

After Leadership

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9 Choosing A Life

(Re)incarnating After Leadership

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Introduction

It is important to have an impact, to make a difference, to be effective, to take initiative, to persuade—to lead.

But this is not forever self-evident.

Individual leaders step out of influential roles for many reasons—retirement, illness, sacking, a choice to do something else with their remaining years. This chapter is about the transition out of roles characterized by power, agency, and influence, leaving behind the things that make one feel alive, someone with a voice, someone who matters.

Role transition is usually theorized as a kind of journey from one role through a liminal phase to eventual re-establishment in a new role.¹ But we are concerned with exits that are not heading anywhere known or foreseen—where there is no capacity to find or create a new identity (we will suggest that this applies more generally than is often recognized). Rather than the journey, therefore, our metaphor is death.

The aim of the chapter is to offer a close consideration of myths and philosophical accounts of “after death” in pursuit of insights and analytical categories to form a theoretical basis for studying “after leadership.”

Leadership

Leadership is all bound up with power; power to influence, command, collude; power to envision, imagine, inspire. Even in its more passive modes, where self-identified followers point to a source of influence that might be abstract (e.g. “the rules”) or dead (e.g. Jesus), leadership involves fantastical projections of potent influence onto the supposed leader.

To take a lead is to exercise agency, engaging power in relation to other people, and therefore to occupy a role.

We will suggest that a move from one role to another involves not so much the personal *acquisition* of knowledge as it does a rebirth of individual subjectivity followed by a longer phase of moment-to-moment rebirth; these

subjective transformations are constituted by choice and enactment as well as involving certain forms of forgetfulness—the yin and yang of selfhood.

We begin with a Greek myth concerning death and reincarnation because death is a realistic expectation, personally and culturally; and reincarnation expresses the hope that there might be some form of continuity beyond catastrophe, that the end will indeed be apocalyptic, (“apocalypse” in Greek is ἀποκάλυψις *apokálypsis*; “lifting of the veil” or “revelation”) and not merely the end.

We go on to examine the trope of death and rebirth in Jungian and Buddhist traditions, reinforcing the significant themes of choice and forgetfulness. In Buddhist terms, the sustained movement of consciousness that we might call “self” is refined to concentrated attention (choice) and non-attachment (forgetting).

This perspective suggests further theoretical observations about the relationship between self and identity, and between person and role. From this, we suggest an epistemological argument that knowledge is (at least partly) an affordance of role.

Finally, we speculate this essay on death and rebirth might have implications at a societal level as we face the possible death of our civilization.

Death and Choice: The Myth of Er

Reason is the central motif of the dialogues of Plato, analyzed and exemplified by Socrates, their principal character and protagonist. But at several points, one or other of the interlocutors introduces a myth, explicitly trailed as such. These myths are carefully crafted contributions to the subject matter of each dialogue, reasonable but not reasoned. In symbolic or analogical images, Plato offers his readers insights that are hard to grasp but nonetheless intuitively recognizable. These are all to do with the nature and life of Soul, the reasoning subject which in Platonic epistemology cannot know itself by dialogic reasoning. The myths therefore reveal something to the reflexive intuition, while at the same time veiling their meaning to the reasoning mind.² Probably for this reason, the Platonic myths have seldom been approached by modern organizational scholars in spite of the extensive (usually critical) attention paid to the more “rational” and cognitive aspects of the Dialogues, such as Gareth Morgan’s³ reference to the metaphor of the Cave and Popper’s critique of hope in a “philosopher king.”⁴

For the purposes of the current chapter, we want to concentrate on one of the myths that deals specifically with the journey of the soul subsequent to death, the choice of how to live, and the projection into incarnation.

The Platonic myths that attend to the nature of the Soul are to be found in the *Timmaeus*⁵ and *Phaedrus*⁶ while the soul’s journey into incarnation and after death are addressed in *Gorgias*,⁷ *Phaedo*,⁸ and *Republic*.⁹ Love in relation to the soul is addressed in two myths in *Symposium*¹⁰ and her final enlightenment in *Phaedrus*. In the Myth of Er at the end of *Republic*, Plato¹¹

has Socrates tell of a vision afforded to the warrior Er, who was taken for dead and laid out on his funeral pyre but recovered to tell what he had seen. Apparently, his soul journeyed with many others to a place where four chasms opened before him, two into the earth and two to heaven. The souls of the dead were judged and sent either down to the underworld or up to heaven according to whether they had lived life justly. Through the other two chasms, souls returned to earth, those coming up from hell stained and disheveled, those from heaven pure and tranquil. Meeting each other and recognizing friends, they swapped stories, camping for seven days in a meadow. On the eighth day, they set off on a journey that brought them, after a further four days, to a great shaft of light that binds heaven and earth together and extending from it “the spindle of necessity,” the efficient cause of the universe.¹²

