

The End of Ending: A Response to Wolfgang Giegerich

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The Meaning of "Meaning"

"The End of Meaning and the Birth of Man" by Wolfgang Giegerich is a tour de force, in the best sense of that phrase, and like other "tours" it covers a terrain that, from my point of view, is crucially important for psyche to visit, partly because it is where psyche is already. In fact, the terrain of Giegerich's essay is an intellectual landscape that I, in my own way and somewhat differently from Giegerich, have revisited more than once. Though we differ about the concept of postmodernism and about the nature of the nonperceptual and nonsensate "image" (matters that are quibbles and that do not detract from our deeper agreement), we concur completely on the fundamental matter that, as Giegerich puts it, "the feeling that there should be a higher meaning of life and that it is missing is the illness."

In *The Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot (1952) wrote that "we had the experience but missed the meaning" (p. 133). It may equally be the case that we have too many "meanings" which have obscured experience, like the too many leaves that cover the rock, the gray particular of quotidian being, in the poem by Wallace Stevens (1975, p. 526). Jean Baudrillard, for one, has made this point. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1994) writes: "He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning. . . . There is no therapy of meaning or therapy through meaning. . . . There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal" (pp. 161, 164). Baudrillard here is opposing the "illness" of which Giegerich speaks and which the latter calls the "meaning market" or the "meaning industry."

I also have in the past attempted to address this disease, i.e., that we need meaning. This was the theme of my final Eranos lecture in 1988 ("Prometheus, St. Peter, and the Rock: Identity and Difference in Modern Literature"), and I spoke to the same issue later in the journal *Spring 1989* ("The 'Stone' Which Is Not a Stone: C. G. Jung and the Post-Modern Meaning of 'Meaning'"), as well as in my essay in the book by Daniel Noel *Paths to the Power of Myth* ("The Flight of the Wild Gander: The Postmodern Meaning of 'Meaning'"). The same theme is also the focus of my late essays on Joseph Campbell's insistence on the "end of myth" ("The Fire is in the Mind" and "Comparativism in a World of Difference: The Legacy of Joseph Campbell to the Postmodern History of Religions"). Already in 1975 and 1977 at the Eranos Conferences, I had tracked the ending of the notion

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of “happy ending” and the ending of the notion of “ending” itself (“Images of Happy Ending” and “Imaginations No End”), and my various essays on the distinction between the genres of myth and folktale (Miller, 1976, 1979, 1998), to which Giegerich alludes, were focused mainly on the mythic deconstruction of fairy tale notions of plot and “ending.” One of my early articles, “Homo Religiosus and the Death of God” (1966), concerns the shift in paradigm that brings about an end of mythic structures from agricultural and industrial sensibilities, a point not unlike Giegerich’s when he speaks of a “return to hunters and gatherers.”

I mention this not in order to imply that the argument of Giegerich’s essay has already been articulated. By no means. I only mention my own involvement with the thematic of the “end of meaning” in order to affirm at the outset a fundamental agreement with the thrust of what Giegerich is doing. My earlier attempts at something similar do not really anticipate the present one, because, by comparison with Giegerich’s essay, they seem not sufficiently radical and Giegerich could easily argue that they do not follow through on their own promise or do not manage to be consistent with their own insight and impulse. As Giegerich writes: “Frequently the ideas of the death of God and of the loss of meaning are not carried to their logical conclusion.” Indeed, it is not a simple matter to make the point about the end of meaning meaningfully without reinscribing the problem that one is attempting to solve. Giegerich at the outset points out the difficulty in the case of Jung, when Jung did not follow through on his sensibility about the end of meaning. Other examples could easily be given: Joseph Campbell (2002) reinscribing mythic consciousness against his own argument in the 1957 Eranos essay “The Symbol without Meaning”; or Martin Heidegger (1973) reinscribing a metaphysics of presence in poetic consciousness after announcing the end of metaphysics after Hegel; or Jacques Derrida (1987) reinscribing a philosophical “negative theology” of deconstruction after announcing an end to all transcendental signifiers. In spite of the awkwardness, however, the task is important. Others besides Giegerich have sensed this.

