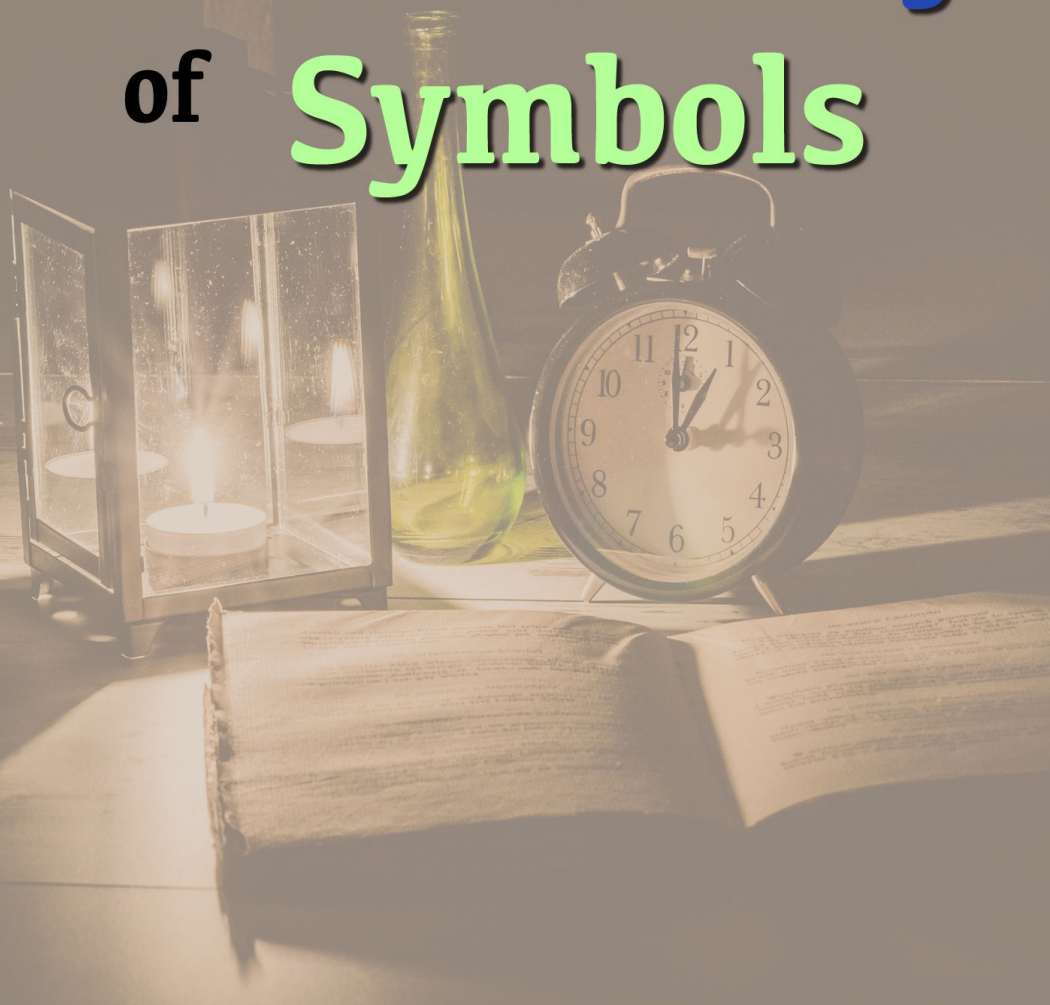


THEORIES OF SYMBOLISM

The

Scientific Study

of Symbols



CHARLES A. SARNOFF MD

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SYMBOLS

Charles Sarnoff, MD

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Theories of Symbolism* by Charles A. Sarnoff

Copyright © 2002 by Charles A. Sarnoff

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Table of Contents

[THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SYMBOLS](#)

[SYMBOLS, CONSCIOUSNESS, MIND, AND BRAIN](#)

[SUMMARY](#)

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SYMBOLS

SYMBOLS, CONSCIOUSNESS, MIND, AND BRAIN

INTRODUCTION

The symbolic forms, which are accessible to scientific study, are the natural (simple and cryptic) symbols. They can be defined, their characteristics described, and their existence recognized by scientifically trained workers. Once symbols are so identified, it should be possible to explore the multiple brain locales in which are situated the mental functions that produce the characteristics of each natural symbolic form. The multiple forms in which natural symbols are present (simple and cryptic) require more than a single anatomical venue.

Transcendent symbols as understood by those who live by them are not thought to arise in the brain. Rather they are assigned origins in a zone of spirit and deity, which exists beyond the boundaries of the self, the brain, and the mind. Transcendent symbols are thought to be inaccessible to scientific study. Any hint that they are cultural adaptations, similar to those of natural symbols, is denied.