The three Fates, the daughters of Necessity (*Adrastia*), are seated on thrones nearby. *Lachesis* sings the past, *Clotho* the present, and *Atropos* the future. *Lachesis* (through a prophet who assists her) casts outnumbered lots and each soul picks up the lot that falls nearest to them, determining the order in which each will choose their next life. The prophet warns the souls to choose with care, for “Virtue has no overlord, so as a man honours or dishonours her, so shall he have more or less of her. Of the chooser is the cause, and God is guiltless.”¹³



Then numerous lives are laid out in front of the crowd—more than enough for everyone—and amongst them are every conceivable kind, rich and poor, famous and unknown, beautiful and ugly, healthy and sick. These conditions are set, but not the temperament or the character of the person, because this will be established by the soul in living that life: “of necessity, a soul that has chosen a certain kind of life becomes changed accordingly.”¹⁴

Here Socrates pauses his narration to point out that this is the most crucial moment, and that knowledge of what constitutes a good life (that which will be most fitted to living in justice) and the ability to select it is the most important, “for thus does a man [*sic*] become most happy.”¹⁵ As they take their turn to choose, many—especially those coming from an easy time in heaven, “virtuous through custom without philosophy”¹⁶—leap at the chance of fame, fortune, and power, without noticing the tragedies and unhappiness that accompany these Fates. Souls coming from the underworld searched more carefully, but most apparently “chose after the custom of their former life.”¹⁷ Only the soul of Odysseus, who drew the last lot and so has fewer to choose from, is wise enough to seek carefully for the fate of a humble farmer destined to lead a quiet life with every chance of happiness.

Having chosen, each soul comes before *Lachesis* to be granted the angel (or “daemon” or “genius”) of the life she has selected, who guides her to *Clotho* to ratify the choice and thence to *Atropos* to make it irrevocable. Passing from the thrones of the three Fates, the souls journeyed through terrible heat across the barren Plain of *Lethe*, to the river *Amalete*, where

the thirsty souls drink, though the wise more moderately than others. *Lethe* means forgetfulness, and *amalete* is usually translated as carelessness; having forgotten where they came from, and without a care in the world, the souls slept until the middle of the night when, with a peal of thunder, they were cast hither and thither into birth.

At this point Er, who had not been permitted to drink the waters of Lethe, awoke on his pyre, and thus preserved the tale of his vision. The moral of the tale, according to Socrates, is an injunction to care for the soul by seeking justice and living the life of a philosopher.¹⁸ However, the eschatological features of the myth should not obscure its cosmological and psychological aspects. In particular, the myth deals with forgetfulness and choice, and it is these themes that we explore in more detail below.

There are direct parallels between this Ancient Greek myth and the widely documented phenomenon of the “near-death experience.” It is important to point this out because we want to focus on *existential* aspects of  transition and not confine ourselves merely to “identity-adoption.” nce the archetype of reincarnation, as discussed extensively by Jung, for example, carries crucial implications for our argument. The brief review we offer at this juncture will help set the scene for the analysis we engage in shortly. In his tour de force *Imagining Karma*, Obeyesekere²⁰ undertakes a meticulous cross-cultural analysis of myths and stories of rebirth in Greek, Buddhist, and Amerindian cultures. In the same manner as Jung, Obeyesekere establishes the ubiquity of the reincarnation motif within narratives that hail from widely different times and places. Similarly, Zaleski’s scholarly interrogation of “near-death experience” in medieval and contemporary Western accounts lends weight to the idea that this phenomenon is crucially important in both individual psychic and collective cultural terms.²¹ In a more recent study based on interviews with 100 respondents who claim to have had near-death experiences, Fox²² compares and contrasts the anecdotal experiential evidence with the more sceptical positions deriving from medical science. Serious psychological and social science research on the theme of “past life memory”²³ and sanctioned LSD research from the 1950s and 1960s²⁴ also identify recurring patterns of experience, many of which mirror those described by Plato in *Republic*. Whether one “believes” in the reality of life-to-life rebirth or not, there can be no question that the phenomenon has consistently and persistently manifested itself in individual and collective human consciousness. We are bringing it up in a chapter on role because it provides an expression of the experience of role transition, one focusing on the existential aspects rather than mere “identity-adoption.”²⁵

Forgetfulness

And although in the course of her journey she may forget much and suffer much, yet her forgetting will be the means of her remembering, and her suffering will bring release from suffering.²⁶

