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Psychosis as the Failure of Symbolization

Abstract:

After offering a brief outline of Cassirer's fundamental ideas on symbolization, the article looks at its application to psychopathology, e.g. psychosis, a theme not introduced by Cassirer himself. Psychosis is conceived of as a distortion of a fundamental symbolization, a radical metaphor, thus elaborating a version of Cassirer's own line of thought. Cassirer's concept of basis phenomena appears to provide a fruitful conceptual scheme in this regard. At the same time, a case is made for the reappraisal of an anthropological brand of psychopathology. It constitutes a qualification of the currently dominant biological psychiatry, offering a legitimate perspective on psychic disorder, albeit a relative one in both cases – a vision in line with Cassirer's basic assumptions of symbolization.

Keywords:

Cassirer, basis phenomena, psychosis, symbolization, anthropological psychopathology

This article aims to present very briefly an image of man as a symbolizing being that is able to interpret itself and is thus endowed to a certain extent with the capacity of reflection. As a matter of fact, any image of man has to be substantiated in human and cultural sciences, as well as being founded in a philosophical tradition, in order to acquire any validity. For the purpose of the foundation of the concept of man as a symbolizing being, we should be inspired by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) who introduced the concept of man as an *animal symbolicum*, in connection with his voluminous *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, his *chef d'oeuvre*, a philosophy of culture, written in the 1920s. Next to it, a substantiation of this concept will be offered, applying this concept to a particular human science: psychopathology, conceived as the study of pathology of symbolization.

Cassirer

Cassirer's reputation has suffered from some misunderstandings. Being familiar with a wide range of philosophical and scientific domains, he was conceived as the last universal scholar of the twenty century in Europe.¹ In terms of the content of his work, he was often seen as one of the last great philosophers of culture.² Reputation-wise, if justified, this would present in our post-modern age a lethal blow, as it would relegate him to the mausoleum of history. However, this does not do him justice, because rather than concerning himself only with culture in a narrowed-down sense ("European culture"), his final focus is on culture *per se*, on man's cultural or symbolic mode of existence: the broad conception of culture embraced by Claude Lévi-Strauss as well as Sigmund Freud in his *Civilization and its Discontents*. Indeed, in his philosophy of the symbolic forms, Cassirer demonstrates how Kant's ideas can be developed into a theory of culture, symbolic forms, and ultimately into a theory of symbolization.³ His main thesis is that man's knowledge does not mirror nor duplicate reality, but represents brutal reality through images, words and formulas, relying on symbolic forms in which language plays a key role. And yet each of these systems is characterized by the same lack: being limited to representing or symbolizing reality as something else, without truly reflecting or duplicating reality itself. Their capacity to represent is based on this lack, on this inability to duplicate. Nonetheless, this lack works out positively rather than negatively. Indeed, it enables representation, or productive representation, as well as the creation of a wide variety of symbolic systems. The very inadequacy of any symbolic system creates the need for more symbolic systems, a need that can in fact be addressed. The lack left (and created) by a particular type of symbolization can be filled by another, complementary or corrective type of symbolization. This symbolization will take a variety of shapes and can be substantiated through a wide range of media (language, science, art, religion and so forth). While none of these will show reality in its true form, each will use their own unique "refractive index" to project reality. Thus, reality is only given as one single manifestation out of a pluriform range of manifestations: as a rock or rock formation, as food on the table; as radiation, as $e=mc^2$; or as fascinating or terrifying – while none of these manifestations can be singled out as the "one and only true" manifestation.

Brutal reality or the real being exhaustive eludes any such attempt. The real is processed symbolically – through images, languages or formulas – but reality itself is excluded from this process. As a result, man does not coincide with his natural body, nor does perceived nature coincide with nature itself, while knowledge of the other is charged with misunderstanding. Thus, man is denied access to immediacy – to life, brutal reality, to the Other. Inevitably, any type of mediation, of symbolization, leaves a gap, one that can manifest itself in all kinds of ways: maybe as an experience that does not match theory, or as an unexpected, indefinable impulsive act, or as an event that cannot be dealt with or symbolized in one's own life, ultimately leading to a trauma.

