

Towards a Philosophy of Psychosis

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(translated by Arnold Davidson)

The studies on infantile psychosis have produced remarkable results.¹ If one combines these studies with those on the psychic development of the child it becomes possible to construct a theory of psychosis. This theory also clarifies the structural development of a human being before it assumes the status of subject in the Oedipus conflict. Our theory of psychosis is thus also an attempt to construct a philosophy of the pre-subject.

I have found the elements for my theory in the works of Aulagnier, Lacan, Spitz, M. Mannoni and in a psychological encyclopedia.

We will start with Jacques Lacan's article on the mirror- stage.² The author observes that since the age of six months the infant has recognized his image in the mirror. Moreover, he reacts to this recognition with a series of jubilant movements. The interpretation of this behavior tells us that at this age the infant identifies with his body or assumes his bodiliness. The fact that perception has a crucial function for the assumption of the body becomes clear if one looks closely at Harrison's experiments on pigeons and Chauvin's on locusts.³ But perception is only one of the factors . The observations of Spitz show us that the quality of desire is also involved.⁴ Spitz has established that children who suffer from hospitalism fear the approach of anyone who has not come to feed them. In these circumstances these children regularly produce negative cephalogyric motions. The greatest

difference between normal children and children who suffer from hospitalism is that the former were the object of their mothers' narcissistic desire while the latter were only surrounded, at the most, by the scientific knowledge of doctors and nurses. Thus we can suppose that the jubilant aspect in the recognition of the self is the counterpart of the narcissistic projection of the mother. If one wishes, one can see here the mutuality of desires even at a time when one of the desires does not have the status of full subjectivity.

Two months after the jubilation of the mirror-stage, Spitz observed a kind of anxiety in the child which he has called the anxiety of eight months. At this age the child shows signs of anxiety at the approach of everyone other than his mother. But why anxiety and why the distinction between human beings?

It seems to me that during the two months that separate the moment of jubilation and the eight month anxiety, the child has had the time to become conscious of the alienation that is hidden in the identification with the body. In fact once the human being assumes his body as his own, there is a dimension of himself which escapes him. Although the child is the master of his movements, he does not know the result of his actions as others see it. Having assumed his body, the child no longer knows what he is for others. Sartre's analysis of the look expresses this alienating dimension in intersubjectivity very well.⁵ At the same time, this shows that the alienation of eight months is never eliminated but can only be surmounted.

Since there is a special relation between the child and his mother, namely a symbiotic relation, the child never fears alienation from his mother. Indeed the relation between the child and his mother is not necessarily mediated by the look; it is enacted more directly on the level of desire. It is here that Aulagnier's study clarifies matters for us. The author shows that there is not only a

difference between the normal and psychotic child but that there is also a difference between their respective mothers ,particularly in the structure of their desires. From the time of conception, the mother of a normal child creates in her imagination a corporeal infant

. The psychogenic mother speaks retrospectively of the infant during pregnancy as something in her related to her own body. The psychogenic mother is not prepared at the level of imagination for the autonomy of the child. From that time on, the difference between the two types of desire becomes clear with the birth of the child; one mother sees it as a loss and the other sees it as a stage in the life of the child. The first mourns about the birth, while the latter knows to give meaning to it. This difference in behavior between the two kinds of mothers is reported by gynecologists.

During the first months of life, the baby is "conscious" of himself only as a partial body in relation with his mother: particularly as a mouth in relation with a breast. The idea that the body is only seen as a partial one is not new. It was studied for instance by M. Klein E. Erikson, and P. Aulagnier. Thus the assumption of his body at six months gives the child a greater autonomy and a possibility to live without direct relation to his mother's body or a substitute.

But one sees the difference once more at the age of eight months. Anxious from the alienation felt because of the approach of others, the child must find help in order to surmount his alienation. The child of a normal mother finds this help in the imaginary desire of his mother which since his conception has desired him as an autonomous and sexual body. The child of a psychogenic mother has never desired him as an autonomous being. Indeed, Aulagnier shows that she fears such autonomy and denies it to him. Thus the alienation of a child with a psychogenic mother is increased by the structure of the mother's desire. Where the normal child finds his support, the future psychotic finds a denial. It is at the alienating structure indicated by the eight month anxiety that the

psychic evolution of the psychotic encounters its greatest difficulty.

