

The Ego-Psychological Fallacy: A Note on “the birth of the meaning out of a symbol”

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In his “The Mystical Symbol: Some Comments on Ankori, Giegerich, Scholem, and Jung” in this journal (*Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2005, pp. 25–29), Sanford Drob argues—seconded by Micha Ankori in his “Rejoinder . . .” in the same issue (p. 31)—that “both Scholem’s understanding of the symbol and the kabbalists’ notion of infinite interpretability pose significant challenges to Giegerich’s declaration of ‘the end of meaning.’” This is in no way the case. He can only think so because he does not see my argument; what he sees and criticizes is a view that he unwittingly substitutes for my view. The thesis in my “End of Meaning” article is by no means threatened by the ideas that “the symbol is *sui generis*” and that it is open to “an indefinite, if not infinite array of interpretations.” I have no problem with these ideas.¹ Jung also becomes a victim of the same misconstrual. It makes Drob see an opposition or conflict between certain statements of Jung’s where in fact there is no conflict, because the statements referred to are fully compatible. Thus, after quoting Jung’s idea from *Psychological Types* about the symbol that “once its meaning has been born out of it ... it is *dead*, i.e., it possesses only an historical significance,” Drob states, “Jung, however, was not consistent in this view. For example, he later stated that ‘no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery.’” Jung’s two statements are compatible because they are answers to two different questions and for this reason cannot get into each other’s hair. Drob seems to confound these two distinct issues.

What are the two questions? As to the first I start out with Drob’s sentence “While it is true that some symbols, for whatever reason, cease to stimulate interpretive possibilities, and thus ‘die’ ...” and note that Drob does not totally dispute the idea of the death of symbols, but that he has no explanation to offer for why and how the death of symbols is possible and that he does not find this question worthy of consideration. How can it be that a symbol that enthralled people for centuries all of a sudden loses its power over their psyche? It is precisely this question that Jung answers with his theory, in *Psychological Types*, of the *birth* of the symbol’s meaning out of it, in contrast to the symbol still *pregnant* with meaning. This is a question that has to do with the history and phenomenology of the soul’s life in empirical reality.

When Jung, by contrast, says that “no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery,” he is concerned with a totally different question, namely, that of what a symbol *is* (when and as long as it is alive), a question about its particularly dignity, its special nature and

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essence, in contrast above all to “sign” and “allegory.” This is a logical question, a question of definition. Anyone can see that this view of the (it is safe to add: *infinite*)² richness and expressiveness of mythic imagery can with ease be inserted into the other statement, where it would then elucidate the “symbol still pregnant with meaning.” The theory of the death and merely historical significance of a symbol precisely presupposes this (allegedly late and “not consistent”) view of the symbol’s richness. The symbol can only lose its richness and expressiveness if it possessed it before.

I said anyone can see it. But why then did Drob not see it? The reason, it seems to me, is his surreptitious replacement of Jung’s (and my) view of the birth of the meaning out of the symbol by another, absolutely incompatible view, which comes out most clearly in his phrase “the possibility or even the *necessity* of providing them [the symbols] with rational translations and interpretations.” Drob asserts that “for Giegerich, with the birth of meaning out of the symbol, the symbol is finally understood,” which is in a way backed up by formulations in my essay (in which I tried to *interpret Jung’s* comments rather than speaking on my own), but is nevertheless a fundamental misrepresentation of my argument, since “understood” for him refers to *our* understanding, our interpretations, whereas in the context of the pregnancy-birth idea it means that it is the meaning itself that revealed its secret, that *it* has opened up like a blossom. Not, however, ‘out there’ as something to be watched, but by unwittingly having imparted itself to consciousness, by objectively having come home to and having revolutionized the logical form of consciousness. Therefore the symbol is not finally understood (by us, in the personalistic sense), but its meaning has been born out of it! A significant difference that deserves a few comments.

I worked with Jung’s metaphor of *pregnancy* and *birth*. Drob instead works with the concepts of *interpretation* and *translation*. The difference between these two stances is crucial. What is the difference, indeed, opposition between them? We have to discern several aspects.