Obviously, this fundamental view of pluriform disclosure of reality may not appeal to all, or indeed provoke fierce criticism. After all, science, most notably the world of physics, make claims regarding ascertaining the nature of reality as it is. So too the fields of natural sciences, life sciences and neurosciences attempt to tell us exactly what nature is, what life is, what the mind is, and will undoubtedly continue to do so. And religion is a thing of the past, isn't it? Criticisms such as these are typical of the dominant discourse: man is

1) Jürgen Habermas, "Der Befreiende Kraft der symbolischen Formgebung," in *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung*, eds. Dorothea Frede, Reinold Schmücker, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1997), 81.

2) Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

3) Antoine Mooij, *Lacan and Cassirer. An Essay on Symbolisation*, trans. Peter van Nieuwkoop (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018 forthcoming).

an animal, man is his brain, psychic disorder is a brain disease (according to the currently accepted concept of disease realism that holds that mental disorder, while not being primarily a construct, does exist as such in external reality).

In this context, Cassirer is particularly relevant, with his elaboration of a pluriform access to reality into a broad philosophy of culture, which encompasses a host of symbolic forms (myth, religion and art, language, law, science and so forth). Indeed, conceiving and seeing in whatever form, is partial, perspectivistic. Rather than applying an immutable hermetic code, symbolizing or representing means applying a system of representation that is insufficient to mirror reality, whilst offering a disclosure of reality.

Symbolization: three sources and three domains

The process of representation ends what went before, replacing it by a mediated presence: “No being is tangible or accessible except through meaning.”⁴ In this mediated presence, something will appear as being present through a reference to what it is not itself (another mental event, an image, a word, a formula and so forth). Quintessential is the *a*–figure: *x* as *y*. By necessity, anything will be conceived as being something else as well. Secondly, by virtue of this *a*–figure, symbolization is also differential in nature. Indeed, any qualification allows a different one: *x* as *y* ... or *a* as *z*. This turns symbolization, thirdly, into a dynamic process: *x* as *y*, or *a* as *z*, ... and so on, which is maintained as it unfolds. Thus, reality is disclosed, relying as it does on an empty space created by the symbolic itself, with terms mutually referring to each other. Only from and within the symbolic realm can reality appear as entities, being different from each other. Cassirer comments evocatively: “Outside this clearing, reality remains in eternal darkness, an undifferentiated and infinite primordial ground....”⁵ This disclosure of reality, this transformation, eludes explanation, lacking ground, being creative itself. And myth would then be its first outcome, with language following in its wake.

Radical metaphor. Both myth and language, images and words, break open the more or less closed circuit of stimulus-responses, interlacing it with a world of symbols, a symbolic world which implies a radical metaphor, a transmutation. Indeed, decisive for man is only the symbolic, not the organic.⁶ And that acquirement implies not only a transition into another category but actually the creation of the category of the symbolic itself. That is a huge step: a step from the immediacy of life, a fundamental caesura. Indeed, myth, like art or objectifying knowledge, all of these arise in a process of separation from immediate reality, raising a barrier against it.⁷ This has the result that the spirit in its relation to life, without turning against life, always stands opposed to it: It is going beyond the primordial ground of “life”. That means that life itself can never be the

4) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 299. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, in *Gesammelte Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Birgit Recki, Volume 13, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 345.

5) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, volume 4: *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, eds. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven /London: Yale University Press, 1996), 31.

6) Christian Möckel, “Kulturelle Existenz und Anthropologische Konstanten. Zur philosophischen Anthropologie Ernst Cassirer’s,” *Zeitschrift f. Kulturphilosophie*, 3, Heft 2 (2009): 209.

7) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 2: *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 24. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, in *Gesammelte Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Birgit Recki, Volume 12, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 30. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 284. Cassirer, “Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis,” 326.

source of the symbols in which reality is first comprehended and understood, in which it “speaks to us.”⁸ This raises the question about the possible nature of this source.