SYMBOLS AND BRAIN SCIENCE

In the works of those who study the brain in hopes of identifying the lair of humanity with its multiple thought skills, mention of symbols is rare. The neuroanatomical localizations of the brain mechanisms that produce cryptic symbols have been little explored. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, brain scientists tend to define behavior with emphases limited to functions, which had been localized to areas of the brain early in the researches of their newly developing science. Such functions are simple reflexes, sensation, and the organization of space. They are less complex, less abstract and less protean in form, than the clinically manifest symbols that are found in health and pathology. In the second place the word "symbol" is tainted for scientific use. A vast majority of the billions of people on Earth define symbols in terms of Heron of Alexandria's scientifically unacceptable description of the transcendent symbol, which is, "[An] . . . external object that wakens in the senses universal knowledge

inscribed in the soul" (see Schwaller de Lubicz 1978 P 41).

EXPLORATION OF ANATOMICAL STRUCTURES WHOSE FUNCTIONS PRODUCE NATURAL SYMBOLIC FORMS

There are two natural symbolic forms, simple and cryptic. Simple symbols are found in straightforward vocabulary. Cryptic symbols are the symbolic forms found in poetry, phobia, and dreams. These are symbols, whose venue of origin is devoid of any taint of transcendence. For them, a scientific identity can be established according to the principles of the Aristotelian monistic world of science. One can study brain mechanisms and associated psychological defenses that give rise to such symbols. The anatomical localizations in the brain for these symbolizing functions are the seat of symbols in the brain.

Simple and cryptic Symbols and their underlying structures and functions mature and grow with the brain. They have a phylogenesis and ontogenesis that parallels that of the brain. They have regressed forms that follow the brain's decline in states of pathology. (See ontogenesis chapters above.) Their existence stands the test of scientific scrutiny, which, demands that an entity to be valid must be verifiable, transmissible, and repeatable. This means that the entity can be proven to have existed, can be reported to another person and can be caused to recur at will under a predictable set of circumstances. The repetition of the phenomenon must be a shared experience. Implied is the ability of a cognitive entity to be causal in effecting the environment and to have an existence, which is independent of the vocabulary that describes and communicates it. The sources of its content are to be found in perceived reality and in memory for perceived reality. Such entities amongst symbols are the simple, poetic and psychoanalytic manifest conscious symbols.

TRANSCENDENT SYMBOLS

Scientists and students of transcendence have clashing explanations for transcendent symbols. The scientific explanation for the existence of transcendent symbols holds revelation and traditional learning to be a product of inner psychological needs and transcendent symbols to be a form of cryptic symbol.>

One cannot study scientifically entities whose existence is denied recognition by science. Unless one works with a symbol, whose theory of origin is free of transcendental dualism, one cannot theorize about that symbol as an object of scientific study, for which origin in brain function can be postulated. The

origin of the idea of transcendent experience is seen from a scientific orientation to be a figment derived from the projection of a hope. Students of transcendence find support for its spiritual origin in the fact that man's need to explain the sources of awe is not satisfied by the what and how answers of science. Transcendent symbols persist because of man's need to find expression for concepts, which though abstract, appear to be concrete and capable of being physically causal. Examples would be life's beginnings and the adventures of the soul after death. If all the potential knowledge that science is capable of uncovering about the multiform faces of these abstractions were uncovered, there would still be unanswered questions about the nature of the first mover¹. Religious belief would not be extinguished.

Transcendent symbols are assigned origins in memory. The pertinent memory content is derived from that which is taught as revealed. In turn the origin of such infused knowledge arises from mystic experience derived from the experienced words and wills of deities. This point of origin lies beyond the boundaries of scientifically defined reality and is beyond the power of science to explore. The study of transcendent symbols is the province of spiritual and transcendental loyalists who recognize in their definitions that transcendent symbols do not have a locus of origin in the brain. For transcendentalists recognition of meaning for symbols is derived from traditional teaching about universal knowledge inscribed in the soul. Such knowledge is based on direct personal and private experience of sights, senses, and auditions, whose origins are imputed to a spiritual flow in worlds beyond man's boundaries. A point of entry from this "beyond" is posited.

From a scientific point of view, transcendent symbols are understood to be manifestations of simple, poetic and psychoanalytic symbol constructions. The search for the anatomical origin of symbols must be limited to simple and cryptic (poetic and psychoanalytic) symbols. The pursuit of an anatomical locus of origin for transcendent symbols can be likened to a search for diamonds in the glistenings of the firmament.

SUMMARY

Scientific hypotheses about the anatomical brain origins of symbolic forms must be limited to the simple, psychoanalytic and poetic groupings of symbols. Simple symbols have conscious links between

representations and referents. Affects are little involved in their production. Their unitary meanings fit well their primary role of serving communication. Natural masking cryptic symbols, by definition, are derived from referents whose meanings are retained in zones excluded from consciousness. Cryptic symbols are used to explore new insights, inform abstract conceptual memory and protect the borders of the system consciousness. Their multiple meanings encourage philosophy and underlie reflective consciousness. Affects are strongly involved in their production. The alteration in the intensity of affect that results from the displacements that underlie cryptic symbol formation is necessitated by the need to counter the impairment of adaptation and function, which would occur if strong affect were permitted to enter consciousness. The search for their locus of origin in the brain must include affect regulation areas.

NOTES

[1](#) An Aristotelian reduction (E.B Search)