In an impressive work, *The Meaning of Meaning*, written not too long after the end of World War I, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923) probed some of the philosophical dimensions of problematizing so-called “meaning.” Several years after the work by Ogden and Richards, similar issues concerning shifting paradigms of “meaning” were raised by Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) now well-known book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, though Kuhn did not raise the possibility that the paradigm of “shifting paradigms” may have itself shifted so as to indicate an end to paradigmatic thinking about “meaning.” In the Jungian world, Ronald Schenk (2001) has addressed the question of “myths of meaning” in the opening chapter of his book *The Sunken Quest, the Wasted Fisher, the Pregnant Fish: Postmodern Reflections of Depth Psychology*, as has Paul Kugler (1990), in numerous essays on what Giegerich notes as the linguistic turn from symbolic to semiotic in critical theory, and as has Stanton Marlan, in his new book, *The Black Sun* (in press). I have already mentioned Campbell, Heidegger, and Derrida, and many modern and postmodern dramatists and poets could be added to this paragraph’s list. There is, for example, Archibald MacLeish’s (1959) “Ars Poetica”:

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights about the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

The reason—as least the psychological reason—for this bracketing of questions of meaning is put plainly by Giegerich in his first section on “the self-contradiction inherent in the search for meaning”: namely, that psychologically “the search for meaning is the opposite of itself.” This should have been obvious after Jung insisted early in his writing on the enantiodromic nature of the logic of the psyche or after his late insistence on the synchronistic (as opposed to diachronic) nature of the logic of the psyche. As Jung (1970) explained:

I use the term enantiodromia for the emergence of the unconscious opposite in the course of time. This characteristic phenomenon practically always occurs when an extreme, or one-sided tendency dominates conscious life; in time an equally powerful counterposition is built up, which first inhibits the conscious performance and subsequently breaks through conscious control. (par. 709)

If the nature and structure of the self is constituted as a *complexio oppositorum*, always double—fundamentally ambivalent, as Freud said; *eros* and *thanatos*—then, as Jung (1985) put it elsewhere, “Like the alchemical end-product, which always betrays its essential duality, the united personality will never quite lose the painful sense of innate discord.” (par. 400). If the conscious aspect of the self (ego) searches for and believes that it has discovered a “meaning,” it will not be long before a surprise may be in store from another side of the self. Jung (1971) wrote: “Life is crazy and meaningful at once. . . . There is then little sense and little nonsense either. When you come to think about it, nothing has any meaning” (par. 65).

The dialectical nature of the self (*anima* and *animus*, conscious and unconscious) reveals that either the quest for so-called “meaning” or the sense that a life is “meaningless” is a work in the domain or economy of the ego and does not belong to the logic of the total psyche. In the synchronicity of the psyche, “meaning” is always already accompanied (not always consciously) by “meaninglessness,” and vice versa. What is “meaningful” to the self in, say, a dream may be experienced as a disturbance of “meaning” to the ego. As Jung (1963) said late in life: “The experience of the self is always a defeat for the ego” (par. 778). So it is as Giegerich says in the present essay, and as he has said before in his book *The Soul’s Logical Life*: “Nothing is changed if only the individual [i.e., ego’s meaning] is changed and not also and even predominantly the logic of being-in-the-world at large.” The quest for meaning belongs to ego’s desires, to ego-ology and not to psych-ology, to humanistic and not to depth psychology. On the other hand, it is *psyche’s* logic that makes for the awkwardness concerning the quest for meaning or, for that matter, concerning an announcement of the end of meaning that I alluded to earlier. I turn to that now.

The End of “Ending”

The awkwardness is not constituted by a logical contradiction in attempting to write about the “end of meaning” meaningfully. This is only an apparent contradiction, which Giegerich addresses succinctly in footnote 13 of the present essay when he writes: “To avoid misunderstandings I want to point out that ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘loss or end of meaning’ refers only to meaning in the material sense (‘meaning as in: the meaning [*Sinn*] and worth of life, mythic or metaphysical meaning). ‘Meaning’ in the formal sense (‘the meaning [*Bedeutung*] of such and such a word, sentence, text,’ etc.) remains of course unaffected.” The awkwardness that I should like to address is formal, and it has to do with the frequent occurrence of the notion of “history,” as in the following phrases from Giegerich’s text:

- “each historical locus”
- “radical change in man’s being-in-the-world”
- “archaic stage”
- “‘*illud tempus*’”
- “end of in-ness”
- “historical development”
- “*historical* presences”
- “the gift of the sense of history”
- “primitive societies”

- “the history of the soul at large”
- “the historical locus”
- “the given historical moment”
- “late historical result”

Giegerich has in my opinion argued forcefully in *The Soul's Logical Life* and in *Animus-psychologie* that the images and ideas belonging to myth, religion, and metaphysics require sublation in psychological thought (Hegel's word for this is *Aufgehoben*). But I wonder if there may not be an unconscious image and idea lurking still in Giegerich's historical logic, a diachronic and nondialectical spatial image of history as a series of now-points moving in a linear and developmental manner.

In a much earlier essay—“Ontogeny=Phylogeny? A Fundamental Critique of Erich Neumann's Analytical Psychology”—Giegerich (1975) had argued precisely against this evolutionism or developmentalism. The following paragraphs will give the gist of his reasoning:

Matriarchal and patriarchal consciousness cannot be shown to ensue in history with the regularity of a law. . . . In a similar way one could produce examples of additional deviation from the postulated sequence from other ages of cultural history. (Giegerich, 1975, p. 113)

Such deliberations force us to the conclusion that the application of the idea of development to cultural history is unfruitful; it does not work. There are changes in history, but there is no evolution. This is a conclusion also arrived at by most historians of religion after the attempt of decades or more to force some evolutionary pattern onto history, such as the sequence of belief in souls, in spirits and in gods (Tylor) or of prereligion, polydemonism, polytheism, monotheism (R. Otto). . . . The contributions of anthropology to the topic of cultural development are more momentous by far than the question of the evolution of the forms of religion. (p. 114)

By following him [Neumann], that is to say by taking his system, his phases and stages literally instead of symbolically, we base psychology on an unfitting ontology within which a truly archetypal psychology cannot thrive, while empirical reality is at the same time deprived of its concreteness; we at bottom reaffirm—despite our anti-positivistic concern with the symbolical and transpersonal—the Darwinian prejudice according to which we like to ascribe unconsciousness to the primitive and a highly developed consciousness to ourselves; and above all, we fall into the Hero/Great Mother-myth and thus become unpsychological. (p. 128)

I realize that a thinker's thinking can, and even should, change, and perhaps Giegerich's views have shifted. But I believe that there is something powerfully correct about the earlier article, and I wonder how its logic impacts upon the logic of the present essay.

To be sure, one ought not be unrealistic about historical change culturally and in formal thought. Some logics are in descriptive fact more complex than others. Tic-tac-toe is less complex than three-dimensional tic-tac-toe, and both are less

complex than chess, just as chess is less complex than three-dimensional chess. But it may be important to speak of this difference in degree of complexity in a manner that does not at the same time imply that tic-tac-toe is inferior intellectually and/or morally to chess, or that chess is superior intellectually and/or morally to tic-tac-toe. Nor is there a causal development from tic-tac-toe to chess. They are simply different.

Giegerich has in the present essay argued that human embeddedness in nature (and in myth, religion, and metaphysics) "is over." Although many persons live as if this were not the case, I concur with this claim as a description of fact and of cultural and historical change. But I also think that one can argue compellingly that human embeddedness in history is also "over." My viewpoint here is informed by a particular theological argument.

The argument is that, with the rise of the radical monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there occurred in human signification a displacement of so-called "meaning" from the aegis of nature to that of history. The divine was not experienced in trees and mountains and rivers (*anima mundi*), but in the history of a people (Israel), or in a historical event (the incarnation of Christ or the revelation of the Book to Mohammed). God was "high and lifted up" above nature, wholly transcendent and other, though it was believed that He acted in and through history. To view the divine in nature was thought to be idolatry, a category mistake, an abrogation of what Kierkegaard called "the infinite qualitative distinction" between nature and the supernatural. Giegerich has noted well this "leap in being" in his Eranos essay on "Das Begräbnis der Seele in die technische Zivilisation." But according to some (e.g., Gabriel Vahanian, *Dieu et l'utopie*, and Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy* and *On Time and Being*), this is not the end of the story. The human is embedded neither in nature nor in history. (Vahanian displaces historical thinking with eschatological thinking in order to go beyond the nature/history binarism, and Heidegger rethinks so-called "history" in relation to time rather than space in his critique of Hegel.)