Three sources. To identify this basis or source Cassirer reaches back the concept of original phenomenon, derived from Goethe but fleshed out differently.⁹ He devotes a number of important sections to this topic, written circa 1940 but having been published later on. In Cassirer’s conception, Goethe distinguished three fundamental domains of reality: (1) the sphere of each life of being a continuously moving flow or stream, which nonetheless represents a unity (monas); (2) which goes on to step outside itself, interacting with reality and with others; (3) which ultimately is objectified in works that remain and that transcend the life unity’s life span. However, Cassirer does not conceive these three domains as ontologically distinct spheres of reality but rather as perspectives on reality, only from which reality can be disclosed. Consequently, they are given a different name – he speaks of “basis phenomena” rather than “original phenomena”. They do not refer to reality itself, but to its conception or disclosing from each of these perspectives. Thus, in processing and reinterpreting Goethe’s concept, Cassirer remains faithful to his own philosophical principles – basis phenomena are perspectives, functions rather than entities.¹⁰ Quite plastically, he summarizes their specific character as follows:

They are the windows of our knowledge of reality, by which the phenomenon “reality”, i.e. reality as a phenomenon, discloses itself. They are the fundamental modes of mediation, through which reality reveals itself to us; they are the look that we cast upon the world; they are the eye, so to speak, that we open up; and in the opening of the eye, the phenomenon reality, reality as a phenomenon or as a world, discloses itself to us.¹¹

While modifying the content of Goethe’s concept, Cassirer adheres to his tripartition. Life inescapably presents itself to us as a unity (monas), as an I (the sphere of “life” itself, the I-Phenomenon). Next, it meets with opposition from a non-I, external reality, another, a you, thus introducing it into the sphere of action and reaction, the Action-Phenomenon. Finally, this leads to the production of lasting works with an objectivity of their own, each of these referring to a community, to others, the Other: the sphere of the Work, the It-Phenomenon, e.g. the spirit of objectivity. As a result, every basis phenomenon will offer nothing more than a window that can be and needs to be filled and made concrete in all spheres of reality. Indeed, a basis phenomenon is not a concrete phenomenon itself, but may generate concrete phenomena.

Thus, they can find an application in the in the field of philosophy, to the extent that any basis phenomenon can inform a unique type of disclosure of reality.¹² Indeed, it can be effectuated from the I-perspective, along the path of intentionality, from the Action-perspective, which includes the shared situation, and from the It-perspective, which contains the objective structure of myth, language, science – from the objective mind. Thus, this tripartition reflects the position of respectively phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structural analysis. Moreover, they can find a concrete application in the field of psychology, discussed by Cassirer himself.¹³ In the extension thereof, an application to the field of psychopathology could be examined. Not being mentioned by Cassirer himself, it would be an appropriate field, according to this line of extension. Hypothetically, the

8) Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Volume 4: *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 30–31.

9) *Ibid.*, 127–190.

10) *Ibid.*, 136.

11) *Ibid.*, 138.

12) *Ibid.*, 166–190.

13) *Ibid.*, 143–153.

concept of a radical metaphor, a fundamental symbolization, would offer the basic research question, its role in the genesis of mental disorder, conceived as a modification of symbolization, which may be played out on each basis phenomenon, with each basis-phenomena referring to reality outside symbolization: three domains of the real, being transformed into the three basis-phenomena, three sources of human experience.

Three domains. These domains turn out to be: (1) the real of life and the body, (2) the external real, and (3) the primordial Other – a concept not being developed by Cassirer, but introduced here. Through this fundamental symbolization, each undergoes a mutation – a transition to a different state of being, a transfer to a symbolic universe. Firstly: life, the immediacy of life (*Unmittelbarkeit des Lebens*). The vital tension inside the body is represented, and through representation is transformed into a subjective body, which enables the experience of the body as one's own body ("I am thirsty", "I am hungry", "my ear aches"), thus replacing the condition of physical tension. Outwardly, one's own body will function as a cradle of intentional relationships, enabling a representative connection with that which exists externally, adopting form as intentional phenomena (bread, water). Thus, the real of life is transformed into an intentional experience, effectively pushing out or denying access to the immediacy of life itself. As life is turned into an experience, life as such must give way. Secondly: the external real (the static real). Along this path, the real is disclosed as a "world", as a range of different situations. In this case, the external real is presented as a world of space, of time, causality and interaction, with the external, exhaustive real being tamed, hemmed in. Thirdly: here, symbolization, transformation focuses on the primordial Other, enabling a world of intersubjectivity. However, these three domains have not to be conceived in a substantive or ontological way, but rather as standing in relation to a function: the symbolic function, only to be grasped, conceived within and from the effectiveness of the symbolic function *in actu*: from the basis phenomena. This transformation can be seen as a "labor of culture" (*Kulturarbeit*), to quote Freud, which might be compared to reclaiming the Dutch *Zuiderzee* from the sea: "*Wo Es war, soll Ich warden*", which can be translated as: "Where It was, I must come into being."

