

Paradox and the transcendent function

Applied Jung Foundation Modules lecture notes

Opening statement:

“Wholeness is perforce paradoxical in its manifestations, and the two fishes going in the opposite directions, or the co-operation of birds and fishes, are an instructive illustration of this.” (Jung, CW9.2 ¶ 224)

Herein Jung expresses the quintessential psychological dilemma.

We strive for unity. Unity of purpose, unity of identity, and unity of desire. Our greatest fantasies and aspirations are one’s wherein we experience ourselves as unified around a singular purpose or ethic. And in these fantasies our thoughts, feeling and actions coalesce. Our usual experience of inner turmoil comes to a rest in these sublime moments of unified thought, word, and deed.

Juxtaposed against this desire is the reality of paradoxical drives and desires. And, if we follow Jung on this, we need to accept that it is precisely in the experience of these inner paradoxes that we have sight of the wholeness of our psyche. Our psychic structure is never reducible to any single unified perspective. Unity when we are able to realise it for a fleeting moment is the consequence of the ego’s identification with a definitively one-sided belief or desire. A view of psychodynamic activity that illuminates one side of a greater story and relegates its opposite into the unconscious.

This situation never lasts. The psyche has an inexorable impulse to the conscious realisation of what has been consigned to the shadows and to the unconscious. We can only avoid the monster hiding under the bed for so long, before we are either compelled to take a peek or it “spontaneously” emerges from its hiding place.

This paradoxical character of wholeness and of the Self (as opposed to the one-sided ego) makes for no small philosophical, ethical, and moral challenge. It is without exaggeration, the greatest thorn in our side and enslaves us to a life of inner turmoil and polarisation. It is simultaneously and paradoxically, the essential structure and our freedom and transcendence.

It is this capacity for transcendence that ensures our perennial capacity for renewal and rebirth.

a) The transition to a new attitude is called the transcendent function. In the regenerated attitude the libido that was formerly sunk in the unconscious emerges in the form of some positive achievement. (Jung, CW6 ¶ 427)

(b) This produces a new attitude to the world, whose very difference offers a new potential. It is equivalent to a renewal of life, which Eckhart symbolizes by God’s birth. (Jung, CW6 ¶ 427)

(c) The transcendent function does not proceed without aim and purpose, but leads to the revelation of the essential man. It is in the first place a purely natural process, which may in some cases pursue its course without the knowledge or assistance of the individual, and can sometimes forcibly accomplish itself in the face of opposition. The meaning and purpose of the process is the realization, in all its aspects, of the personality originally hidden away in the embryonic germ-plasm; the production and unfolding of the original, potential wholeness. (Jung, CW7 ¶ 186)

Structure of presentation

1. A consideration of the basic problem of paradox, duality, polarisation, and conflict from the psychological perspective. What Jung appropriately terms the problem of the “*complexio oppositorum*”.
2. Application: identify a central paradox in your own psyche and reflect on its impact. (followed by a discussion).
3. The Transcendent Function: the way out is through.
 - a. Stages of the TF.
 - b. A reflection on the Transcendent Function.
 - c. Examples: Jung’s Christ example and provide a personal example or an example from a client.
4. Q&A and discussion.

Paradox

“Like all archetypes, the Self has a paradoxical, antinomical character. It is male and female, old man and child, powerful and helpless, large and small. The Self is a true “complexio oppositorum,” though this does not mean that it is anything like as contradictory in itself. It is quite possible that the seeming paradox is nothing but a reflection of the enantiodromian changes of the conscious attitude, which can have a favourable or an unfavourable effect on the whole.” CW9.2 ¶ 355

Notes: Interesting to note the paradox in Jung’s own statement here. On one hand he characterises the Self as having a “paradoxical” and “antinomial”, and on the other he hastens to add we should not see it as “contradictory in itself”.