In the Platonic myths, the soul is portrayed as “forgetting” all she inherently knows of reality and is thus obliged to learn it again through personal experience and the exercise of philosophic faculties. Forgetfulness got her into this mess, and un-forgetting will get her out of it. It is no mere coincidence that the Ancient Greek word *lethe* is the root of the word for “truth”: *a-lethe-ia* (αλήθεια), meaning “un-forgetfulness” or “un-concealment.” In other words, discovering the “truth” implies reversing the forgetfulness that veils an already manifest reality, a process which is central to the dialogical method employed by Socrates in “revealing truth” to his interlocutors. But forgetfulness plays a still more dynamic part in this account of transition, for it is the first lesson the soul learns in crossing the plane of Lethe after choosing a life. The transmigration of the Soul is perhaps the archetypal example of “transformation,” a word overused in relation to any kind of change or adaptation, with little regard to what receives a new form, or indeed what is entailed in the process of formation.

In other premodern sciences of rebirth, for example, those of *Theravadin* and *Mahayana* (particularly Tibetan) Buddhism, death-moment-consciousness is treated with very close scrutiny indeed.²⁷ The moment of consciousness that immediately precedes death is understood within Buddhism to be the most powerful supporting condition for rebirth in another realm (whether that be one of the many “heaven” or “hell” planes or indeed another human birth which, within Buddhist cosmology, is considered to be the first or lowest form of “heaven realm”). Evans-Wentz’s translation of the *Bardo Thödol*, rendered as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*,²⁸ gives some insight into the Tibetan Buddhist analysis and understanding of the life-to-life rebirth process. The *Bardo Thödol* is effectively a manual intended to offer guidance to dead people whose consciousness moves into *Bardo* existence—a forty-nine day interregnum between death and rebirth. Typically chanted by a monk in the presence of a dying or recently deceased individual, it consists of three major sections as follows: (1) *Chikhan Bardo*, detailing the psychic events at the moment of death; (2) *Chönyid Bardo*, a description of the dream state arising after death; and (3) *Sidpa Bardo*, an account of the onset of the rebirth impulse and prenatal events occurring in subjective consciousness.

It seems likely that the various elements of the *Bardo Thödol* would have been directly informed by the psychological philosophy of *Theravada* Buddhism, first committed to written form in approximately 80 b.c. and documented in the *Abhidhamma* texts of the *Pali Canon*. Quoting from Nārada’s translation of *A Manual of Abhidhamma*, “Every birth is conditioned by a past good or bad Kamma [volitional action] which predominates at the moment of death. The Kamma that conditions the future birth is called Reproductive (Janaka) Kamma.”²⁹ According to this tradition, action or memory at the moment of death carries a great deal of “weight” in terms of conditioning post-death/rebirth consciousness: “Death-proximate Kamma, is that which one does or remembers immediately before the dying

moment. Owing to its significance in determining the future birth, the custom of reminding the dying person of his [*sic*] good deeds and making him [*sic*] do good acts on this death-bed still prevails in Buddhist countries.”³⁰ As with the Platonic Myth of Er, Buddhism also maintains that, for most, memory of previous births are completely lost when a new life-to-life birth is undertaken.

So, the soul forgets first her own nature, and thus learns to forget; later she forgets sensible things and remembers intelligible realities. Leaving things behind, literally forgoing the getting of things, is the essential virtue of “non-attachment.” This forgetting is analogous to death, a departure from the world of parts, and like death is veiled in the same way: what knowing lies beyond forgetting; what life beyond dying? The Myth of Er is in some respects an attempt by Socrates to fill this lacuna, conjuring up a more or less familiar process of judgment and journey, perhaps to deny the awful void of death as well as to re-present death as an opportunity for choosing a good life. And in life, creeping forgetfulness must be a terrifying thing, so we make no attempt to romanticize a failing of memory. But “the philosophic death” is a consistent theme for Socrates, arguing that paradoxically the philosopher truly lives when, by practice of the cathartic virtues, he or she becomes free of material attachments and “soars aloft” to contemplate reality. Thus, forgetting and dying are analogs, experiences of transiency marking a transition into a state free of partial and ultimately deceptive perceptions, but one in which the soul remembers reality—contemplative, intuitive, and self-evident. In Socratic terms, therefore, forgetting is central to this transition.

We now have two “forgettings,” the first by which the soul forgets what she should know, and thus falls carelessly and ignorantly into incarnation, followed by the struggle to learn and thus develop intellectual virtues (set out, for example, as the *mathetai* or intellectual disciplines—arithmetic, geometry of planar, solid and moving objects, and harmonics—in *Republic*). The second forgetting is the precise reverse of the first. The soul abandons the facts and impressions thus accumulated, and thus by contemplation is able to perceive truth, *alethia*—abstract, eternal, and real ideas. The difference is that the first forgetting occurs through foolishness, the second through wisdom.