Failure of symbolization: psychic disorder

However, the process of fundamental symbolization is functional itself and is therefore remains at risk of functional "failure". This possibility of failure of the symbolic function may carry a person beyond the limits of normality, or what is accepted as such. This possibility leads us to the field of psychopathology, the domain of the psychic disorder. What applies, is the concept of the real and of the "three domains" within it: that is exactly where fundamental symbolization, through its failure, becomes relevant. As a result, more than just highlighting an empirical field – that of the psychic disorder – from the present symbol-theory, it puts another dimension of this symbol-theory center stage, making it concrete: the inquiry into the fundamental, radical symbolization.

Fundamental idea. At first glance, the idea to look at fundamental symbolization from the point of view of psychopathology may seem odd, bizarre even. And yet this is precisely what Cassirer did, proceeding from the notion that what a function accomplishes behind our backs can be identified at the point where this function fails, or partly fails. Through this deficiency, the mechanisms of the symbolic function will show themselves. This notion is less outlandish than it initially appears to be, because it is in line with the fundamental Neo-Kantian concept that the workings of the mind cannot be identified directly or through introspection (as opposed to what transcendental phenomenology believes to make possible). It can merely be reconstructed, namely on the basis of what mental functions accomplish, based on their outcome (*Ergebnis*). Cassirer himself applied this insight to the field of neuropsychology, or neurology, by drawing on data supplied by the neurologist (and his

cousin) Goldstein: the well-known case of Schneider.¹⁴ Drawing on neurology should not surprise us either, seeing that the basic notion is not just Neo-Kantian, but is actually derived from the medical field: dysfunction shows the function. This proved to be a fertile point of departure, reconstructing as it did the traditional neurology based on clinical picture and the pathological-anatomical substrate, the post-mortem establishment of the various brain part functions, to construct a “map of the mind” – a detailed image of the brain that may have been refined by modern neuroscientific insights, but has not been changed fundamentally.

Not just in neurology, but also in psychiatry and psychopathology, this idea took hold. Goldstein, Cassirer’s nephew, was the first to apply it here, namely in the field of psychosis, of schizophrenia.¹⁵ Such an approach casts a whole new light on psychic disorder, but also on the mechanisms of the mind, of the symbolic function which illuminates a defect here. The field of psychopathology, particularly psychosis, would be more enlightening than that of neuropsychology, because the disruption in the field of psychosis has a deeper impact and therefore provides better insight into the workings of the symbolic function (which obviously does nothing to lessen the devastating effects of neuropsychological disorders). It is not surprising, therefore, that the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics (of the situation) have often drawn on psychopathology in order to clarify their ideas.¹⁶ Consequently, psychopathology can hardly be regarded as a foreign body once fundamental questions about man need to be asked. And yet: more often than not, the elaboration tends to limit itself to the psychosis, the most fundamental form of psychic disorder. And yet there is no reason for limitation, because a modification of the representation can essentially be constructed in all types of psychic disorder. Nevertheless, psychosis fulfils a key role, because it functions as a prime example, a “casus princeps”, based on which a failing symbolization may be clarified as a fundamental principle of the psychic disorder. Obviously, such a description of the psychic disorder in terms of failing symbolization is not intended to explain this condition (as is done for instance by biological psychopathology). What it sets out to do is to deepen the descriptive psychopathology, from Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as from phenomenology and hermeneutics.¹⁷ The hypothesis would then be that the psychosis is characterized by a failure of the fundamental symbolization.

Psychosis

With psychosis the relationship with the world is highly fragile or has even been severed, leading to a failed reality-testing, as may become apparent from symptoms such as hallucinations (“object-less perceptions”) and delusions (“incorrigible aberrations”). The psychotic person lacks insight into his own condition – depending on the extent of psychosis – and “believes in his own symptoms” rather than considering himself ill. He truly believes he is being conspired against, in the case of a delusional disorder, sees himself as a worthless person, in the case of melancholic disorder, or feels utterly exposed in the case of schizophrenia – and this belief is unshakeable. Indeed, the field of psychosis is classically subdivided, since the beginning of clinical psychiatry, into three forms of disorder: schizophrenia, melancholia, and delusional disorder (paranoia). The question would then be in which field symbolization has specifically failed, and where the psychotic person finds himself

14) Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 223–232. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, 257–268. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 103–116.

