

Psychosis as a disorder of the knowledge of essences

Psicose como um transtorno do conhecimento das essências

John Cutting¹

Abstract

This paper aims to show that what is referred to as delusional perception in schizophrenia is an experience which artists of genius have themselves experienced and portrayed in their work. The author's conclusion is that both conditions schizophrenia and artistic genius are unworldly states in which the essence of something is perceived in its most paradigmatic form.

Keywords: Schizophrenia; Art; Cezanne; Rilke; Rodin

Resumo

Este artigo pretende demonstrar que aquilo que é conhecido como percepção delirante na esquizofrenia é uma experiência que os artistas geniais experimentaram e expressaram em seu trabalho. A conclusão do autor é a de que tanto a esquizofrenia quanto a genialidade artística são estados espirituais nos quais a essência de algo é percebida em sua forma mais paradigmática.

Palavras-chave: Esquizofrenia; Arte; Cézanne; Rilke; Rodin

¹ Institute of Psychiatry, London. E-mail: jccutting@outlook.com

This paper is part of International Conference on Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology (INPP) presentation. São Paulo, Brazil, 2016.

Received: 2/9/2017

Accepted: 3/1/2017

Introduction

We are concerned here with philosophical and artistic insights into the nature of experience and knowledge gained around the turn of the 20th Century by the three founders of the philosophical movement known as phenomenology – Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger – and three artists – Cézanne, painter; Rodin, sculptor; and Rilke, poet.

We are further interested in demonstrating that these insights have a bearing on the experience, and knowledge or lack of it, of schizophrenics and depressives.

The psychotic, so my argument goes, is a living example of what Scheler, in particular, of the three philosophers mentioned, achieved in his thought experiments known as ‘reductions’, i.e. what a human being would be like if a major part of its constitution were wiped out, and, as far as schizophrenia is concerned, what the three artists came to see as the ultimate goal in a work of art.

Phenomenology, as the theoretical study of the phenomenon, and modern art, as an actual depiction of the phenomenon, provide the clues to the nature of psychosis.

Rilke’s and Kurt Schneider’s encounters with dogs

While living in Spain Rilke encountered a dog:

Recently in Cordoba a little ugly dog in the last stages of pregnancy came up to me and lifted her eyes and desired my gaze and in her look there was truly everything that transcends the particular the meaning and earnestness of our entire communication was boundless (Fischer, 2015).

Rilke was one of the greatest ever poets. He wasn’t mad. When writing his poems about animals – panther, gazelle – he would spend hours staring at the animals in the Jardin Des Plantes, a zoo in Paris. His poems are about what it is like to be a caged panther or a gazelle. His goal is to portray the essence of pantherness or gazelleness. His animals are depicted from the point of view of the animal, not as a symbol of the human being, and certainly not as a figment of human imagination as so many philosophers and artists have done. And in his

encounter with a real dog he experienced what he had been aiming at in his poetry, the sense of something mysterious beyond human reason emanating from, and behind, the animal itself.

Compare this now with Kurt Schneider's patient's encounter with a dog:

A dog lay in wait for me as I sat on the steps of a Catholic convent. He got up on his hind legs and looked at me seriously. He then saluted with his front paw. Another man was a little way in front of me. I caught up to him hurriedly and asked if the dog had saluted him too. An astonished 'no' told me I had to deal with a revelation addressed to me (Schneider, 1946/1959).

What is going on here is impossible to distinguish from Rilke's dog encounter. The fact that Rilke was sane, albeit an artistic genius, and that Schneider's patient had what Schneider considered to be a schizophrenic delusional perception, is of no help when we look at the two actual experiences.

The German psychopathologist Blankenburg (1965) attempted a similar exercise using one of Rilke's poems – The archaic torso of Apollo – and a patient of his, again with delusional perception. The poem is about a classical statue, which Rilke brings to life:

Eyes ripening like fruit [there wasn't even a head] his torso glows still like a candelabrum (Fischer, 2015).

But note the ending:

New life springs. Otherwise the stone would not break out of all its boundaries like a star; for there is no place which does not see you. You must change your life (Fischer, 2015).

As in the poet's and schizophrenic's experience with dogs, the torso, which is here only an artefact and not even alive, is looking at the poet and telling him something – You must change your life. Blankenburg's own patient was a young man in the throes of a delusional mood who saw a picture in an art shop on his way to the doctor and was captivated by its blueness. He felt bound to it and unable to think of anything else, and within the experience:

Something so endless about it, as endless as the universe.