The foregoing analysis suggests the function of “forgetting” within an epistemological argument underlying the Myth of Er. However, we would not wish to deny other interpretations of this myth, some of which are more psychological than epistemological. For example, referring to transitions between work roles, forgetting may be functional if it enables a person to leave behind the darker associations of an old role—the regrets, the impotencies, and the unforeseen consequences of actions. Moving toward a new role, one is often seduced into colluding in its idealization and the image of oneself in it. The disowned parts of one’s experience (of oneself in role) sink into the shadows, are forgotten. So setting off across the plains of Lethe is

allowing oneself to forget one's old obligations. Forgetting enables a discontinuity, from anxiety about the future and regrets about the past, toward hope and the possibility of insight.

Choice

The choice to take up a new role, like that of a new life, is only partly governed by conscious reasoning.³¹ Fantasies and wishful thinking play a big part, and very few of us have the foresight and discretion of Odysseus or even the philosophical grounds on which to make a choice. The Myth of Er paints a vivid picture of the turmoil within which such choices are made, but central to the Myth—as to this entire corpus—is the principle of individual responsibility for choosing. Regardless of whether or not we take the myth (or other evidence) of rebirth as containing a literal truth, it points to a deep pattern or archetype within human consciousness. For the purposes of this chapter, we can think of rebirth as occurring on a moment-to-moment basis, formed out of conditioned (pre-given) and conditioning (volitional or intentional) choices. Moreover, as the myth suggests, consequences follow from the conditioning aspects of the rebirth process and the choices involved.

The principle of intentional choice is addressed by Plato in *Protagoras*³² in the Myth of Prometheus (forethought) and Epimetheus (afterthought). In that myth, Prometheus signifies the power of the soul to identify a purpose in the life she chooses. But what is forgotten on the Plain of Lethe includes knowledge of intent as well as experience accrued from the past. Prometheus, as forethought chained to a rock, reminds us of this predicament—that there is something we ought to be getting on with, but which we have forgotten, and that we have allowed ourselves to be detained and harried by events.

In the Myth of Er, the choice of next life is characterized by forethought assailed by impatience, grandiose ambition, and avarice: it is as if most of these souls (with the exception of Odysseus) are already chained to the Promethean rock. Making their selection before the throne of Necessity suggests that to become someone the soul must take on the consequences that go with that selfhood. Similarly, when taking up a role we take on the consequences of that role—there is no option to take up a role without such consequences. And although the consequences are in the future, we choose on the basis of past experience and knowledge (i.e., from *Lachesis*, who looks to the past). So what belongs to the role, and what do we bring to it? As the myth suggests, the disposition of the Soul develops in response to the circumstances of the life or role; but the *character* of the soul is exercised most clearly at the point of choosing, for it is here that, even without forethought, those souls preserved by wisdom are able to exercise moral virtues. In so doing, they seem to bring moral agency to this transition, individual choice beneath the gaze of necessity. It is this lesson of *choice* deriving from

the Myth of Er that prompts us to frame role transition in terms of the *moral craft* of self-management. In other words, choice in this context carries moral as well as technical implications.

On Taking up a Role, Like Choosing a Life

A remarkable feature of the rebirth myths and transmutations we have discussed so far is their resistance to a dualistic framing of life and death. The Myth of Er in particular describes an active zone of transition, in which both space and time (sequence of events) are rich in significance far beyond a literal representation.

As described above, the construct of self-in-role derives from psychodynamic theory in which dualisms are crucial to explaining the dynamics of *psyche*. For Freud, life and death are not so much states of being as dynamic forces: the destructive forces of the so-called death instinct, *thanatos*, in constant struggle with the life-longing drives of *eros*. Although Freud generally conceived of these as opposing libidinal forces, Sabina Spielrein as early as 1912 proposed *eros* and *thanatos* as components of a single-sex instinct.³³ Both might be seen as drives toward obliteration—*thanatos* toward obliteration of self in the All; *Eros* toward obliteration in the other. Both give rise to anxiety about the loss of self, along with many other potent emotions such as guilt, envy, and desire. However, as we see in the Myth of Er, the passions of the soul are in relation to an object—the lives to be selected and lived. Object relations theory³⁴ addresses the ways in which we internalize objects external to ourselves, and project the emotional and meaning-making content of our selves into these objects. The pattern of these relations is established in infancy, by the manner in which an early sense of subjective self is established through the gradual realization of an objective world on which the self is dependent. Thus, these early relations with others (primarily the mother or mother-substitute, experienced as part-object rather than as a whole and independent complex person) are of crucial existential significance; so much so that in later life most relationships with others conform to the patterns set in early life because these are the determinants of how we experience ourselves. When we relate to others we do so by projecting onto them the expectations that have come to be integral to our own sense of self. Thus, we relate to them as objects in our own psychic universes; this is especially so when the relationship is laden with the emotional and existential charge most reminiscent of early parental relationships—that is, with people in authority, and also with organizational systems that embody authority. As we have argued above, self-narrated prospective identities may serve the same function as part-objects.

