

Madness and Mysticism: clarifying the mystery

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Introduction

This subject brings together two areas of abiding concern for me. Throughout my life, spiritual practice, meaning attention to the wider relationship within which my individuality is embedded - with God, or whatever form of words is acceptable, has been very important. I have similarly had a long involvement with working with people with mental health problems: initially as a volunteer in more of a service-user advocate role, but for the last ten years, as a clinical psychologist. Through my work as a therapist with people with psychosis I have been able to reflect on the overlap between psychosis and spirituality, and to contact those who have written and researched this. In particular, Mike Jackson's thesis and subsequent papers on his research on the area of overlap, (Jackson 1997) was seminal, and Peter Chadwick's book "Borderline", reflecting on his own experience was particularly helpful to me in drawing conclusions from the accounts of mystical type experience in early breakdown I was hearing from some of the people I saw in therapy.

I was working within the context of the burgeoning practice of cognitive therapy for psychosis, (see e.g. Chadwick et al 1996, Kingdon & Turkington 1994) which operates on the premise of continuity in reasoning and concern between psychotic and non-psychotic thinking; helping to draw out the "meaning in madness", and so make bewildering experiences more manageable, at the same time as providing a normalising rationale. What I propose is a development of that approach, and in no way a contradiction to it. In stressing continuity, the element of discontinuity in quality of experience between active psychosis and the everyday gets lost, and has not been adequately explained within the cognitive therapy framework. However, most people with psychosis can readily recognize this distinction when it is discussed, and sharpening that recognition helps in the development of a sense of control. Others working in the field have noted this and used it therapeutically, for instance, Nigel Mills, who characterises the distinction as "centred" versus "scattered" (Mills 1997)

In seeking to understand this discontinuity of experience, the parallel with mystical and spiritual experience presents itself. In making this parallel, I do not in any wish to gloss over the differences, or the very real distress and damage entailed in most psychotic experience. To leave aside, temporarily, the content of the experience, I want to suggest that as human beings we have access to two distinct ways of encountering (inner and outer) reality. One is our normal, everyday apprehension, filtered through our constructs, and therefore our memories and anticipations (See Bannister & Fransella 1971 for a clear exposition of Kelly's theory of constructs). This is precise, well adapted to everyday life, but in its nature, limiting. The other is an unbounded apprehension of the whole, glimpsed in peak experiences and creativity, but plunged into in full mystical experience, some drug induced states, and psychosis. Such states often entail a loss of self within the larger whole (embedded context, God/Goddess etc.) or intense relationship with Him/Her/It.

Two Cognitive Models

I suggest two ways of looking at what is going on here cognitively, with the aim of understanding more clearly a process that entails bliss for some, terror and torment for others, and significantly for yet others, both. I have already described ordinary experience as bounded by constructs, in the Kellyan sense. Bannister, a follower of Kelly, characterised psychosis as a case of extremely loose construing. I am suggesting that where this state is entered fully, the construct system, in its usual, precise, mode of operation, is essentially left behind. I therefore refer to this state as "beyond the construct system" or "unconstrued".

Another way of understanding what is going on cognitively is to refer to Teasdale and Barnard (1993)'s Interacting Cognitive Subsystems model. This is a complex information processing model of cognition, based on extensive research into memory and thinking processes, from which I propose to extract certain key elements. I will concern myself here with only two of the nine subsystems, and their associated memory stores; the implicational and the propositional. The propositional subsystem represents the logical mind, capable of fine discrimination, and the contents of whose memory store is coded verbally. It can take an objective, dispassionate view of phenomena, and in this way can learn much about the environment. There is probably some rough correspondence between this aspect of human functioning and the neocortex, the newer parts of the brain, though the rich interconnections within the brain make this sort of statement all but impossible to verify. The implicational subsystem, on the other hand, deals with perception of the whole, and with emotional meaning. Its memory system codes vividly in several sensory modalities, and its concerns are not the dispassionate study of the external world, but the inner world of the self and, in particular, its worth, and any threats to its survival or position. Again, this subsystem probably represents the older and deeper levels of the brain, to make a sweeping oversimplification of a complex subject.

Kelly's conceptualisation cuts across Teasdale's, as Kelly's core constructs undoubtedly belong to the implicational subsystem, while more peripheral discriminations will be made at the propositional level. According to Teasdale's model, neither of these two central subsystems predominates, but easy communication between them is essential for good functioning. While the implicational level communicates directly with, and is much influenced by, the body's arousal system, the propositional system is more removed from this emotional area, and indeed, can become temporarily disabled by a state of high arousal.

I would like to suggest that a simple (probably far too simplistic!) way of understanding the dichotomy between the two ways of experiencing the world in interacting cognitive subsystem terms could proceed as follows; perhaps the everyday, scientific state is one where the propositional and implicational subsystems are working nicely together in balance, whereas the spiritual/psychotic state is one where the two are disjoint, and the system is essentially driven by the implicational subsystem. The characteristics of this subsystem, and some of the characteristics of this area of experience match well. The implicational subsystem deals in relatively undifferentiated wholes and cannot manage fine discrimination; it is overwhelmingly emotional, and swings between sharp dichotomies such as euphoria and terror, or is, somewhat paradoxically, unemotional or beyond emotion. It is centrally concerned with the self and threats to the self.