Cézanne, Rodin and Rilke on art

Like Rilke, Cezanne would spend hours looking at an object before he painted it. He too experienced them as alive, whether they were or not, even fruit and mountains, and as saying something to him. Here he is on fruit:

Fruit are more faithful. They love having their portraits done. It's as if they're asking to be forgiven for fading (Fischer, 2015).

And like Rilke, he would experience something mystical and beyond the everyday world in them:

There are days when I get the impression that the universe is nothing more than a stream our first step towards God (Fischer, 2015).

Rodin too searched for and sculpted the inner life of his subjects:

Instead of imagining the different parts of a body, as surfaces more or less flat I represented them as projections of interior volumes (Fischer, 2015).

He too experienced bodies as other-worldly:

The body of the human being is a temple and has heavenly forms.

Rilke himself now, in a letter to his sister:

Can you think with me how marvellous it is for instance to see into a dog while walking by. I don't mean seeing through it. I mean letting oneself into the dog, exactly into its centre to the place where it starts being a dog, there, where God, as it were, would have positioned himself for a moment when the dog was complete (Fischer, 2015).

Scheler's views on art

Scheler's view on art is extraordinarily close to what we have been getting at:

The relationship of the artist to the ground of all things is a unique one: he places himself, as it were, into the location of the beginning of the world in a timeless sense The artist, a small God, begins to create a world but on a smaller scale and in pictorial fashion *He sees the world order in a singularity that he creates* (Scheler, 1947/1974).

Notice this last sentence. The artist is he or she who not only gets behind what it is to be anything in the world – as our artists above demonstrated – but by virtue of this process reveals a metaphysical pattern of meaning behind it – as our artists and schizophrenics also demonstrated.

Phenomena and essences

The three founders of phenomenology – Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger – held differing views on what constituted a phenomenon and what an essence was. None is easy to understand.

Surprisingly for someone who started the phenomenological movement rolling Husserl's ideas on these matters are the most obscure and the most objectionable (Husserl, 1913/1982). A phenomenon was anything that could appear in consciousness – e.g. an actual apple tree in the garden or the thought of number 33. An essence was the class to which such individuals belonged – e.g. trees in general, any number. He thought that the phenomenon could reside in the mind with exactly the same appearance as it had in the real world and that the essence could be perceived in the real world exactly as it was conceived of in the mind. Scheler and Heidegger thought all this was nonsense, as have many commentators since.

Heidegger (1925/1985) was closer to the mark. The phenomenon is something that does not appear. In fact it hides itself. It nevertheless determines the content and form of the appearance. So, for instance, the redness of a cherry, a speck of blood and a London bus shines forth as the same phenomenon in each of these three things but cannot actually be experienced in isolation from these things or some other red thing. It cannot enter the mind (further against Husserl) as it belongs to a non-human realm of Being (with a capital B) which makes available the incarnation of beings (with a small b) to humans and other animals through a process of *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger, 1955/1966) – a letting be of beings to an agent with the wherewithal to mesh with Being (with a capital B). As for essences Heidegger was averse to any notion of a spiritual or higher intellectual apparatus being much involved in world formation and delegated the role of class formation to language. His notions of a mysterious Being (with a capital B) behind everything that is, which somehow releases bits of it in the form of beings (with a small b) to a grateful human, resonates a little with how our artists and our two schizophrenics see matters.

It was Scheler, however, who, in my view, gave the most plausible account of phenomenon and essence, of their relationship, of world formation as a consequence, and who provided the best insights into what our artists and schizophrenics were getting at (Scheler, 1920's/2008).

The phenomenon was extra-human and extra-animal. It was the hidden nature of everything that is. It was completely inexperienceable in itself but could be brought into the human domain of knowledge and experience under the following circumstances.

For the everyday person the act of perception incarnated an individual actuality of it and the act of ideation created a thought version. The idea of something had been building up since early childhood encounters with the phenomenon, what Scheler refers to as 'functionalisation' – real objective encounters being transformed into a subjective schema for framing the experience of later encounters. The essence of anything was an amalgam of the phenomenon – the non-human object – and the schematic idea (which had gradually attained some typicality). Any post-early-childhood meeting with anything was experienced simultaneously as essence and accidental exemplar – e.g. a cherry here and now.

