and *scire* meaning "to know" or "to see" (Edinger, 1984, p. 36). The root meaning of consciousness is, therefore, "knowing with" or with "seeing" an "other." According to this line of reasoning consciousness is experientially, at least intuitively, a knowing with an "other." Indeed, it is not unusual to gain insight and increase awareness through relationship and dialogue. Therapy, at least in part, works that way.

However, ultimately, the "other" referred to here is the Self. According to Edinger (1984, p. 36, 37) not only does the ego know an inner and outer "other," but it too is the object of knowing, "with the function of the knowing subject residing in the other" (p. 41), that is in the Self. Jung (1965, p. 212, 323, 334, 323f) himself reported at least two dreams where he, that is to say his dream ego, experienced being the known object. Consciousness, therefore, seems to be experientially, not only ego related, but one that directly involves the Self, whether one is aware of it as Jung was, or not. A genuine

increase in consciousness is presumably based on an active fiat from the Self and involves an experience of the Self. In extraordinary circumstances, as in the case of Jung, one is aware of being both “subject and object, the knower and the known” (Edinger, 1989, p. 53), indeed, the sacrificer and the sacrificed.

Consciousness is a “knowing with.” “Knowing” requires discernment and understanding and is based on the power of Logos. “Withness” suggests connectedness or relatedness, the function of Eros. Consciousness or “knowing with” is, therefore, a union of Logos and Eros, where ultimately it is a question of relatedness of the ego to the Self. This corresponds to the fact that spiritual knowledge or *gnosis* is “knowledge of the heart.” Interestingly enough, the word “meaning” is itself cognate with mind and the German, *minne*, or love (Weekley, vol. 2, p. 911).

A meaningful life is a life of meaning based on increasing consciousness. It is one dynamically engaged with the Self, with both Eros and Logos, involving an active search for “knowledge of the heart.” Such a life, according to Jung, is the answer to the general neurosis of our day, of a life without meaning. It is one where experiences of synchronicity or meaningful coincidence remind one of the general acausal orderedness of a greater life with which one can consciously participate. It is one where work and relational goals are transcended, becoming increasingly reflective of an inner need for more consciousness and, potentially, a vocation or meaningful expression of being. Psyche, accordingly, “unfolds with an optimum degree of life and development” (Jung, as reported in Hoeller, 1982, p. 202).

### Meaning in Individual Lives

For a life to be meaningful, then, it is not only a question of more and more consciousness *per se*, but of more consciousness-force, or consciousness that comes with the effective power of realisation. In order to appreciate how this applies in practice, I will now illustrate with some examples. A life of meaning is a life-in-process, and what is meaningful at one level, at the next is not. These examples need to be seen in this light.

Jung (as reported in Jaffé, 1989) himself lived a life that culminated in what he called a "Visio Dei", a vision of God, where "meaning freed itself from the material and the Being it had become and was able to completely unfold, blossom" (p 119). His life expressed the highest order of meaning, not only for himself but also, in my estimation, for Western civilisation and culture. For most of us, such an order of meaning is well beyond our capacity and destiny. Still, life can be meaningful, I suggest, for each of us at our own level of readiness and receptivity to Grace. The writings of Jung and some of his disciples provide guidance and help to understand the process.

My first example is that of a twenty-six year old woman, whose presenting problems were panic attacks and fear of her husband from whom she is separated. She is the mother of two young children and did not complete secondary school [high school]. She has been seeing me for about a year and a half now and her attacks have almost completely subsided. In addition, she has returned to secondary school, which will be

soon completed, at which time she is planning to take a year's professional training. The young woman has an active dream life and, after some initial resistance, now appreciates how it relates to her daily life. Seeing how her inner and outer lives interact encourages her to take what can be described as ethical decisions, based on her observations and our discussions. In her mind, her life is taking on more meaning as she develops herself intellectually and professionally. There are still relationship problems, although she is now getting divorced from her estranged husband and is able to appreciate that life is carrying her forward in a meaningful way to qualitatively different experiences in relationship as well.

The second example is that of a thirty year old man whose presenting problem was that at time he had disturbing masochistic sexual fantasies that he felt compelled to act out. After about six months of therapy, he has come to the point where he feels that he has an ethical choice and that he is generally able to opt for not acting out. In addition, there has been reconciliation with his father, and the father principle. He now realises that he doesn't have to compete directly against him -- his father is a university professor and a brilliant mathematician -- but that he can return to the field he loves, also mathematics, and excel in his own way. He accepts the fact that he may have less mathematical genius but perhaps he has greater teaching skills.

