Symbolization
Representation and Communication

Edited by James Rose
SYMBOLIZATION
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ABOUT THE EDITOR

James Rose, PhD, is a Fellow of the Institute of Psychoanalysis and a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He has a private psychoanalytic practice in London. He has worked in the Brandon Centre, an inner city charity specializing in the psychotherapeutic treatment of adolescents and young adults for the past twenty years.
Because psychoanalysis is a science of subjectivity, it is no surprise that symbols and symbolic phenomena have been of central interest from its inception and early development. There are few phenomena more obviously subjective than symbols. They conjure a particular fascination because of their enigmatic quality. For this reason, they manage to communicate something in an obscure manner. Thus, they partly hide. This duality and ambiguity approaches the fleeting and evanescent quality of subjectivity itself, at its most subjective. The word symbol is derived from the Greek symbolon, which denoted an object cut in two, constituting a sign of recognition when those who carry it (them) can assemble the two pieces. It was used by members of the early Christian church during times of persecution when it could be fatally dangerous to announce one’s faith without ensuring the identity of those to whom one spoke.

Thinking about symbols in this descriptive way introduces us to their complexity. However, it is not the most immediately helpful approach to understanding symbols as phenomena, because...
it omits immediate consideration of how symbols are formed and how they are used by the individual and the groups that seem to gather around them. The essence of a symbol is that it has a meaning for someone. It is this that distinguishes a symbol from a sign, which is usually taken to mean a stimulus for some kind of action. This action is not necessarily mediated in any way by conscious thought. A danger sign is a prompt to escape the danger without any pause for thoughtful reflection. Pavlov’s dogs formed associative links between the ringing of a bell and salivation, which were termed conditioned reflexes. These links, however, did not create symbols because the “symbolizer” had no conscious choice in how to respond on presentation of the sign. Thus, the bell does not become the symbol of meat to the dog.

This simple division between symbol and sign based on the possibility of choice and thought does not quite stand up to the test of experience when we hear a fire alarm. Whether we waste no time to escape the building probably depends on other cues besides the alarm bell itself. The smell of smoke and the sound of running feet and alarmed voices will no doubt influence how we interpret the danger. If we suggest that a sign stands for action whereas a symbol represents an experience, then I think we get to something more useful, particularly if we add that the experience itself may only be partly open to consciousness. It is this that makes the symbol of interest to students of subjectivity.

Initially, the promise of symbols to the pioneers of psychoanalysis was based on their offering access to the unconscious. Like dreams—and manifest in dreams—they seemed to promise to be part of the “royal road to the unconscious”.

An example comes from Joan Riviere (1924) who reported in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis that:

Speaking of homo-sexuality between women for the first time in analysis, a woman patient expressed disgust at such a practice. On being asked the origin of this feeling, she said: “Well, it’s not so much disgusting, perhaps, as boring. I mean it seems such a pointless idea, so utterly meaningless—like trying to play tennis without balls!” The next moment she herself laughed at the quite unconscious significance of what she had said. [p. 85]
The development of the concept of symbolism in psychoanalytic theory

Freudian psychoanalysts have differed from their Jungian counterparts in their regard for symbols because they have been increasingly narrowing their focus on to individual experience. The idea that symbols might have some cultural relevance, giving access to a collective unconscious, is of little interest to many of the Freudian persuasion, be they classical Freudian or followers of one of the post-Freudian pioneers. Exceptions might be thought to be the Lacanian development, with its development of the concept of the symbolic order as distinct from the real, and the imaginary orders and the work of Winnicott and associates (e.g., Milner), who have sought to show that artistic endeavour could be understood through the concept of transitional space and transitional phenomena.