(1) The pregnancy-birth opposition is a metaphor from natural conditions or events. The ideas of “interpretation” or “translation,” by contrast, are taken in their literal sense and can be taken in this way because from the outset they already refer to *mental* events. They involve the subject-object hiatus. The symbol is the object; the interpretation given is an event in the subject, in the mind of the ego-personality. This split plays no role in the pregnancy-birth imagery. The metaphoric birth of the meaning that the symbol was pregnant with is the (in a certain sense of the word) natural, spontaneous self-movement of the meaning (above I used the image of a bud opening up into a blossom). The event that happens here takes place solely on the side of the “object.” The subject with his ideas and sentences does not enter in. We do have to stick to the image. A born baby is of course nothing like a human “interpretation” of what one surmises was hidden in the mother’s belly. No, it is itself the hidden embryo that now, however, has come forth from out of its hiddenness.

(2) With pregnancy and birth we are talking about a status or condition change of one and the same entity, substance, or matter. “Birth” is the metaphoric description of a transition that can be observed, much like an alchemist observed the change of the matter in his retort, e.g., from blackness to whiteness.

The ideas of a translation and interpretation, by contrast, operate with a duality, with two separate entities. Whereas the embryo is gone (“death” of the symbol) once the baby has been born, precisely because it turned into and lives on in the born baby, a translation is a new, additional product that leaves intact behind it the original that it is the translation of. Similarly, an interpretation is a new reality in addition to that which has been interpreted. Now we have two things, the original “text” and its interpretation/translation, both divided by an ontological gap.

(3) The unborn-born pair of concepts distinguishes between *statuses* or *conditions* of one matter. In the case of the interpretation-thesis, this distinction is replaced by another one, the “real” (text as fact) vs. “ideal” (interpretation as view, opinion) opposition, in other words, an opposition between two ontological realms. Because the difference is ontological, there cannot be a transition from the one to the other. They stand vis-à-vis, divided by a fundamental hiatus.

(4) Drob speaks of *providing* symbols with rational translations and interpretations. This wording is, I admit, completely appropriate for his “interpretation” thesis. *We* provide the already existing symbol with something; the interpretation has its origin in us, in the subjective mind; it is produced by us (on our own responsibility). It is a kind of thesis, hypothesis that we supply to or ‘put under’ (*hypo-*) the symbol. This shows that with his “interpretation” thesis about the “birth of the meaning” Drob clearly views this idea from an ego standpoint. “Meaning” (in this context), since it is viewed in this way, immediately evokes the conception of our assigning our explanations, opinions to the symbol. It is all our activity, our thinking. *We* try to make sense of a symbol, we try to figure it out.

The *birth* of meaning idea, understood in its own terms, is completely different. Here we are talking of an event that is the previously unborn meaning’s own doing, its further development, its coming to light. “Meaning” now has absolutely nothing to do with interpretations provided by the subjective mind. The birth image indicates that this theory is from the standpoint of “objective psychology.” What *we* think or feel about a symbol, what interpretations or translations we *provide* for it, all this ego-stuff is irrelevant for an objective psychology. “Meaning” here is a *reality* in its own right. It is something (I might even be tempted to say: “substantially”) real, even though of course psychologically, not physically, real (not a thing of nature, but a mental, intellectual real, a *soul* real, a matter in the psycho-alchemical sense), much like in our metaphor the baby that is born is something real and not a subjective opinion or explanation about the mother (or the embryo). Jung was speaking about the symbol’s *own* meaning, the meaning *as which* it exists. How this real, existing meaning should be understood and interpreted by us is an entirely different question which, to be sure, is also interesting, but does not enter at all into the question answered by Jung in his “birth of the meaning out of a symbol” theory nor into the argument of my “End of Meaning” paper.