In mentioning this sublation of the image and idea of history lurking in a historical consciousness, I am not thinking of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) work *The End of History and the Last Man*, nor of William Irwin Thompson's (1971) book *At the Edge of History*, whose last chapter, "Revisioning History," is nonetheless relevant. I am thinking more of Stuart Sim's (1999) work against Fukuyama, *Derrida and the End of History*, which raises the possibility of the ending of "endist" thinking. But especially pertinent is the work of the theologian of culture, Mark C. Taylor.

In Taylor's (1984) book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, the author comments theologially and philosophically on the same cultural terrain surveyed by Giegerich's psychology: namely, what Taylor refers to as the "death of God," the "disappearance of the self," and the "closure of the book." But Taylor adds a fourth chapter to this litany, which he calls the "end of history." Historical consciousness, Taylor argues, with its tendency toward emplotment along the narrative line of beginning-middle-end, functions to colonize meaning (including the "end" of meaning) so as to be an "intricate evasion" of the "primordially of lack." People kill time by telling stories, Taylor quips, i.e., by making or constructing history.

Giegerich's argument may not be vulnerable to this argument. The author in fact acknowledges the difficulty. Giegerich writes:

Much the same as what has been said about the death of God idea applies to the idea of the loss of meaning. If we really listened to what it says, we would understand from it that meaning is simply no topic anymore. As a topic or notion it is dead and gone. We cannot even speak of its loss, because then we would secretly resurrect and hold on to it as a logical *category* that merely today happens to be empirically empty. This vacuum would then necessarily create a craving, an obsession with the search for meaning. But the vacuum is only the result of the fact of the loss' having been reductively held down in the status of a semantic event and thus something particular. The vacuum, and with it the addiction, immediately disappear if the 'loss,' initially experienced as semantic, is allowed to infect and permeate the syntax of consciousness as such.

This paragraph allows for the possibility of congruence between Giegerich's 1975 essay and his present one. It points not to material history but to formal thinking about any nature or history. It signals logical transformation. It implies the end of "endism," a sublation not only of nature but also of history. (Compare Heidegger's revision of Hegel's notion of thinking "history" in *Identity and Difference* as *der Schritt zurück* rather than *die Aufhebung*.)

However, it is Giegerich's 1985 Eranos lecture—"Die Alchimie der Geschichte"—that is more important to the issue that I am raising than is the 1975 essay on Neumann's developmentalism. This work represents, in my view, Giegerich's own sublation of the "history" about which he speaks in the present essay. Here Giegerich entertains the critique of historical reason by Wilhelm Dilthey. He tropes both "soul" and "history" with the radical metaphors of "the black box" and Kafka's tale of "The Penal Colony." In the former, the ultimate nothingness of "the black box" (the logic of the psyche) is affirmed. In the latter, the penal apparatus inscribes the sentence of guilt with a series of needles cutting deeper and deeper into the body of the imprisoned one. Giegerich's own rethinking of the "groundlessness of the historical" (*die Bodenlosigkeit der Vergangenheit*), the "meaning of history" (*der Sinn der Geschichte*), and the "tear of history" (*der Bruch der Geschichte*) is amplified in an especially differentiated manner that is especially made possible by the distinction in the German language between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. It is the latter that Giegerich invokes, thereby separating his argument from the "redemption of history (*Historie*)" promised in the nineteenth-century historiography of Leopold Von Ranke, or, more recently, in that of the French Annal school and the American New Historicism.

So, I raise the issue of the sublation of "history," not because it calls into question the argument or the importance of the argument of Giegerich's essay, but because I believe that the essay's diction and rhetoric could be (mis)read semantically rather than logically, materially rather than formally, "historically" (as *Historie*) rather than psychologically (as *Geschichte*). More is at stake in Giegerich's argument than semantic quibbles about the way things actually were or how they now really are. Psychology, i.e., consciousness, is at stake. This is why I believe that it is important to read this present work in 2004 in the context of the earlier works from 1975 and 1985. By so doing, the soul of psyche's anima can be touched

without sacrificing the spirit of psyche's animus, a syzygy born in the human mind and body.

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