In the development of the infant, around two years of age, there is a period of negativism. Psychologists have verified that it is the mother rather than the father who is the object of this negativism. Several psychologists have seen that the refusals at this period are not rational. Indeed, when the mother asks her child: "Do you want a candy?", his refusal does not mean that he rejects the candy. It is sufficient that she leaves the candy near the child and goes out in order for the child to begin to eat the candy. I had the opportunity to observe the following scene. It was a Sunday afternoon and the mother was going to serve cake. First she asked the youngest child (two years old) if he wanted a piece and he refused. This situation (question- refusal) was repeated three times. After the third refusal, the child took his mother's hand and kissed it. The cake was then served to the other guests at the table. A small piece of cake remained. After about ten minutes the mother asked the guests, and not the child who was sitting directly next to her, who would like the rest of the cake. Before anyone could answer, the child said that he would like a piece.

Thus the period of negativism seems not to have the function of a rational refusal but of a refusal for the sake of showing one's own will, a refusal for the simple reason of refusing. In other words, a refusal to show that one is autonomous, independent. Positively, the period of negativism is the rupture of the symbiosis with the mother and the advent of autonomy; i.e., a reference to oneself in the moment of decision. Thus it prepares the Oedipal conflict, where there is not only a mother-child relation but also a father-child one. It is only after the rupture of the symbiosis that the father can have a functional significance different from the one which the mother has. Before this rupture the child behaves towards his parents as if they were one. If one analyzes the rupture of the symbiosis with the mother in light of the alienation of eight months, it is as if the child, by his

negativism, shows himself and his mother that henceforth he no longer needs the imaginary support of his mother to surmount this fundamental alienation. In his negativism, the child assumes himself as point of reference. He is not yet a subject since he does not yet have his own identity. He has only the refusal which is his own. It is still necessary for him to pass through the Oedipal tragedy in order to become a subject and acquire his own identity. In the meantime, he has conquered his autonomy. He is at least a pre-subject.

It is exactly this acquisition of autonomy, this right of reference to oneself as it is carried out in the "no" and the refusal which is lacking in the psychotic. One only has to read Mannoni's book on The Backward Child and His Mother to be convinced of this. This same lack can explain some strange features of psychotic language. Since the psychotic does not have the power to choose himself as a point of reference or a point of view, he will have difficulty in using the personal pronouns "I" and "you" which have only a referential meaning.⁶ Or else the psychotic will tell you the following thing: "You see, for me, a fork is either wood and steel and it is the use made of it by others which makes me understand its utility or sometimes it is something that pricks, that penetrates, but then the word fork does not have for me the meaning it has for others."⁷ Or finally he will not express anything in his speech by always repeating himself with successive negations of his earlier statements.⁸

In neurosis one sees a man alienated from the image he has of himself and who asks himself who he is. In psychosis one sees a man who is not only incapable of choosing an identity but one who simply refused to choose himself as point of reference. Thus one can repeat with Rimbaud that at the heart of the "I" one finds the other, that "I am an other" since I am constituted by the support of the other. And from the moment that there is an other who has the key for the "I", there is the

possibility of supreme alienation. It is this to which the psychotic is condemned, but by an other.

FOOTNOTES

¹ P. Aulagnier, "Remarques sur la structure psychotique. I. Ego spéculaire, corps phantasme et objet partiel," La Psychoanalyse, 8 (1964), 47-67.

J. Lacan, "On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis," Ecrits A Selection translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: WW.WW. Norton & Co., 1977), pp. 179-225.

M. Mannoni, The Backward child an his Mother, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Random House, 1972).

E.J. Mishler and N.E. Waxler, "Family Interaction Processes and Schizophrenia: A Review of Current Theories," International Journal of Psychiatry 2, no.4 (July 1966), pp. 375-413.

² J. Lacan "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I," Ecrits. A Selection trans Alan Sheridan (New York: 4W.4W. Norton & Co. 1977), pp. 1-7.

³ R. Spitz, No and Yes. On the Genesis of Human Communcation (New York: International Universities Press Inc., 1957).

⁴ J.P. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press 1966), especialy the section on the look (Part Three Chapter One, IV).

⁵ This is one his case presentations, Dr. Green in Paris is asked: "Does your father love you?" and the patient answered: "No, I do not love him."

6 P. Aulagnier, *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷ F. Bleuler, *Dementia Praecox* trans. Joseph Zinkin (New York: International Universities Press, 1950), pp. 191-198.