

World-view and culpability within psychosis

A study of "The man without qualities"

During yesterday morning's symposium on the relationship between psychosis and violence, Giovanni Stanghellini (Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio", Chieti-Pescara Italy) spoke about the nature of responsibility when the individual's life-world is taken into account.

"To be human is to be at odds with responsibility: being aware that we cannot fully control the involuntary dimensions of our existence, but at the same being held responsible for it," said Professor Stanghellini, adding that responsibility is both a presupposition and a task in our culture: a presupposition, because society expects a person to be responsible for their deeds; and a task, because responsibility is not an inborn characteristic for human beings. "It is achieved through education," he said. "As French philosopher Paul Ricœur put it, 'education is education to responsibility'."

And responsibility is achieved through the integration of responsibility and vulnerability, he explained, via the awareness that we are vulnerable to the involuntary dimension of our existence. The ethical consequence of this, particularly with respect to forensics, is that it is very difficult to extricate responsibility from non-responsibility.

Professor Stanghellini argued that standard procedures for determining responsibility are unhelpful, and he illustrated this through an exploration of the 20th century three-part unfinished novel by Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*).

The novel explores a variety of human themes through the eyes of Ulrich, whose the book's title describes. It includes, amongst many, the protagonist Moosbrugger, a murderer and rapist who is eventually condemned. Musil discusses this case in finely tuned phenomenological terms, using the standard notion of accountability and anaemic concept. Quoting this section of the book, Professor Stanghellini read: "'To the judge, Moosbrugger was a universe, and it was very hard to say something convincing about a universe.'

"Musil immerses Ulrich, his hero, in the inner experiences of a murderer, and identifies Ulrich's determination to fulfil his primary task, namely to find the vital link between thinking and doing, exploring the realm of responsibility in order



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to discover the right way to live.

"Musil commented to himself in a letter when he almost

completed his novel: 'I am concerned with the scientific study of psychology and I believe that, in the fine reports of the French psychiatrists, for example, I can both experience vicariously, and depict every abnormality, transporting myself into the corresponding horizon of feeling, without my own will being seriously affected.' This is of course the empathetic understanding of another's subjectivity."

Ulrich, explained Professor Stanghellini, is preoccupied with reality (*wirklichkeit*) and effectiveness at the same time. This manifests in Ulrich's fascination with Moosbrugger's subjectivity, and his pursuit Ulrich perceives as

'intellectual dynamite' to blow up *wirklichkeit*.

Reading the quotation from the passage describing Moosbrugger's trial, Professor Stanghellini

said: "Two strategies were locked in combat, two integral positions, two sets of logical consistency." The passage illustrates the emergence of the logic that is employed by Moosbrugger, that his act could be reasonably understood within a certain frame of reference. "Musil clearly shows in his novel is that the life world inhabited by Moosbrugger is totally different to that of our own," said Professor Stanghellini.

Speaking of another phenomenon illustrated in the same section dedicated to Moosbrugger, so-called 'hang-togetherness', he then quoted the following passage from the book:

"A squirrel in these parts is called a tree kitten, it occurred to him. But just let somebody try to talk about a tree cat with a straight face! In Hesse, on the other hand, it's called a tree fox. But oh, how curious the psychiatrists got when they showed him a picture of a squirrel and he said, 'That's a fox, I guess. Or it may be a hare, or maybe a cat or something.'"

"Moosbrugger's experience and conviction were that no think could be singled out, because things hang together," explained Professor Stanghellini. "First and foremost, we use words in order to indicate details of our life to hang together as a meaningful perception of our surroundings, linked together by meaningful connections. It is believed that a deep metamorphosis of life space also involves two or three distinct directions of objects in the life space: firstly, the separation of the object from the complete scene; secondly the experience that everything hangs together; and lastly, the concept of 'rubber-banding', a common sense natural attitude to reality."

In his conclusions, Professor Stanghellini asked whether we need transformation of the life-world to determine accountability: "Is there a link between the transformations of the life-

world in schizophrenia? Is the assessment of psychiatric symptoms and anaemic symptoms devised to assess the accountability of the patient, or should we have a fuller reconstruction of this person's life-world to establish their accountability when they exist in life-worlds that are not our own? The tentative conclusion is that a person can be

held not responsible for their deeds, if and only if they emerge out of an ontological framework that radically differs from our own."

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