In this context, we may approach the Myth of Er as an account of intrapsychic processes of role adoption. The lives offered to the souls are objects paradoxically devoid of life until selected. It is only when the soul projects herself into these lifeless objects that they become vivific possibilities; and

we have seen how this projection is engulfed by the emotional residue of past lives. It is not hard to see this dynamic at work in everyday life; for example, by analogy, we observe that job descriptions are not dissimilar to the lives offered by *Lachesis* (likewise the process of choosing a new role, assuming its responsibilities, and necessary conditions). Job descriptions themselves are mere caricatures: inanimate objects that nonetheless provide the material conditions for the realization of roles, once taken up by a person. A person longing for a job is thus longing for a lifeless object, at least in so far as the longing is directed at the imagined role, rather than the experiences and relationships that it might afford. But perhaps from the point of view of an organizational system, one function of the job description is to sanitize the role from the imprint of the previous role holder, de-personalizing it in the way that a hotel prepares a supposedly “characterful” room for the next (unknown) guest.

Person-In-Role as A Transformational Rebirth: A Jungian Perspective

The themes of *transformation* and *transmigration* that we have thus far explored in relation to Plato’s Myth of Er are afforded a central place within Jungian psychology. Although Jung, perhaps surprisingly, did not discuss the Myth of Er directly (despite many references in his oeuvre to Plato’s theory of the soul), he was fascinated, not to say at times preoccupied, by the rebirth motif and its transformational implications. Jung returns repeatedly to the concept of archetype in his work, but a useful definition is found in a relatively early essay ‘Symbols of the Mother and of Rebirth’ dating from 1916 and first published in *Psychology of the Unconscious*.³⁵ Here he defines archetypes as: “universal and inherited patterns which, taken together, constitute the structure of the unconscious ... for archetypes are the forms or river-beds along which the current of psychic life has always flowed.”³⁶ Similarly, in *Psychology and Religion*, he speaks of “inherited psychic factors” as “universal dispositions of the mind” that are “analogous to Plato’s forms (*eidola*), in accordance with which the mind organizes its contents.”³⁷ He goes on:

One could also describe these forms as *categories* analogous to the logical categories which are always and everywhere present as the basic postulates of reason. Only in the case of “forms,” we are not dealing with categories of reason but with categories of the *imagination*. As the products of imagination are always in essence visual, their forms must, from the outset, have the character of images and moreover of typical images, which is why ... I call them “archetypes.”³⁸

As Jung asserts in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*: “Rebirth is an affirmation that must be counted among the primordial affirmations of

mankind. These primordial affirmations are based on what I call archetypes ... [and] it is not surprising that a concurrence of affirmations concerning rebirth can be found among the most widely differing peoples.”³⁹ In this lecture dating from 1939, Jung identifies five forms of rebirth, one of the most pertinent of which for our present argument is “participation in the process of transformation.”⁴⁰ He observes that “Rebirth may be a renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or part of the personality ...”⁴¹ Furthermore, “rebirth” can, under certain circumstances, involve an *indirect* transformation brought about not by passing through literal death and rebirth but in “a process of transformation which is conceived of as taking place outside the individual.” These thoughts resonate strongly with the argument that we are pursuing here insofar as the kinds of organizational role transition that we are considering relate to the migration and subsequent enactment of *person* (subjectivity) into *role* (exogenous context).