I find it deplorable and shocking that serious Jung-scholars half a century and more after Jung’s inauguration of an objective psychology are not capable of getting this crucial point—rendering, as it were, the whole effort of the later, alchemical Jung futile. It is a psychologically fatal mistake to confuse the psychological concept of (the symbol’s) “meaning” with “meaning” in the sense of “rational translations and interpretations” of the symbol, a relapse into personalistic or

ego-psychology. One can only exclaim with Jung, "*You see, it is always the same matter: the complete misunderstanding of the psychological argument*" (*Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 572, to Robert C. Smith, 29 June 1960, italics in the original).³

Maybe Drob feels that by showing himself willing to "acknowledge that such interpretations represent what might be called a maturing or development . . . of human consciousness" he obliges my view of things a bit. But not so. I do not at all subscribe to this statement. For me, the "rational, discursive interpretations" are ego-stuff and have no significance for the maturing or development of human consciousness and are uninteresting for an "objective psychology." Psychology is not about people and what *they* think or feel. It is about "the soul" (and what it thinks or feels), about the objective psyche, about human consciousness. Of course, like all schooling, academic training, private reading, and thinking those interpretations can be important for people's personal development, for the maturing and expansion of the subjective mind. But as to the history of "human consciousness" they are neither here nor there.

We could recall here Jung's oft-mentioned idea, taken over from Leopold Ziegler, of the "metamorphosis of the gods." For example, Jung wrote that (in antiquity) "[m]any of the earlier gods developed from 'persons' into personified ideas, and finally into abstract ideas" (*CW 13*, para. 49). When this had happened, i.e., when that which had formerly been gods, or more precisely: when the logical form of "god" for the respective contents had become psychologically obsolete, all of a sudden all sorts of rational interpretations and explanations of the former gods and of myths sprang up, *vide* only those by Euhemeros. But what we have to realize is that those interpretations were precisely not the form in which the birth of the meaning out of the god symbols took place. Rather, they were free-floating, inconsequential ways in which a now disconnected ego-consciousness tried to make sense of the now dead and psychologically alien "symbols" that, true, persisted, but persisted only as erratic, no longer understood elements in historical memory.

All the intellectual speculation and theorizing about the gods is psychologically, in terms of the history of the soul, irrelevant, merely people's opinions, not psychic realities. They are semantic contents of subjective consciousness and as such make use of and thus confirm the prevailing objective constitution of consciousness, much like the furniture and pictures brought into a house have no bearing one way or another on the structure of the house itself. The soul or consciousness is the house, the ego or ego-consciousness is the tenant who furnishes his (private) rooms in the house with his views and interpretations according to his personal likes and needs. The only psychological (in contrast to private, personal, ego) relevance the intellectual speculations and interpretations have is that, as *symptoms* of the (psychological) obsolescence of that which they are about, they display this obsolescence. Whenever the need to explain and interpret is felt, we know that that which is to be interpreted has lost its significance for the soul and has now become prey to the cut-off ego practicing its external reflection and theorizing upon it as upon the relics of the particular contents of a bygone form of consciousness.

Our result so far is that rational interpretations per se do not represent a maturing or development of human consciousness. But the converse is that it would also be wrong to assume that a real development of consciousness goes along with discursive interpretations and a higher subjective understanding. I

already rejected the idea that “with the birth of meaning out of the symbol, the symbol is finally understood” (in the ego sense of understood). The birth of the meaning does not result in interpretations, i.e., in semantic contents. One does not know more or better. One (as individual conscious mind, ego consciousness) is not more conscious, more aware. Rather, the birth of the meaning results in an initiation of consciousness, i.e., in a revolutionizing of the form or logical status of consciousness, so that consciousness becomes an “esoteric” one in Jung’s special sense, one that has integrated the meaning of the symbol into its logical form, but ipso facto stands ignorant in front of the now empty shells (the now “conventional signs”—Jung) that formerly used to house that meaning and thus used to be living symbols, viewing them from outside, in external reflection. If it does not simply dismiss them, it will probably feel the need to make sense of them on the basis of the newly acquired status of consciousness.