In recent years, symbols as phenomena have not captured the imagination of the psychoanalytic community in quite the way they once did. The last symposium at an IPA congress on symbol formation was in 1978, to which Harold Blum and Hanna Segal contributed. At the IPA congress in Chile in 2000 there was a contribution to a panel on “Affect, somatization and symbolization”, notably by Joyce McDougall. Why there has been a comparative silence in the literature since is not easy to gauge. It hardly seems that all there was to be said about the symbol had been said. Perhaps it was the Lacanian claim for the symbolic order that had something to do with it. At the symposium in Jerusalem in 1978, Harold Blum stated quite categorically that the unconscious was not structured like a language as if it were an objective fact rather than a way of thinking about the unconscious.

Over the past century, development of the concept of symbolism has taken place within the different meta-psychological frameworks as they have emerged. Jones’ paper “On symbolism”, written in 1915 as a public lecture, was an effort to emphasize the significance of symbols as providing evidence for clearly unconscious processes. At the time this had an obviously political significance because the Freudian ideas were competing with the Jungian ones. The British Psychoanalytical Society had only just been formed and the establishment of the unconscious as something of
scientific interest and a legitimate object of serious scientific research could not be taken for granted. Jones was battling not just for an acceptance of Freud’s ideas but also to raise the status of psychoanalysis to one of a science and a method of legitimate psychological inquiry.

However, Jones saw symbols as rather primitive, demonstrating a poverty or deficiency in a capacity to communicate. Nevertheless, he saw them providing evidence for the existence of unconscious process.

If the interest in symbols to psychoanalysts in the early part of the last century was because they provided evidence for unconscious process, the reason for their being of interest had changed by the middle of the century. In this country, the Controversial Discussions (see King & Steiner, 1992), prompted by the arrival of Viennese psychoanalysts into a British Psychoanalytical Society heavily influenced by Melanie Klein, created a tension because the protagonists used different models of subjectivity often without realizing it. At its most fundamental, the issue that divided British psychoanalysis was the philosophical one of how we can know reality in the sense of its objectivity. Freud believed that we can never know reality in a totally objective sense.

Freud (1915) held that:

In psychoanalysis there is no choice for us but to assert that mental processes are in themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the sense organs.

And further that,

Just as Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical to what is perceived though unknowable, so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object. Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to be. [ibid.]

If we accept that our perception of reality must be a creation partly determined by unconscious processes and born from our
desires, of which we are only partly aware, then we must accept that we cannot fully grasp the external world. This is Freud’s radical proposition, which challenged and continues to challenge our illusion that we are essentially rational beings. Klein’s concept of “unconscious phantasy” led some to believe that it was possible and technically important to interpret in the transference a patient’s hostile impulses towards the analyst. This they did much sooner than a classically trained psychoanalyst, who would wait until it was clear that such hostility was interfering with the free associative process.

As mentioned above, thinking in this descriptive way is not the most immediately helpful approach to understanding symbols as phenomena, because it omits immediate consideration of how symbols are formed and how they are used by the individual and the groups that seem to gather around them. Initially, the promise of symbols to the pioneers of psychoanalysis was based on their offering an access to the unconscious.

As Blum (1978) remarked in his summary of the colloquium on symbol formation at the IPA Congress in Jerusalem in 1976, there has been a tendency to concentrate on what symbols might mean rather what created them in the first place and what their function might be. Thus he said:

The whole subject of symbolism remains of great importance and a central topic for psychoanalysis, but has received infrequent systematic study (Donadeo, 1974). While there is much in the literature on the meaning of various symbols, there is little theoretical discussion of the symbolic process and symbol formation, and considerations of the different symbolic forms and products. It is now common knowledge, even for the layman that a train can represent a penis and a tunnel, a vagina, but the how and why of symbolism has been relegated to scattered articles in the psychoanalytic literature. [p. 455]

Without fully understanding its implications, most psychoanalysts have used an essentially Cartesian concept of subjectivity (see Cavell, 1998). As Cavell has pointed out, this concept can be characterized as “the first person view”. The problem with this position is how one introduces a notion of objectivity. As a beginning in thinking about how different analysts have addressed this problem