While such moments of organizational transition and moment-to-moment action within role can involve, in Jung’s terms, both an “enlargement” or, by contrast, “diminution” of personality,⁴² it is useful for our purposes to consider the kind of development entailed in, say, taking on greater responsibility associated with positions of increased authority. Here we find Jung confirming our thesis that enactment of “persona” in role does not simply entail an accretion of psychic contents stemming from external organizational (re)sources—the idea of “stuffing oneself as much as possible from the outside” which can only lead to “greater inner poverty”⁴³—but must come from a dynamic meeting of subjective sensibilities with new organizational demands. In other words, in moving into a role with a commensurate expansion of responsibility, “something in us responds to it and goes out to meet it.”⁴⁴ This demands of the individual a certain form of wisdom, *phronesis* perhaps, which enables her to grow and react to organizational rebirth. As Jung asserts:

Richness of mind consists in mental receptivity, not in accumulation of possessions. What comes from outside, and, for that matter, everything that rises up from within, can only be made our own if we are capable of an inner amplitude equal to that of the incoming content. Real increase of personality means consciousness of an enlargement that flows from inner sources ... It has therefore been said quite truly that *a man [sic] grows with the greatness of his [sic] task.*⁴⁵

Jung also describes certain forms of rebirth transformation in terms of “possession,” a metaphor which, once again, seems apposite to our discussion of person-in-role. Although “possession” may be related in pathological parlance to “paranoia,” this does not discount the possibility of viewing it in non-pathological terms, for taking up a role might well involve being “taken over” by certain forms of psychic content whose sources are external to the

subject. In this context, Jung makes some telling observations about professional life that resonate strongly with our argument:

Every calling or profession, for example, has its own characteristic persona. It is easy to study these things nowadays [1939], when the photographs of public personalities so frequently appear in the press. A certain kind of behaviour is forced on them by the world, and professional people endeavour to come up to these expectations ... One could say, with a little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is. In any case the temptation to be what one seems to be is great, because the persona is usually rewarded in cash.⁴⁶

For postmodern societies in which the cult of mass media and mass media-
tion has taken so great a hold, these words seem to carry no less resonance
than they did in 1939. Indeed, if anything they have even more salience.
The recent financial crisis, for instance, has spawned a plethora of imagery
of bank bosses, once lauded by the financial press, who, having lived up to
expectations of the high-flying leader are now uniformly portrayed in the
negative. The scandal over bonuses must surely have caused the personae
implicated no end of anguish as their post-crisis image became subject to
such strong public disapprobation and derision. Our main point is that the
notion of “possession” associated with organizational role casts interesting
and helpful light on the kinds of transformation and rebirth processes that
concern us here. We may think of the role *possessing* the individual subject,
in a certain sense, and demanding that inner sensibilities go out to meet and
embrace new forms of knowledge in the broadest terms.

Jung devoted a great deal of energy to an exhaustive exploration of
the transformation motif in medieval (and earlier) forms of alchemy.⁴⁷
Throughout this engagement, he emphasizes that the kinds of physical or
material transformation that featured in alchemical experimentation and
the search for the *lapis philosophorum* (“philosopher’s stone”) was, for the
more enlightened alchemists, always located within an explicitly mystical
search for personal realization, that is, “the transformation of what is mortal
in me into what is immortal.”⁴⁸ This is a key informing trope for what
Jung describes as a process of *individuation* or “natural transformation.”
“Nature herself demands a death and a rebirth,”⁴⁹ he asserts, and the “inner
voice of the soul” is in unconscious connection with this imperative. Jung
makes the universal claim that human individuals each have *inner voices*—
what alchemists referred to as *aliquem alium internum* or “a certain other
one, within”⁵⁰—that call them toward personal and spiritual development.
Such “voices,” moreover, are not exclusively or even predominantly of the
pathological variety. We may also note in this context a more than pass-
ing resemblance between the inner voice and the function of the daemon
within Ancient Greek cosmology. Jung’s notion of individuation reinforces
our argument to the extent that it offers yet another perspective on the

operation of the unconscious in relation to the personal transformation of the kind invoked by role transition.

Discussion

The trajectory of our chapter has been to problematize the relationship between person and role to better understand transition out of leadership. We have suggested that a move from one role to another involves not so much the personal *acquisition* of knowledge as it does a rebirth of individual subjectivity followed by a longer phase of moment-to-moment rebirth; these subjective transformations being constituted by choice and enactment as well as involving certain forms of forgetfulness. We have pursued an ironic trope with respect to “knowledge,” indicating that this may be thought of as something *produced* by the role context; that is, the role entails *possession* of the individual in a certain sense. With this main argument in mind, it is interesting to note how Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious implies a level of “reversibility” of the subject/object or person/role duality. Consider Jung’s contention:

The world of gods and spirits is truly “nothing but” the collective unconscious inside me. To turn this sentence round so that it reads “The collective unconscious is the world of gods and spirits outside me,” no intellectual acrobatics are needed, but a whole human lifetime, perhaps even many lifetimes of increasing completeness. Notice that I do not say “of increasing perfection,” because those who are “perfect” make another kind of discovery altogether.⁵¹