*The elevation of the human figure to a king or a divinity, and on the other hand its representation in subhuman, theriomorphic form, are indications of the transconscious character of the pairs of opposites. They do not belong to the ego-personality but are supraordinate to it. The ego-personality occupies an intermediate position, like the (soul placed between good and evil). The pairs of opposites constitute the phenomenology of the paradoxical Self, man's totality. That is why their symbolism makes use of cosmic expressions like *coelum / terra*. The intensity of the conflict is expressed in symbols like *fire and water, height and depth, life and death*. (no citation)*

PARADOXES IN ALCHEMY

The tremendous role which the opposites and their union play in alchemy helps us to understand why the alchemists were so fond of paradoxes:

*In order to attain this union, they tried not only to visualize the opposites together but to express them in the same breath. Characteristically, the paradoxes cluster most thickly round the arcane substance, which was believed to contain the opposites **in uncombined form as the prima materia, and to amalgamate them as the lapis Philosophorum**. Thus the lapis is called on the one hand base, cheap, immature, volatile, and on the other hand precious, perfect, and solid; or the prima materia is base and noble, or precious and *parvi momenti* (of little moment).* CW14 ¶ 36

Comparison with the infamous Zen Koan¹

At first sight it seems as if the posing of a koan question as an object of meditation would anticipate or prejudice the end-result, and that it would therefore determine the content of the experience, just as in the Jesuit exercises or in certain yoga meditations the content is determined by the task set by the teacher. The koans, however, are so various, so ambiguous, and above all so boundlessly paradoxical that even an expert must be completely in the dark as to what might be considered a suitable solution. In addition, the descriptions of the final result are so obscure that in no single case can one discover any rational connection between the koan and the experience of enlightenment. Since no logical sequence can be demonstrated, it remains to be supposed that the koan method puts not the smallest restraint upon the freedom of the psychic process and that the end-result therefore springs from nothing but the individual disposition of the pupil. CW11 ¶ 895

ANSWER FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS AS THE SATORI EXPERIENCE

The complete destruction of the rational intellect aimed at in the training creates an almost perfect lack of conscious assumptions. These are excluded as far as possible, but not unconscious assumptions that is, the existing but unrecognized psychological disposition, which is anything but empty or tabula rasa. It is a nature-given factor, and when it [the unconscious] answers this being obviously the satori experience it is an answer of Nature, who has succeeded in conveying her reaction direct to the conscious mind. What the unconscious nature of the pupil opposes to the teacher or to the koan by way of an answer is, manifestly, satori. This seems, at least to me, to be the view which, to judge by the descriptions, formulates the nature of satori more or less correctly. It is also supported by the fact that the “glimpse into one's own nature,” the “original man,” and the depths of one's being are often a matter of supreme concern to the Zen master. CW11 ¶ 895

So, the experience of paradox can be symbolised (viewed) as an opportunity for deeper psycho-spiritual maturation and sophistication. The answers that you previously or currently have being inadequate to the challenge of the paradox. In this sense, every moral problem is an act of grace demanding a greater unfolding of your inner man and individuation process.

Question for self-reflection.

Identify a personal example of a central paradox. Ideally, although not essentially, the central paradox you live with. Your karmic load, to phrase it differently. Identify it and take a few minutes to reflect on its impact on your life.

The Transcendent Principle (phase1): production

The production of the Transcendent principle (phase 1) can be usefully described as having two distinct and to some degree discreet stages. These stages follow and broadly mirror the structure of the Hegelian dialectic.

(1) Thesis set against antithesis,

¹ A Zen Koan is a paradoxical story, question, or statement, originating from Chan-lore, used in Zen Buddhist practice, particularly for meditation by novices.

(2) producing a (higher) synthesis.

In simple psychological terms the identification of the paradox (thesis and antithesis) produces sufficient psychological tension over time to produce (birth) a new synthesis. Each of these stages are nuanced and require a fair amount of reflection and unpacking. The first stage or step is the identification of the paradox is an opportunity and invitation for intense self-reflection, facilitating greater self-knowledge and consciousness.

The second stage or step is the production of a new attitude, insight, or perspective, previously hidden from consciousness.