If the kabbalists had the theory of the “infinite interpretability” of the mystic symbols, those symbols must already have been a thing of the past for them, because living symbols need no interpretation: they *are* their meaning. The consciousness of the kabbalists must already have been an esoteric one in Jung’s sense, one that from an external, theoretical standpoint reflected *about* the meaning (here = interpretations) of so-called mystic symbols (actually: signs). An exoteric consciousness does not reflect from outside about the meaning of symbols; it is in the *immediate* spell of its presence and truth.

Thus, all that happened when a development of consciousness took place is that consciousness itself has been *objectively* transported to a new level or logical status, a status in which basically the same game as before between unconsciousness and conscious awareness, ignorance and knowing, repeats and continues, although now in new and different ways and with respect to different aspects.⁴ The development of consciousness is a form change, an “alchemical” or logical change, not a rise to a linear increase of subjective consciousness, not a quantitative expansion of personal awareness. In fact, each higher (or deeper) level of consciousness *begins* with a greater unconsciousness and primitivity than had been reached in the final developed phase of the previous status of consciousness.

To explain this by returning to the birth metaphor: with the transition from embryo to baby, the enigma of the former is not lost or diminished. Is the baby—as potential person, mind, and soul—any less enigmatic than the embryo? Of course not. The fact that the baby is now out in the open before everyone’s eyes does not resolve the mystery of its nature and being. And the moment we do not confuse the objective meaning of a symbol with our interpretation(s) of the symbol, but comprehend the meaning as a real, the idea of the meaning in the singular that is born out of a symbol does not narrow down the symbol to a single literal “meaning” (in the sense of interpretation), but is open to, more than that: insists on, the inner infinity of this one (real, existing) meaning or mystery as which a baby as well as a symbol exist. The symbol has *its* meaning in the singular, just as a tree has *its* nature in the singular, not in the plural. The choice here seems to be between numeric infinity and inner infinity. But for the psychologist qua psychologist the choice is from the outset determined by his profession.

Birth is not synonymous with rational translation or discursive interpretation; it does not mean that we have intellectually *understood* “the baby” or “the

symbol's meaning," respectively. It is the objective consciousness that has "understood." Subjectively, the born meaning is normally unconscious, not understood. It simply prevails, rules, as a (in the psychological sense) "natural" fact. As I pointed out, meaning in this psychological sense refers to a reality and not to a subjective "idea about . . ." Birth means the meaning's coming to light, its "albedo," if I may say so. And just as the whitening in alchemy only means that the matter has turned white, not that the alchemist has provided it with a rational interpretation, so the meaning's coming to light means a *psychological* status change of the meaning itself, instead of an *egoic* intellectual understanding of it. In the "End of Meaning" paper, where I was not concerned, as Jung was in his comments, with the fate of individual symbols, but with that of human consciousness at large, I used in addition to the birth metaphor that of emergence from the waters, an emergence that results in the "Aquarius" stage of consciousness. The "end of meaning" is a logical, syntactical transformation and comes about through the *integration* (and thus also sublation) of the whole former status of consciousness into the structure of consciousness itself.

The inwardization of the whole former constitution of consciousness is dialectically tantamount to the surfacing ("birth") of a new, formerly hidden, unrealized potential of consciousness as such, its rise above its former self.

The notion of integration helps us to be a little more precise than Jung was when he said, very roughly speaking, that "[m]any of the earlier gods developed from 'persons' into personified ideas, and finally into abstract ideas." The birth of the meaning out of the gods that this sentence expresses should not be understood such that each individual god changed one-to-one into a particular corresponding abstract idea. Rather, the development of consciousness meant that that stage of consciousness which is characterized by the fact that truth appeared to it in the logical *form* of gods (god images), as personal beings or powers, was *in toto* sublated and integrated into the logical constitution of consciousness, which ipso facto had become a post-imaginal, post-mythological consciousness. For this newly constituted consciousness, truth had to present itself in a new form, the form of "abstract ideas" (e.g., Platonic forms). What in the previous stage were semantic contents of consciousness (images, gods), in the new stage invisibly ruled over consciousness as *its own* inner laws or structure, its syntax, within which this new consciousness now apperceived all its semantic contents. The previous consciousness was, with respect to the gods, comparatively innocent; it had the gods outside, before itself, which means that consciousness in its own constitution was still untouched by and ignorant of them. But the later consciousness did no longer have the same innocence, inasmuch as "the gods" had come home to it and it now had them, in sublated, distilled form, within itself as its own style or syntax.