Of course, this framing of the personality/unconscious duality in Jung’s modernist hands takes on a progressive hue that sees some kind of “essential” personality “evolving” toward greater levels of “completeness.” What we take from this quotation, without endorsing such essentialism, is the implication that the boundary between personality and collective unconscious is necessarily *permeable*, perhaps even illusory in the last analysis. By analogy, we would want to claim that the same level of boundary permeability and reversibility characterizes the relationship between person and role—that these notions are intimately interconnected and that it is a matter of perspective or emphasis (informed by rhetorical purpose) which guides whether one recovers “knowledge” as something pertaining to the “within,” “without,” or “in-between” of person–role.⁵²

Conclusions

One implication of this chapter is a theory of knowledge that refers to ideas as wholes rendered particular by role holders: we suggest that two processes involved in this particularization are *choosing* and *forgetting*. A second

implication is to interpret learning as the realization of properties inherent in a role, rather than the acquisition of new personal knowledge. A third implication is that roles now appear as affordances, offering unforeseen opportunities.

We have argued elsewhere that managing oneself in role involves disciplining intra-psychic processes, disciplinary practices that might take Stoic spiritual exercises as their source of inspiration.⁵³ In the present chapter, we argue managing oneself in role also involves perceiving, internalizing, and working with knowledge that becomes available through taking up a role, including conscious and unconscious aspects of knowledge. In particular, we have drawn attention to the processes by which certain kinds of knowledge are brought into being by the confluence of person and role, which we characterize as a knowledge nexus. Epistemologically, we claim that roles are so closely associated with some forms of knowledge that they might even be defined *by the knowledge to which they give access*; and further, that it makes sense to think of this knowledge as a potential awaiting actualization by a person taking up and managing themselves in that role. We suggest a theory of knowledge that refers to ideas as wholes, rendered particular and “known” by role holders’ forgetting and remembering. In terms of Plato’s Myth of Er, it is as though the new inhabitant of a role effectively *chooses* birth in that role and has, as a consequence, to engage in a certain form of “un-forgetting” in order to discover the practical *truth* of what such rebirth entails.

As a further implication, this perspective affords us an ironic take on “learning.” In place of learning as the *acquisition* of new personal knowledge and practical competence, the myth inspires us to think in terms of realizing the propensity or potential *inherent* in the role—the meeting of personal, previously conditioned sensibilities with the newly expanded (or diminished) context of responsibility and organizational duty. Learning occurs through the un-forgetting or openness to the moment-to-moment experience of the rebirth in-role. This suggests new insight into the function of *reflectiveness* in leadership and management development.⁵⁴ All too often, reflection is described as learning from past events and sometimes as reflexive awareness of the here and now. What is implied by our discussion is qualitatively different, arising from participation in intellectual and affective wholenesses, and thus transcending purposive human agency.⁵⁵

These observations support our argument that roles should be approached as affordances offering unforeseen opportunities. These include the accomplishment of self-concepts often referred to as identity work,⁵⁶ and also the realization of ideas and systemic knowledge, conceived as impersonal latent potential within a system.

We began this essay by speculating that “after leadership” is akin to “after life,” because it requires leaving behind the identity-boosting devices of power and efficacy. However, our close analysis of Buddhist, Jungian, and Platonic accounts of death suggests that leaving leadership is not such a

special case after all. Many role transitions—and many developments within role—may be characterized as death and rebirth, forgetting and choice. After leadership might be a particularly strong case, but not a special one. This is a theoretical proposition that we hope might be explored empirically.

Wider Implications for Leadership

Although our focus has been on the individual, we believe our argument has wider significance for civilization.

The balance of global power is shifting, challenging cultural and political faith in democratic decision making, consensual leadership, free trade, and the inevitability of technical progress. In a 2009 speech to the United Nations, President Obama named a litany of threats to a world order that values (at least normatively) democracy, individual human rights, and market economics. These are terror, unending wars, genocide, nuclear proliferation, poverty and disease, and melting ice caps. It is now clear that all of these are linked, and all of these are terrible; but the last is of a different order, signaling the collapse of objective conditions for human life by non-human processes that are likely already beyond mitigation. We face the likelihood of the death of our civilization, if not our species (amongst the multitude of deaths now characterized as “the 6th extinction”).⁵⁷

Many authors focus on how societies will adapt to changes brought about by climate change and biodiversity destruction and pollution, combined with those wrought by digitization and globalization, along with massive and ubiquitous migration. These conditions will stretch the meaning of the well-established term “adaptive leadership,”⁵⁸ but perhaps if combined with “resilience” (Rockström et al., 2012), there will be sufficient continuity for us to develop and recognize leadership in more or less familiar ways. But there is more than a chance that changes will be severely disruptive of the moral norms by which we assess authority to be legitimate. This is a theme we have explored elsewhere,⁵⁹ arguing that social and cultural collapse undermines common understandings of what counts as good action, virtuous characteristics, admirable behaviour, and wise leadership in general. Such times might properly be called catastrophic (κατά (*kata*) = down; στροφή (*strophē*) = turning), and for many societies, such as those subject to violent colonization, the catastrophe has been terminal. Hence our interest in death and what might survive the collapse of the powers, competencies, and meaningfulness that characterize a vibrant society, and at this level might suggest other ways of pursuing “after leadership.”

