

ARNALDO BALLERINI - GIOVANNI STANGHELLINI

## OBSESSION AND REVELATION: ANTHROPHENOMENOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of the relationship between obsessive and delusional thinking can be developed from a descriptive point of view, focusing the differential aspects, and from a standpoint more sensible towards the continuity linking the two phenomena, looking for those elements contributing to clarify the dynamic relationship between them. As Binswanger [1957] wrote: «In the “linnean” system of psychopathology we must clearly distinguish from the descriptive point of view as from the material point of view the psychological characteristics of the superstitious “obsession” from those of the delusion of persecution; anthropoanalysis, on its side, points to shed light upon what they have in common, which is standing at the basis of those descriptive characteristics, and which makes comprehensible the shift from one to the other».

### DESCRIPTIVE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Jaspers [1965] illustrates in the following passage the differences between the world of the obsessive and that of the paranoid: «The obsessive patient is conscious of the senselessness of the meanings which strike him. For the paranoid the meaning of the phenomena are one with reality». Also Schneider [1971] points out the «*sense of extraneousness* of the Ego, or the sense of *absurdity, of irrationality*» of the obsessive idea. v. Gebattel [1938] sharply specifies that «the paranoid would never acknowledge like the anankastic that some phenomena “assume” a meaning. For him the meaning that we call delusional is one with the actual reality (...). On the contrary, the anankastic, being possessed by a *folie lucide*, knows, more or less distinctly, of the “inexistence” of the meanings which surprise him». E. Bleuler [1960] radicalizes the egodistonic character of the obsessive idea, and the egosyntonic one of delusion, writing that the obsessive fights *against* his idea, while the paranoid flights *for* it, with it.

A very original contribution on this subject is to be considered Matussek's [1952]. He distinguished two separate phenomenological areas: delusional perception and what he refers to as «symbolic awareness», an obsessive modality of perception. His theory, coherently with classical psychopathology, states that the obsessive meaning is egodistonic and felt as «derived from» and not as «part of» the perceived object: it has «more the nature of an assumption, of an opinion or a phantasy on an object, than that of a direct experience of some meaning belonging to the object itself». We can include the symbolic awareness by Matussek in the phenomenological circle of the so called «delusional notion linked to a perception» [Koehler, 1976, 1979]. According to Koehler, this psychopathological phenomenon, from a formal point of view, is situated between delusional perception and delusional idea. In the delusional notion linked to a perception the meaning of the perceived object is correct, but the meaning it compulsorily evokes is delusional.

Finally, Kraus' contribution (1982, 1983) to a modal (structural) definition of *primary* delusion is fundamental for setting its prototypical subjective character – i.e. the experience of *revelation* – distinguishing this psychopathological phenomenon from holothymic deliroids (arising from an emotional and cognitive intolerance of ambiguity and having the structure of overidentification) and from symbolic awareness.

## ANTHROPOANALYTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The acknowledgement of its *physiognomic* nature brings the enquiry about the world of the obsessive close to the analysis of the delusional world. Both are dominated by a pathological unbalance between intentional and vital significations or, in other words, both present themselves with their specific gradient of *VerWeltlichung*. The anthropoanalytical contribution is centered on the «acknowledgement of the negative values» in which is declined the existence of the obsessive patient [Cargnello e Calvi, 1961]. The essential feature of the phobic-obsessive object is, indeed, its peculiar physiognomic significance, that is its repulsive, polluting or menacing meaning which overshadows its common and obvious meaning. We send back to the classic analysis by v. Gebattel, Straus and Binswanger. V. Gebattel [1938] stresses the double feature of material and moral corruption of the impurity from which the anankastic defends himself: it is, at the same time, moral stain, guilt, sin, and «urogenous and coprogenous pollution». He traces back to the original *stagnation* of time (common to obsession and melancholy) the genesis of the anankastic distorted world, whose physiognomy is that of dirt-rotten and putrefaction.