Why is, as I said above, the born meaning normally unconscious, not understood, not seen? Because its "birth" means that it is no longer a content of consciousness that we could have before our eyes, but the syntactical form in which we see or think whatever we see or think. And in total contrast to literal, biological birth, which is an empirical, consciously felt event, the birth of meaning happens behind the scenes, unwittingly. Consciousness all of a sudden simply finds itself in a totally new situation without knowing what happened or even being aware *that* something fundamental happened. This is so because the meaning, by

being born, does not appear on the stage of consciousness—on the semantic level—as an insight or interpretation, like the baby indeed appears in the real world as a visible being. Rather, it “reveals” itself by, as it were, directly infecting, undermining, and reconstituting the logical form of consciousness from behind and in an already psychological (subtle, evaporated, distilled), not in a psychic (empirical-factual, experiential, semantic) mode. It is a process in the negativity of the soul, not in the positivity of what the eyes can see.

The consciousness that construes the “birth of meaning” as our providing interpretations to symbols is one that takes its firm footing in what we call “the ego.” Maybe because it is, as such, condemned to thinking in *abstractions*, it gets (and possibly feels the need to seek) the non-abstract only outside, before itself, as its semantic contents: for example, as mythic gods and mystic symbols, as the unthinkable and ineffable. This would also explain why it wants to eternalize the gods and symbols into timeless truths, immunizing them from the soul’s historical distilling and evaporating work, and why it indulges (by no means in true mysticism, but only) in reminiscences of historical mysticisms, but at any rate in the *form of unconsciousness*—systematically ‘closing its eyes’ (*myo*, whence ‘mysticism’) to the openly displayed psychological truth of the age, an age that knows symbols and the like only as unmistakably obsolete: as advertised consumer goods on a huge “meaning market,” as elements of ideologies and fundamentalisms, as drugs for subjective high feelings or for numbing consciousness, as stopgaps to (seemingly) fill one’s inner bottomless emptiness, in any case as components of the post-industrial, *medial*⁵ phase of modernity.

It is a consciousness that focuses on and clings to mythic images or mystic symbols as stable semantic contents of consciousness in order to be rescued from the danger of having to become aware of the prevailing syntax of consciousness—another example of “the flight into the unconscious.” For what is unconsciousness? Not to see the forest for the trees.⁶

Notes

1) I would, however, have a problem with Scholem’s view, cited by Drob, that “the mystical symbol is a window into ‘a hidden and inexpressible reality.’” This is obviously a metaphysical or ideological assertion. But as such it cannot pose a challenge for a psychological theory either.

2) Jung was well familiar with Goethe’s, Creuzer’s, Bachofen’s theories of the symbol and concurred with them from early on. The infinite and thus ultimately indescribable richness of the meaning of a symbol was by no means a new acquisition by the older Jung in contrast to the Jung of *Psychological Types*.

3) The context in which he said this and what he referred to were different.

4) For those who find this statement puzzling I might explain that consciousness is in itself the unity and tension of unconsciousness and conscious awareness. There is not a literal “the unconscious” vis-à-vis consciousness. “The unconscious” is an illegitimate hypostasis and extrajection of one of the internal moments of consciousness itself.

5) “Medial”: here an adjective to the noun “the media,” thus meaning something like ‘characterized by the media.’

6) Thus one can have a multitude of interpretations, explanations, rational translations for all kinds of phenomena, great knowledge, and many insights, and yet be quite unconscious. More interpretations or seeing more trees does not by itself make more conscious.