15) Kurt Goldstein, “Methodological Approach to the Study of Schizophrenic Thought Disorder,” in *Language and Thought in Schizophrenia*, ed. J.S.Kasanin (New York: Norton, 1964), 23–34.

16) Arthur Tatossian, *Phénoménologie des psychoses* (Paris: L’Art du comprendre, 1997).

17) Antoine Mooij, *Psychiatry as a Human Science. Phenomenological, Hermeneutical and Lacanian Perspectives*, trans. Peter van Nieuwkoop (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi Editions, 2012), 123–234.

particularly stumped, without an answer. In schizophrenia, the body turns out to be the big stumbling block, in melancholy it is time, and in paranoia it is the Other.

However, this tripartition within the psychotic spectrum, reminds us of the tripartition of Cassirer's basis-phenomena: firstly the sphere of life, the I-phenomenon; secondly; the sphere of Action (action-reaction, interaction, space time and causality); and thirdly the sphere of the Work, the It-phenomenon, the spirit of objectivity. Each of these effectuate a disclosure of reality on its own: from the I-perspective via the intentionality, from the Action-perspective via interaction within a given situation, and from the It-perspective, via the objective mind of culture.¹⁸ And each of these are supposed to refer to three domains of the real, respectively: the immanence of life as it is transformed into an experiencing body that, once included into the symbolic order, is either male or female; next, the brutal state of being that is transformed into a temporally and spatially structured world; finally, the transformation of the primordial Other into a field of intersubjective relationships driven by demands and desires. From this, three problem areas emerge (if this transformation becomes defective).

Let's start with schizophrenia. In this context, the focus is not on the silent form which was characterized by a gradual loss of social competencies and a decay of pre-predicative intentionality, where alerting symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions are initially missing. In the type of schizophrenia to be discussed here, however, hallucinations and delusions feature prominently. At the heart of the hallucinatory experience lies the body. Lying wide open, it is being irradiated, manipulated. In schizophrenia, the failure of the fundamental symbolization would therefore express itself through the ineffective transformation of a vital immanence into an "own body", a "*corps-sujet*". The non-symbolized real aspect of life manifests itself, returning as an invasion of the non-symbolized body into the subjective experience. This results in a loss of the sense of agency, and even of the sense of ownership.

The second type of psychosis is melancholia, or the psychotic depression. Here the emphasis is on the failure of the categorical structuring of time and also of space. Traditionally, depression has been regarded as a disorder of time, with the future being cut off in the temporal experience: there is complete hopelessness, with the future being cast in stone, while the person keeps thinking back to the past: – "if only I had...." – as though the past could be changed in retrospect. What we see is therefore a reversal, with the past acquiring the characteristics of an open future, whereas the future has taken on the characteristics of an immutable past. How can this be interpreted? We could say that in normality, symbolization of the external real leads to a world that contains external time (clock time), as well to an awareness of this time, the inner temporal consciousness, in which is held on to the present, the future is pre-empted and the past is remembered, and is preserved as a result. We might therefore assume that this temporalisation becomes faulty in melancholy, with a misalignment of internal and external time. This leads to the subject falling prey to a purely external time or pseudo-time, in which only loss occurs and nothing is retained in a represented form. This explains the symptom of experiencing continued loss, of time decaying, in turn bringing the consequence of experiencing decay, decomposition of the body (which is different from its open state seen in schizophrenia). A similar detachment as with time is also seen with space. Here we see an implosion of the spatial categorical structuring of the world, a detachment from the external, physical space and its subjective experience. As a result, the person involved is at the mercy of an overwhelming pseudo-space, in which he appears as bottomless and puny, incapable of pleasure (anhedonia), leaving the subject in much torment. Again, in the psychotic phenomena we recognize a specific field in which fundamental symbolization fails, with the subject being left "defenseless", unable to respond.