As Jung puts it,

The transition to a new attitude is called the transcendent function. In the regenerated attitude the libido that was formerly sunk in the unconscious emerges in the form of some positive achievement. CW6 ¶ 427

This produces a new attitude to the world, whose very difference offers a new potential. It is equivalent to a renewal of life, which Eckhart symbolizes by God's birth. **CW6 ¶ 427**

The form the transcendent function takes is a symbol wherein the opposites are united in a new symbol of synthesis, resolution or liberation. And that the production of this symbol from the existing antimony of the paradox does not typically proceed along rational grounds. The TF operates where the original dilemma offers no answer on its own terms, as in the example of the Zen koan discussed earlier. This is very important to emphasize that the unconscious produces a symbol, which is a fundamentally creative act.

Examples:

“Take the classic case of the temptation of Christ, for example. We say that the devil tempted him, but we could just as well say that an unconscious desire for power confronted him in the form of the devil. Both sides appear here: the light side and the dark. The devil wants to tempt Jesus to proclaim himself master of the world. Jesus wants not to succumb to the temptation; then, thanks to the function that results from every conflict, a symbol appears: it is the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven, a spiritual kingdom rather than a material one. Two things are united in this symbol, the spiritual attitude of Christ and the devilish desire for power. Thus the encounter of Christ with the devil is a classic example of the transcendent function. It appears here in the form of an involuntary personal experience. But it can be used as a method too; that is, when the contrary will of the unconscious is sought for and recognized in dreams and other unconscious products. In this way the conscious personality is brought face to face with the counter-position of the unconscious. The resulting conflict thanks precisely to the transcendent function leads to a symbol uniting the opposed positions. The symbol cannot be consciously chosen or constructed; it is a sort of intuition or revelation. Hence the transcendent function is only usable in part as a method, the other part always remains an involuntary experience.”

JL1 ¶ 0

My personal example of the union of a rational and secular ideology with a deeply felt religious impulse.

Example from L, and the 3 Hexagrams of the I Ching.

The Transcendent Principle (Phase 2) working with the transcendent function

Phase 1 of the transcendent function has described the process of developing material necessary for activating the transcendent function. In phase 2, we come to the next question: What is to be done with the material obtained in one of the manners described in phase 1?

(a)

To this question there is no a priori answer; it is only when the conscious mind confronts the products of the unconscious that a provisional reaction will ensue which determines the subsequent procedure. Practical experience alone can give us a clue. So far as my experience goes, there appear to be two main tendencies. One is the way of creative formulation, the other the way of understanding. CW8 ¶ 172

THE CREATIVE OR AESTHETIC FORMULATION

(b)

Where the principle of creative [aesthetic] formulation predominates, the material is continually varied and increased until a kind of condensation of motifs into more or less stereotyped symbols takes place. These stimulate the creative fantasy and serve chiefly as aesthetic motifs. This tendency leads to the aesthetic problem of artistic formulation CW8 ¶ 173

INTENSIVE STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND THE `MEANING'

(c)

Where, on the other hand, the principle of understanding predominates, the aesthetic aspect is of relatively little interest and may occasionally even be felt as a hindrance. Instead, there is an intensive struggle to understand the meaning of the unconscious product CW8 ¶ 174

AESTHETIC FORMULATION VERSUS INTUITIVE UNDERSTANDING

(d)

Whereas aesthetic formulation tends to concentrate on the formal aspect of the motif, an intuitive understanding often tries to catch the meaning from barely adequate hints in the material, without considering those elements which would come to light in a more careful formulation CW8 ¶ 175

BOTH TENDENCIES HAVE THEIR DANGERS

(e)

Neither of these tendencies can be brought about by an arbitrary effort of will; they are far more the result of the peculiar make-up of the individual personality. Both have their typical dangers and may lead one astray CW8 ¶ 176

(e-1).

The danger of the aesthetic tendency is overvaluation of the formal or "artistic" worth of the fantasy-productions; the libido is diverted from the real goal of the transcendent function and sidetracked into purely aesthetic problems of artistic expression.