Straus [1948] ascribes obsession, in its psychotic variety, to the pathology of the sympathetic relations between man and his world. The world grows homogenous in the physiognomy of decay and loses any polaric articulation, so that decision and therefore action becomes impossible. The aim of Straus' analysis is «to grasp the intrinsic unity of the manifold symptoms and their relation to each other and to a basic disturbance» and so doing it proposes itself as a general nosological model, contributing to our understanding psychiatric syndromes referring to constitute psychopathological *nuclei*, i. e. homogenous and meaningful worlds.

Binswanger's contribution [1957] is centered on the relationship between obsession and delusion in the *Case of Lola Voss*. Lola's «linguistic oracle», in analogy with Matussek's symbolic awareness, is both an obsessive and delusional phenomenon. It is obsessive since it is felt as an egodistonic compulsion, and delusional since it is based on the delusional assumption that destiny speaks through symbols whose interpretation can save man from the making of one's own fate. From the anthropoanalytical point of view, the question concerning obsession and delusion can be clustered in two groups of consideration: the first concerns the classic criterium of egodistonicity and syntonicity. The second, more specific, concerns the metamorphosis of the pathological world: the more objectified is the theme, the more it embodies the significance of delusion of persecution. In delusions, the polluting, repulsive and menacing features «emanate» from the object and are conferred to it by «somebody»: they become means through which the *numinous* reveals itself.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

What can give us further help in order to distinguish the obsessive experience of symbolic awareness from delusional perception?

From a purely phenomenological point of view, truth is defined as the coincidence between intention of meaning and intuitive fulfilment. But phenomenological «intuition» has nothing to do with the self-revelation of the authentic meaning of an object. According to Stevens [1974], the very intuition must be understood as an active «giving of meaning» and a phenomenological theory of truth can be built on the basis of the characteristics of the «act which gives the fulfilment»

[Husserl, 1900-1901]. Such a theory of «truth-in-the-making» will be consistent with the fundamental phenomenological statement according to which our commonsense knowledge results from a synthesis of «passive revelation and active structuration» [Stevens, 1974].

In other words, a theory of truth as *epistemic attitude*, functional to the topic we are here dealing with, can be based on the analysis of the grade of consciousness the subject may have of contributing to create his own world. This «consciousness of the Ego activity» is unimpaired (though latent) in the normal existence, is less intact when emotional instances prevail on rational ones (holothymia), is impaired in the symbolic awareness and completely lost in delusional perception.

As it is very well known, Jaspers [1965] broke up the phenomenological unity of Ego consciousness into four components, the first being the «consciousness of activity». Schneider [1971] preferred the notion of *Meinhaftigkeit* (experience of what concerns me). Minkowski [1966] wrote of the «intimacy of the Ego». Synthetically, the positions of these Authors can be summarized as follows: Jaspers lists a series of psychopathological phenomena describable according to his notion, while Schneider uses the criterium of *Meinhaftigkeit* to separate obsessions from delusions. Minkowski postulates the existence of a *trouble générateur*, common to minor symptoms (such as mental automatism, dose to compulsive experiences) and delusional symptoms, consisting on the loss of Ego-feeling.

We propose the hypothesis of dysfunctional *continuum* of the feeling of Ego-activity, of a gradient of oblivion of the consciousness of being actively makers of one's own world of meanings. The meaning of the delusional perception concerns me, but does not belong to me: it belongs to the object itself and is revealed by its presence. It comes from the object to me. In the obsessive symbolic awareness the meaning comes to my mind, but this is felt as an indirect and compulsory evocation. In normal existence, the meanings propose themselves non-problematically, though there is always present the possibility of acknowledging the contribution of Ego-activity to the constitution of the world. In the obsessive, the consciousness that the meanings are proceedings from the activity of the Ego is *irritating* and tormenting. The obsessive knows that he cannot but giving that peculiar meaning to that object of the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

The concept of «fading of consciousness of Ego-activity» is here intended as the functional matrix at the basis of the *continuum* linking obsessions and delusions. The phenomenological analysis sends back to a functional bias, while the anthropoanalytical one outlines the essential physiognomy of the distorted worlds. The lasting problem, now (as Binswanger [1960] asked himself many years ago), concerns the type of relationship between the phenomenological and the anthropoanalytical grounds. Are they just two different methodological areas? Or is there an actual relationship between functional bias and physiognomic distortion?