A third issue is found in the relationship towards the Other (the sum of all others), or intersubjectivity. This leads up to the delusion, the paranoia, where the relationship with the Other is no longer symbolized, raised

18) Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 180–183.

to the level of representation, as a result of which the subject feels haunted by this non-represented primordial Other, who is threatening by definition and is therefore experienced as evil, as having bad intent. Again, we see a return of and invasion from this non-symbolized, non-represented domain.

The problem areas in these three traditional forms of psychosis are, from the symbol-theoretical perspective: the body (in the case of schizophrenia), time and space (melancholia), and the Other (paranoia). Although fundamental symbolization fails in each of these disorders in a particular domain, this does not imply that other domains would remain unaffected. After all, specific is not the same as exclusive. The disorder in the field of corporeality may be characteristic (pathognomic) of schizophrenia, but might be also associated with a disruption of the two other domains (of temporal/spatial structuring and relationship towards the Other). To put it differently: the domain-specific disruption of the fundamental symbolization is accompanied by a general disruption. This would make sense, after all, seeing that the distinction between the three domains is not watertight. Rather than referring to an ontological category, it distinguishes in relationship to a function. This explains why “mixed types” often occur – such as the schizo-affective disorder, found in the intermediate area between schizophrenia and mania, or the paranoid type of schizophrenia, which has features in common with the delusional disorder, and so forth.

Regardless of the specific domains, each psychosis will therefore show what happens during fundamental symbolization: the design of a world, of a type of social bond, of a relationship unto one’s own body. The psychosis rejects the common world, either temporarily in a psychotic episode or more permanently from a psychotic structure. This is obviously true only if and to the extent that the psychosis reaches, which usually does not encompass an entire lifetime, which means the person is able to reflect on the psychosis, potentially leading to a sense of wonder, anxiety or productivity. The psychotic person will therefore examine, in his experience and his quintessential reflection on it, what “possible worlds” there are, testing each of these possibilities. This can actually be tested in practice, seeing that this process is often associated with intense fear and other types of suffering. And yet: to the extent that the psychotic person rejects the defining frameworks of space, time and social bonds, while designing fundamentally different modalities within their psychosis, they will engage in an ontological experiment, which may or may not be liveable. The psychotic person designs a new ontology, not in theory but in their own experience, in that sense becoming an ontologist. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the psychotic experiences, the experiments that make up a psychosis, can seem very close to the thought experiment that play such a major role in philosophy. Examples include the extreme thought experiment of world annihilation which was central to Husserl’s philosophy, with the empirical world being “thought away” while leaving consciousness intact, leading to the assumption of the primacy of consciousness. Whatever the case may be, what is considered to be a harmless thought experiment in philosophy can actually become a real experience within the remit of psychosis, in the experience experiment that psychosis has turned into. It makes the psychosis not just an experiment of nature, but also of the mind: exploring alternative possibilities of symbolization within a person’s own existence.

Significance

The elaboration offered here is intended to support the concept of psychosis as a result of a disruption, or more neutral, a modification of fundamental symbolization. In doing so, it produces its own norm concept. This norm is not external, in the sense of a burden experienced by the person involved or their social environment. Instead, the norm is internal and relates to symbolization itself. It also has existential significance. From this perspective, a psychic disorder is not just a deficiency, but actually reflects core problems of existence, serving as a “reminder”: of the relationship unto one’s own body and gender, unto finiteness and temporality, and to

the Other and his desire, which everyone will have to deal with. In that sense, the psychic disorder is partially of a different order than if it were caused by a deficit. It is a type of symbolization in its own right. Thus, the existential signification stresses also the relevance of the symbol-theoretical perspective, and actually reflects its ambition: to explain the psychic disorder as a modification or a form of deficiency of the symbolic function. The psychic disorder, particularly the psychosis, demonstrates that the transformation of the real to an own body subject, to a world of space and time, and to the capacity to engage in relationships with other, with the Other, can in fact fail or occur in a variety of degrees.

The validity of this tripartite structure cannot be assessed a priori, but its feasibility may increase based on application a posteriori – a train of thought wholly in line with Neo-Kantianism. It thus offers both an explanation and support of the theory of the three basic phenomena, into which fundamental symbolization results: life, external reality and the Other. Evidently, this concept of fundamental, radical symbolization remains abstract and speculative – this is quite inevitable with such thought concepts. However, its potential applicability makes it less speculative and even concrete, with the application itself adding flesh to the theoretical bone structure.

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