(e-2)

The danger of wanting to understand the meaning is overvaluation of the content, which is subjected to intellectual analysis and interpretation, so that the essentially symbolic character of the product is lost

(e-3)

Up to a point these bypaths must be followed in order to satisfy aesthetic or intellectual requirements, whichever predominate in the individual case

(e-4)

But the danger of both these bypaths is worth stressing, for, after a certain point of psychic development has been reached, the products of the unconscious are greatly overvalued precisely because they were boundlessly undervalued before

COMPENSATORY RELATIONSHIP OF THE TENDENCIES

One tendency seems to be the regulating principle of the other; both are bound together in a compensatory relationship. Experience bears out this formula. So far as it is possible at this stage to draw more general conclusions, we could say that aesthetic formulation needs understanding of the meaning, and understanding needs aesthetic formulation. The two supplement each other to form the transcendent function CW8 ¶ 177

CONSCIOUSNESS PUTS EXPRESSION AT DISPOSAL OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

The first steps along both paths follow the same principle: consciousness puts its media of expression at the disposal of the unconscious content. It must not do more than this at first, so as not to exert undue influence. In giving the content form, the lead must be left as far as possible to the chance ideas and associations thrown up by the unconscious. This is naturally something of a setback for the conscious standpoint and is often felt as painful. It is not difficult to understand this when we remember how the contents of the unconscious usually present themselves: as things which are too weak by nature to cross the threshold, or as incompatible elements that were repressed for a variety of reasons. Mostly they are unwelcome, unexpected, irrational contents, disregard or repression of which seems altogether understandable. CW8 ¶ 178

DISCOVER THE FEELING-TONED CONTENTS

Only a small part of them has any unusual value, either from the collective or from the subjective standpoint. But contents that are collectively valueless may be exceedingly valuable when seen from the standpoint of the individual. This fact expresses itself in their affective tone, no matter whether the subject feels it as negative or positive. Society, too, is divided in its acceptance of new and unknown ideas which obtrude their emotionality. The purpose of the initial procedure is to discover the feeling-toned contents, for in these cases we are always dealing with situations where the one sidedness of consciousness meets with the resistance of the instinctual sphere CW8 ¶ 178

THE AESTHETIC OR INTELLECTUAL-MORAL PROBLEM

The two ways do not divide until the aesthetic problem becomes decisive for the one type of person and the intellectual-moral problem for the other. The ideal case would be if these two aspects could exist side by side or rhythmically succeed each other; that is, if there were an alternation of creation and understanding. It hardly seems possible for the one to exist without the other, though it sometimes does happen in practice: the creative urge seizes possession of the object at the cost of its meaning, or the urge to understand overrides the necessity of giving it form. The unconscious contents want first of all to be seen clearly, which can only be done by giving them shape, and to be judged only when everything they have to say is tangibly present. It was for this reason that Freud got the dream-contents, as it were, to express themselves in the form of “free associations” before he began interpreting them CW8 ¶ 179

DRAWING, PAINTING, OR MODELING

It does not suffice in all cases to elucidate only the conceptual context of a dream-content. Often it is necessary to clarify a vague content by giving it a visible form. This can be done by drawing, painting, or modelling. Often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has wrestled in vain. By shaping it, one goes on dreaming the dream in greater detail in the waking state, and the initially incomprehensible, isolated event is integrated into the sphere of the total personality, even though it remains at first unconscious to the subject. Aesthetic formulation leaves it at that and gives up any idea of discovering a meaning CW8 ¶ 180

DESIRE TO UNDERSTAND

This sometimes leads patients to fancy themselves artists misunderstood ones, naturally. The desire to understand, if it dispenses with careful formulation, starts with the chance idea or association and therefore lacks an adequate basis. It has better prospects of success if it begins only with the formulated product. The less the initial material is shaped and developed, the greater is the danger that understanding will be governed not by the empirical facts but by theoretical and moral considerations. The kind of understanding with which we are concerned at this stage consists in a reconstruction of the meaning that seems to be immanent in the original “chance” idea CW8 ¶ 180

