

The Embrace of Paradox for the Healing of Humankind

Dimensions of Apeiron: A Topological Phenomenology of Space, Time, and Individuation

By Steven M. Rosen

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Review by Elizabeth McCardell

“[F]ragmentation is now very widespread, not only throughout society, but also in each individual” (Bohm, 1980, p. 1). Alberto Melucci observed accordingly that, given “the surging flux of events and relations...[t]he points of reference used by individuals and groups in the past to plot their life courses are disappearing” (1996, p. 2) (Rosen, 2004, p. xii)

Why is it, Steven Rosen asks, that while we have among us highly intelligent, talented, and inventive people, our problems instead of diminishing are increasing. He suggests that the root of these problems is that the quest for self knowledge, i.e. reflective consciousness, has been hindered by turning whatever we seek to know into an *object*, including reflective consciousness itself. In this way, it has alienated itself, ourselves. An act of prereflective reflection is required, such that the self is no longer regarded as object nor for that matter free standing subject but, as Rosen puts it, “the embodied fusion of subject and object that constitutes the paradox of apeiron.” It is *apeiron* we must come to know.

At the heart of this fragmentation is the change of our experience of time and space. It is this process of change, indeed, transformation, that needs to continue to happen; indeed, as Rosen traces in this book, it is a change necessary for the individuation (the making whole) of Western society and the individual. This individuation recognizes the interrelationality of all human beings and the earth in which we dwell.

Apeiron, the Greek word for “wild being” or the chaos of primordial nature, has been repressed in Western society, suggests Rosen. Western philosophy has had no real place for this uncalculable, timeless spacelessness, and though little inklings of its underlying presence have emerged in artistic work and certain philosophical ideas (e.g., Nietzsche and Heidegger), mostly it has been denied out of a fear that this primal formlessness, this “inchoate

flux of opposites or contraries” will negate human reason and individuality (cf. p. xiv). The “Black Goddess,” a frequent personification of *apeiron* in this book, will facilitate the process of individuation. She will assist the arising of selfhood from the chaos of amorphous projections, shadows, etc. not in a spirit of denial but through our embrace of her internal paradoxical nature.

Steven M. Rosen (Professor Emeritus of the Departments of Psychology and Philosophy, Staten Island/City University of New York) endeavours to illustrate how the paradoxical nature of *Apeiron* may be understood. He draws upon mathematical topology and especially the Möbius strip and the Kleinian bottle. The Möbius strip is a loop with a single twist, such that surface α becomes surface β when followed around; inside becomes outside, outside inside. A Kleinian bottle may be theoretically constructed (for the attempt to make one would tear the surfaces of the material used) by placing a left-handed Möbius strip on a right-oriented one, superimposed point for point. Just as the two-dimensional Möbius strip demonstrates the melding of two surfaces into one, so the Kleinian bottle describes this same property, but with an added dimension. This “forth” dimension, Rosen declares, calls into play the *Apeiron*. The interplay of surfaces α and β illustrates well the interrelationality of apparent dualities but the reality of the hole of the bottle disrupts the formness of the bottle; it introduces discontinuity and as the author suggests “engages the ontological dimension of human being; that is not just another framework for reflection but a dimension that entails the prereflective depths of Being” (p.192) The act of incorporating the hole engages us in an active process of making whole the threefold continuities of subject, object and space. Rosen says that by consciously embracing the paradox of *Apeiron* a person may realize concretely their own incipient wholeness, a thesis that is debatable.

Rosen’s efforts course a path through a history of Western philosophy, particularly existentialism and Heidegarian phenomenology, cultural theory, physics, mathematical topology, and alchemy—which makes for interesting yet sometimes difficult and to my mind contentious reading. Rosen pleads for a greater concretisation of the *Apeiron* yet he does not adequately engage in an actual concretising of his arguments. He writes of embodiment yet does not really explore the body per se. An example of the latter, for instance, arises during his critique of Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of touch as a way through to exploring subjectivity and objectivity, to be found in Rosen’s final chapter of the book under review. From Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the*

Indivisible (1968), Rosen (p.173) notes the following: he, Merleau-Ponty,

illustrates the interchange of subject and object as a “veritable touching of things, where the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things” (pp.133-134). What we have here is a free reversibility of subject and object wherein, one moment, my left plays the role of subject, fingering an object, say, the keyboard of this computer; while, in the next moment, my left hand itself becomes object to the “subjectivity” of my right hand. ...

Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that arising from bodily experience subjectivity and objectivity can be experienced intermittently but not simultaneously. From Merleau-Ponty’s grounded exploration of the phenomenological lifeworld, Rosen extends Merleau-Ponty’s argument beyond what I believe the latter intended. He suggests that because of the said experiential gap of subject and object, Merleau-Ponty’s argument for a subject-object relationality is self-limited and remains too abstract. This is curious, given that Merleau-Ponty’s insight arises from an embodied account and is not argued theoretically. Such a critique is peculiarly at odds with Rosen’s intention for this final chapter where Being is intended to be explored as a concrete reality.

Rosen investigates the notion of individuation in this book referring only to Western thought, as though the West has not engaged in travel and intellectual exchange with the so-called East. His frequent calls upon the ideas of Heidegger, for instance, never mention the latter’s experimentation in Zen Buddhism and the philosophical ideas of the Kyoto School of Japan which grew out of an interest in Heideggerian phenomenology. Rosen’s exclusion of Eastern thought is particularly odd given his previous journal articles and books where he examines such philosophies in considerable depth.

The explanation of individuation in the book is definitely Jungian and as such bears Jung’s worldview. The personification of *Apeiron* as “Black Goddess,” Mother Nature and “she” is witness to this, as is the description of the supposed linearity of human intent through Western history. The unexplored relationship of the individual to society means that Rosen asserts the individuation of the individual will be the individuation of society. His use of particular artistic works (painted after all by individuals) to illustrate the individuation process in society bears witness to this—a leap I am not willing to take. In his endeavour to trace the progress of individuation and

its aligned demystification of the *Apeiron* in Western society, he commits, I believe, a further error: the simplification of philosophic thought throughout the history of our civilization, from ancient Greece onwards. The whole of the Middle Ages, for instance, is dealt with cursorily: "During the Middle Ages, there was little overt evidence that individuation was being further advanced" (p. 10), thereby forgetting the considerable experimentation of meditators throughout this time. Hidegaard of Bingen, among others, explored in depth what Rosen asks of us in this book: to recognize our wholeness as subject-object, self-others, *apeiron*-ego, etc.

Rosen's determination that it is our perception of time and space that has held us back from realizing our wholeness and interrelatedness is theoretically interesting, but I'm not convinced. What happens outwardly in art, science and religion cannot necessarily be construed as a development of an entire people. I mean, many people today are as Newtonian in thinking as they have ever been; for many it is as if quantum physics has never happened. Another point, arising from this, is that Rosen's emphasis upon product of thought and not upon its process is of dubious value. A painting or a thesis is not the same as the creative process itself. Creativity may be said, after all, to use the energy of *apeiron*, to make concrete an article of intent. The suppression of *apeiron* would make such an endeavour impossible.

Solve et coagula, "dissolve and coagulate," the alchemists' proposed method for bringing into being of the gold of the self, may be applied to this book. A wonderful brew of ideas and very readable at that but gold? Perhaps not. Recommended anyway.