For the artist of genius, whose knowledge and experience of the phenomenal qualities of anything – e.g. panther, fruit – are extra-ordinary, almost inhuman, as we have seen, the incarnation of the phenomenon in the work of art is no mere copy of some real-life appearance, however adeptly this is done, but the depiction of a fictional appearance of the phenomenon according to the artist's superlative knowledge of its typicality – a depicted essence almost, *in* the world (albeit fictional) to stand alongside the ideal essence in the mind.

Schizophrenia

Many schizophrenics are preoccupied with philosophical and artistic matters. Their lives become a philosophical tangle, they experience revelations, and colours, as in Blankenburg's patient above, are imbued with new meanings. Not only this but the very way they describe their perceptual experience resembles the work of avant garde painters and poets, as Louis Sass (1992), in particular, demonstrated in his book *Madness and Modernism*. Even more germane to our theme is the fact that some schizophrenics report the sort of experience that Scheler, in his

thought experiment known as the phenomenological reduction, predicted would occur. Consider this autobiographical account by a schizophrenic patient:

In the silence and immensity, each object was cut off by a knife, detached in the emptiness, in the boundlessness, spaced off from other things. Without any relationship with the environment, just by being itself. It began to come to life. It was there, facing me, terrifying me..... When for instance I looked at a chair or a jug I thought not of their use or function – a jug not as something to hold water and milk, a chair not as something to sit in – but as having lost their names, their functions and meanings; they became things and began to take on life, to exist (MacLane, 1917).

The phenomenological reduction, as an in vitro experiment, as it were, imagines how someone would experience the world if they were pure spirit and higher intellectual functions shorn of their everyday concerns and animality. Scheler predicted that under these conditions the human being would experience an ‘essentialization’ of the world because all the casual and humanly useful aspects of something would wither away. This is exactly what we find in schizophrenic experiences of the sort I just mentioned. Scheler did not predict that the stand-alone things would take on a life of their own, but that is clearly what happens as well. Rilke experienced a headless statue as alive and Cézanne treated his pears and apples as companions with their own emotional life.

Schizophrenia, from all this, emerges as an in vivo reduction of the everyday and animal world, leaving the sort of spirituality that only artists of the greatest calibre achieved.

Depressive psychosis

Depressive delusions other than those of guilt are chiefly nihilistic:

No heart; as if I’m not here; complete shadow

I’m shrinking away; I have no eyes, no face, no back passage, no body, no hands

(Cutting, 1997).

What on earth is going on here? Virtually no-one has even attempted an explanation for these. But Scheler’s reductive experiment, known as the Dionysian reduction, the complete

opposite to the phenomenological reduction, and in which all human spirituality and higher intellectual functions are imagined as lost, leaving only an animality, provides the answer. As we have seen, the essence of what something is, in these cases bodily organs and parts, arises through an idea and the phenomenon melding together. But if there is compromised ideation, which there is in a psychotic depression, then the ability to form the essence of something is destroyed. Depressive psychosis is, in this respect, as is schizophrenia, a disorder of essences. Unlike schizophrenia, however, where the essence of something overwhelms the subject, in depressive psychosis the everyday ability to discern *what* something is is catastrophically lost, hence nihilistic delusions.

Conclusions

I have tried to show the remarkable similarity between certain experiences of schizophrenics and those of superb artists of the early 20th Century. I have further attempted a philosophical explication of this uncanny concordance in the light of Max Scheler's philosophy.

References

- Blankenburg, W. (1965). Zur Differential Phänomenologie der Wahnwahrnehmung. *Nervenarzt*, 36, 285-298.
- Cutting, J. (1997). *The Principles of Psychopathology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fischer, L. (2015). *The Poet as Phenomenologist*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Heidegger, M. (1955/1966). *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1925/1985). *History of the Concept of Time*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1913/1982). *Ideas pertaining to a pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- MacLane, M. (1917). *I, Mary MacLane: a diary of human days*. New York: Stokes.
- Sass, L. A. (1992). *Madness and Modernism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Scheler, M. (1947/1974). Metaphysics and art. In M. S. Frings (Ed.), *Centennial Essays* (pp. 101-120). The Hague.
- Scheler, M. (1920's/2008). *The Constitution of the Human Being*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Schneider, K. (1946/1959). *Clinical Psychopathology*, 5th ed. (trans. into English 1959). New York: Grune & Stratton.