Anxiety about catastrophic endings has always inspired messianic tyrannies and millenarian anarchies,⁶⁰ but these have proven ineffective preservers of civilizations, cultures, and institutions. Catastrophic collapse removes the institutionalized practices by which a civilization legitimates unequal allocation of power and influence. Leadership is a phenomenon of these

institutional processes, not their cause. When institutions collapse, the legitimacy of leadership goes with them. So to hope that leaders will carry us through hell is a vain fantasy.

However, there may be a more “radical hope” (as Jonathan Lear⁶¹ suggests) to guide the soul of a civilization through catastrophe. This hope may be embodied in those whose way of life prepares them to choose (and to forget) with aesthetic finesse—like Odysseus before the throne of *Adrastia*. The quality of choosing and the tonality of forgetting may vary; it is not things or events that carry forward in memory, but values and aesthetics that characterize a way of living. In Buddhist meditation practice, the sustained movement of consciousness that we might call “self” is refined to concentrated attention (choice) and non-attachment (forgetting).

Though in contrast to the pomp of leaders, such asceticism has always been respected. Perhaps it lies behind the current popularity of mindfulness practices—the sense that we must prepare not to have, to control, or even to know, but to choose. Maybe this is what comes after leadership.

Notes

- 1 Ibarra (2003); (2007).
- 2 Gabriel (2004).
- 3 Morgan (1986).
- 4 Popper (1945).
- 5 Plato (1965).
- 6 Plato (1973).
- 7 Plato (1960).
- 8 Plato (1993).
- 9 Plato (1993).
- 10 Plato (1951).
- 11 Plato (1987; 1993).
- 12 The image of the spindle of necessity occurs also in *Timmaeus* (Plato, 1965) where a more detailed symbolic cosmology is described, but which does not directly touch on the concerns of the present chapter.
- 13 Plato (1987: 617e).
- 14 Plato (1987: 618b).
- 15 Plato (1987: 619b).
- 16 Plato (1987: 619d).
- 17 Plato (1987: 619d).
- 18 See Hadot (1995, 2004) on the meaning of the “philosophical life.”
- 19 Becker & Carper, (1956).
- 20 Obeyesekere (2000).
- 21 Zaleski (1987).
- 22 Fox (2003).
- 23 Stevenson (1974, 2003); Head and Cranston (1977); Cranston and Carey (1984).
- 24 Grof (1975).
- 25 Currie et al. (2010).
- 26 Thomas Taylor quoted in Anon (1936: 59).

- 27 Nārada (1980a); Evans-Wenz (1960).
- 28 Evans-Wenz (1960).
- 29 Nārada (1980b: 257).
- 30 Nārada (1980b: 260).
- 31 Case & Gosling (2011).
- 32 Plato (2005: 321c).
- 33 Carr and Lapp (2006).
- 34 Klein (1959).
- 35 Jung (1953–1983, 5: 207–273).
- 36 Jung (1953–1983, 5: 228).
- 37 Jung (1953–1983, 11: 517).
- 38 Jung (1953–1983, 11: 517–518), original emphases.
- 39 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 116).
- 40 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 114).
- 41 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 114).
- 42 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 119–120).
- 43 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 120).
- 44 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 120).
- 45 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 120–121, added emphases).
- 46 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 122–123).
- 47 Case and Phillipson (2004).
- 48 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 134).
- 49 Jung (1953: 9: 130).
- 50 Jung (1953–1983, 9: 130).
- 51 Jung (1953–1983, 11: 525).
- 52 Case and Gosling (2011).
- 53 Case and Gosling (2007).
- 54 Branson (2009).
- 55 This might be what Aristotle refers to as *theoria*, the fourth intellectual virtue (after *arête*, *episteme*, and *phronesis*) in *Nichomachean Ethics*.
- 56 Brown (2018); Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas (2008); Ashforth (2001).
- 57 Kolbert (2014).
- 58 Heifetz (1994).
- 59 Gosling and Case (2013); Gosling (2017).
- 60 Cohn (1957).
- 61 Lear (2008).

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