In a recent dream, there is evidence that a new governing centre is being built in his psyche. According to the dream, it is no longer situated in a big city, but in a more natural environment. A central, solid administrative building is being constructed with

statues of lions at the entrance. In other words, a new organising centre is being constructed that is close to the natural self and related to the heart, the symbolic relevance of the lion. The significance of the fifth sign, Leo in Astrology is suggestive of its meaning. It is noteworthy that the lion is the king of the jungle. The way of the lion with his pride of lionesses, which do the hunting, is also indicative of the workings of the unfettered heart. As witness and king, the lion is master of the pride, yet allows the lionesses freedom to fulfil their nature [as huntresses]. Likewise, the inner witness does not repress the heart's impulses but allows them appropriate expression. Overall, then, this young man is finding meaning at this point in his life inasmuch as he becomes conscious of and realises intimations from the heart and its discernment in life.

The third example is that of a fifty-seven year old highly educated man, who is married with several children. He had been actively engaged in a spiritual life since he was a young man. He had no presenting problem as such, but decided to undertake Jungian therapy after having a dream where his future therapist told him that Jung wanted him to follow a path that leads him to the top of the hill. Such a journey is similar to that made by Dante through purgatory, where Virgil guided him to the top of the hill of being, at which point his beloved Beatrice took over as *psychopompos*. This suggests that his psychological task was to go through a kind a spiritual cleansing under Jung's guidance and that the therapist can act as a kind of mediator.

The man underwent Jungian analysis for about a year and that is, indeed, what happened. As can be expected, the therapeutic alliance was exceptionally high. Moreover, his sense of meaning in life was enhanced in several ways. For one thing, he rediscovered his creative anima and his creativity through writing, which he had abandoned many years ago. For another, he was able to turn his interest in gambling and blind risk taking, because of which he had lost a considerable amount of money, into a study of synchronicity or meaningful coincidence. Although his approach lacked validity, going through the exercise helped him to detach from his self-destructive impulses.

Finally his spiritual life deepened as it is gradually including more of his inferior function and the feminine Self. In one dream, for instance, he saw an old aeroplane, "the Grummond Goose," exclaiming "I love that plane; it's such an ugly thing!" As it flew from its overhead position, he began to realise that, in its place overhead, he was looking at a round silver-white UFO. His acceptance and love for the ugly, that is to say, lead to the feminine Self, indicated by the round shape and silver-white colour.

A silver-white round object is suggestive of the moon, a symbol par excellence of the Self. The silver-white colour reflects all colours, while the moon reflects the light of the sun. The feminine Self, symbolised here, therefore, involves a state of openness and receptivity, important for both spiritual realisation and creative expression.

My last example is that of a fifty-two year old man, who has been directly influenced by Jung for many years. He actively studies his dreams and practices a form of active imagination on a regular basis. Following Jung, by active imagination I mean an active dialogue between the ego and the unconscious, which includes ethical deliberation and decision. The man in question generally uses art in this way.

This process has allowed him to observe how both his personal and professional lives relate meaningfully to the condition of his psyche, although it has ultimately required him to considerably modify his conscious ideals. In fact, over the years, his life has been directed away from a conventional path onto a deeper river of personal destiny. Not only does it include a rich artistic creativity, but all his functions of consciousness, thinking, intuition, sensation and feeling, have been increasingly refined and deepened. Moreover, his new professional life as a therapist is a more positive and satisfying expression of being than what he did previously. The reason for these transformations in his life, he feels certain, is because of his encounter with the unconscious and the influence of the Self in his life.

Although one's life may be deeply meaningful, it does not mean that there is no suffering, or times when life seems random and senseless. Indeed, a life that in the overall is meaningful is often also one which includes a considerable amount of suffering. There may be times of hopelessness, despair, loneliness and even alienation. But even then, there is one thing that sustains all, and that is the faith from both intuitive understanding and experience that life will once again make sense, that

darkness will give way to light and that meaninglessness will prove to be contained in a greater meaning.

In all four examples, the individuals feel a certain sense of meaning in their lives, some more, some less. To some extent, the level of subjectively felt-meaning depends on age and the amount of active involvement and experience in the individuation process, to some extent destiny and to another the experience of Grace. Each of the people referred to above is, relatively speaking, leading a meaningful life. Each, to some degree, has or is [potentially] developing both a religious and an ethical attitude to life. Moreover, although the Self per se is more explicitly a consciously realised experiential phenomenon in the case of the two older men, it is helpful, at least conceptually, to appreciate that the Self is also directing the lives of the other two younger people. In my opinion an experienced and sympathetic Jungian depth therapist can see alluded to in dreams and dream patterns.

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I have discussed the nature of a meaningful life from the point of view of Jungian depth Psychology. Firstly, it involves being related to the Self that is the Godhead and integrating into consciousness experiences of the opposites. Secondly, it involves the creation of more and more consciousness, which involves both Eros and Logos, relatedness and spiritual discernment. I then gave examples of how life has taken on meaning for four different people, in addition to Jung himself. In all cases the

individuals concerned have something of a genuine religious and ethical attitude to life, which is of fundamental importance to leading a meaningful existence.

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