It is evident that such a procedure can legitimately take place only when there is a sufficient motive for it. Equally, the lead can be left to the unconscious only if it already contains the will to lead. This naturally happens only when the conscious mind finds itself in a critical situation CW8 ¶ 181

BRINGING THE OPPOSITES TOGETHER

(m)

Once the unconscious content has been given form and the meaning of the formulation is understood, the question arises as to how the ego will relate to this position, and how the ego and the unconscious are to come to terms. This is the second and more important stage of the procedure, the bringing together of opposites for the production of a third: the transcendent function. At this stage it is no longer the unconscious that takes the lead, but the ego CW8 ¶ 181

(n)

We shall not define the individual ego here, but shall leave it in its banal reality as that continuous centre of consciousness whose presence has made itself felt since the days of childhood. It is confronted with a psychic product that owes its existence mainly to an unconscious process and is therefore in some degree opposed to the ego and its tendencies CW8 ¶ 182

EGO'S POSITION EQUAL TO COUNTER-POSITION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

(o)

This standpoint is essential in coming to terms with the unconscious. The position of the ego must be maintained as being of equal value to the counter-position of the unconscious, and vice versa CW8 ¶ 183

(o-1)

This amounts to a very necessary warning: for just as the conscious mind of civilized man has a restrictive effect on the unconscious, so the rediscovered unconscious often has a really dangerous effect on the ego. In the same way that the ego suppressed the unconscious before, a liberated unconscious can thrust the ego aside and overwhelm it

(o-2)

There is a danger of the ego losing its head, so to speak, that it will not be able to defend itself against the pressure of affective factors a situation often encountered at the beginning of schizophrenia

(o-3)

This danger would not exist, or would not be so acute, if the process of having it out with the unconscious could somehow divest the affects of their dynamism. And this is what does in fact happen when the counter-position is aestheticized or intellectualized

CONFRONTATION MUST BE A MANY-SIDED ONE

(p)

But the confrontation with the unconscious must be a many-sided one, for the transcendent function is not a partial process running a conditioned course; it is a total and integral event in which all aspects are, or should be, included. The affect must therefore be deployed in its full strength. Aestheticization and intellectualization are excellent weapons against dangerous affects, but they should be used only when there is a vital threat, and not for the purpose of avoiding a necessary task CW8 ¶ 183

TAKING THE OTHER SIDE SERIOUSLY

(q)

Coming to terms with the counter-position is a serious matter on which sometimes a very great deal depends. Taking the other side seriously is an essential prerequisite of the process, for only in that way can the regulating factors exert an influence on our actions. Taking it seriously does not mean taking it literally, but it does mean giving the unconscious credit, so that it has a chance to co-operate with consciousness instead of automatically disturbing it CW8 ¶ 184

(r)

Thus, in coming to terms with the unconscious, not only is the standpoint of the ego justified, but the unconscious is granted the same authority. The ego takes the lead, but the unconscious must be allowed to have its say *to audiatur et altera pars* CW8 ¶ 185

THE 'OTHER' VOICE

(s)

The way this can be done is best shown by those cases in which the "other" voice is more or less distinctly heard. For such people it is technically very simple to note down the "other" voice in writing and to answer its statements from the standpoint of the ego. It is exactly as if a dialogue were taking place between two human beings with equal rights, each of whom gives the other credit for a valid argument and considers it worth while to modify the conflicting standpoints by means of thorough comparison and discussion or else to distinguish them clearly from one another. Since the way to agreement seldom stands open, in most cases a long conflict will have to be borne, demanding sacrifices from both sides. Such a rapprochement could just as well take place between patient and analyst, the role of devil's advocate easily falling to the latter CW8 ¶ 186

A LIVING THIRD THING

(t)

The shuttling to and fro of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principle *tertium non datur* but a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation. The transcendent function manifests itself as a quality of conjoined opposites. So long as these are kept apart naturally for the purpose of avoiding conflict they do not function and remain inert CW8 ¶ 189