And, in this case, which hierarchical relation between them? Or, last question, are there two different «axis», not interacting but cooperating in making the final picture of the pathological world? These are theoretical questions with which psychopathology should confront with.

But there is a further problem, carried out by the questions listed above, concerning the *identity* of the obsessive and the deluded patient. In the delusional world, what we call the psychotic part owes the identity.

In the obsessive existence, which represents a «psychosis without madness», the healthy part holds the identity, but it is the ill part that mediates the meaning-relations with the world. The obsessive world mirrors the psychotic part: the meanings are attributed by the ill part, and lived as absurd by the healthy one. *The unity of the being-in-the-world is undermined*. The patient lives in a world which is not his own: it is lacking that familiarity that derives from the obscure, subterranean but permanent perception of the consonance between Ego and world. It is, like the pre-delusional

atmosphere, a condition of profound depersonalization. But while in the pre-delusional perplexity the *Unheimlich* comes from the eclipse of the common meanings, in the obsessive experience it comes from the apparition of meanings felt at the same time as belonging and extraneous to the self. The delusion to which the *Wahnstimmung* leads is interpreted as the *rebuilding* of a world, the delusion into which the obsessive experience may turn has more the feature of the *rejoining* of Ego and world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Binswanger L., *Schizophrenie*, Neske, Pfullingen 1957.  
Binswanger L., *Melancholie und Manie*, Neske, Pfullingen 1960.  
Bleuler E., *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie*, Springer, Berlin 1960.  
Cargnello D., Calvi L., *Principi ordinativi per un inquadramento antropoanalitico delle fobie*, Archivio Svizzero di neurologia, neurochirurgia e psichiatria, 87, 327-350, 1961.  
v. Gebattel V., *Die Welt des Zwangkranken*, Monatschrift fuer Psychiatrie und Neurologie; 99, 10-74 (1938).  
Husserl E., *Logische Untersuchungen*, Halle, 1900-1901.  
Jaspers K., *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, 8. Aufl., Springer, Berlin 1965.  
Koehler K., *Delusional Perception and Delusional Notion Linked to a Perception*, *Psichiatria clin.*, 9, 45-58, (1976).  
Koehler K., *First Rank Symptoms of Schizophrenia: Questions Concerning Clinical Boundaries*, *Brit. J. Psychiat.*, 134, 236-248, 1979.  
Kraus A., *Identity and psychosis in the manic-depressive*, in: *Phenomenology and Psychiatry*, A. J. J. De Koning and F. A. Jennerr Eds., Academic Press, London Toronto Sidney, 1982.  
Kraus A., *Schizo-Affective Psychosis from a Phenomenological Point of View*, *Psichiatria clin.*, 16, 265-274, 1983.  
Matussek P., *Untersuchungen ueber die Wahnwahrnehmung*, *Archiv fuer Psychiatrie und Zeitschrift Neurologie*, 189, 279-318 (1952).  
Minkowski E., *Traité de psychopathologie*, PUF, Paris, 1966.  
Schneider K., *Klinische Psychopathologie*; 10, Aufl., Thieme, Stuttgart 1971.  
Stevens R., *James and Husserl: The Foundation of Meaning*, Den Haag, 1974.  
Straus E. W., *On Obsession*, *Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs*, New York 1948.

Prof. Amaldo Ballerini  
Via Venezia, 14  
I-50121 FIRENZE

Dott. Giovanni Stanghellini  
Via delle Bombarde, 3  
I-50123 FIRENZE

*A previous version of this paper was published in Psychopathology (1989; 22: 315-19). Our wish to submit it to the readers of Comprendre is meant to confront our opinions with specialists in anthropo-phenomenological disciplines.*