The explanatory power of this model

I am aware that all this is rather speculative, but appeal to the explanatory power of the model in making sense of puzzling aspects of both psychotic symptoms, and of spiritual

experience. Operating within constructs, or between the propositional and implicational levels, represents normal human functioning. For most people, either some sort of a jolt, or a carefully designed process is needed to move them into another state. This could be a crisis, a ritual or religious ceremony designed to shift consciousness, a drug or meditative practice. For the person with psychosis, the barrier that for most of us makes this sort of experience hard to access is dangerously loose.

Where this barrier is passed in spiritual practice, the experience of the unmediated whole is usually reported as one of euphoria. I would argue that this stage is sometimes (but certainly not invariably) present in psychotic experience. Peter Chadwick testifies to this (Chadwick 1992 and 1997), and I have met it in the accounts of people I have had in therapy. It is possibly underreported in the literature as it is not asked about in standard interviews, and dismissing personally significant experiences as illness phenomena or prodromal signatures will tend to inhibit their communication. However, I am equally clear that many psychotic breakdowns do not pass through this stage of euphoria. The characteristic psychotic experience could be understood in terms of the loss of bearings because of having drifted out of reach of the construct system, or the propositional subsystem, which people rely on to make sense of their environment. The often cited timelessness of the mystical experience shows that time is one of the parameters lost in this transition. In the case of a mystical experience attained through spiritual practice, (or, as often happens, occurring spontaneously, but within a spiritual context that gives it meaning for the experiencer), managing the transition back to construed reality after the experience generally (but not invariably) occurs naturally and after a short space of time. Where the same state is achieved by taking a drug, the return again normally (but not invariably) occurs when the drug wears off.

In psychosis (and drug experiences that go wrong, or shade into psychosis), the orderly return does not happen. The individual finds themselves stranded beyond the reach of their constructs or propositional subsystem, trying to operate in the world. Not surprisingly this is extraordinarily difficult. The familiar boundaries between people, events, time and space are not accessible as before. Telepathy seems normal. Other people can read, and worse, interfere with, the individual's thoughts. Coincidences abound - everything is connected and everything is disconnected. Everything is possible and nothing is possible. Where this new reality might be exhilarating for a short while, the sustained experience is terrifying. The desperate sufferer tries to make sense of the unfamiliar environment, clutching at whatever connections come to hand. In this way delusions, which usually have their origin in the early stage of the breakdown, are born. In another dissolution of normal boundaries, internal concerns are experienced as external communication, and the person hears voices. Normal thought is disrupted - or as the psychiatrist would say, disordered.

The Logic of the illogical

In the preceding paragraph, I have started to sketch in the way in which a human being encountering reality unmediated by the construct system, or without benefit of the propositional subsystem, will make sense of it. In both psychotic material, and accounts of spiritual experience and religious ideas from different faiths, a parallel logic can be discerned that is strikingly different from, and frequently opposite to, commonsense and scientific logic. Possibly this parallel logic was and is better understood and utilised in other cultures and in former times. Perhaps this is because through science, we have gained unprecedented control over the material world, and, at least in the affluent North, created

greater comfort and security for ourselves than any of our forefathers. The logic of science has unlocked so many secrets that we have downgraded that whole area of human experience that lies beyond the reach of its logic. I suggest that this other area has its own logic, which is even more compelling, but more difficult to pin down.

It is the logic of archetypes; of myths and stories - full of paradox and a sense of mystery. Science discriminates - things are "either - or". In this realm two contradictory things can be simultaneously valid - a world of "both - and". In archetypal stories, such as the traditional fairy tales, the ordinary transitions of every human life, like leaving home and "seeking your fortune", falling in love and marrying, and death, are vested with cosmic significance. In Christianity, and indeed most religious traditions, the individual is both supremely precious, and insignificant in the context of the whole; God is distant and transcendent, and simultaneously concerned for the individual.

Such paradoxes could be elaborated endlessly. There is here an interesting parallel with a characteristic strand in the psychotic experience. A conviction of great personal importance - being Jesus Christ or related to the Queen, for instance, is a common element in delusional systems, as is a conviction of personal worthlessness, often reinforced by derogatory auditory hallucinations. The common theme here concerns the self, and the position of the self in the family, in society and in the cosmos. The construct of self is among the concepts to be lost in the transition, which can lead to an exhilarating feeling of unity and interconnectedness, as well as the bewilderment of loss of self. The theme of the self links with the central preoccupation of Teasdale's "implicational subsystem", cited above, which is the self, its value and threats to the self. I would argue that the characteristic themes of psychotic material, whether in the form of voices or delusions, concern issues of self worth, acceptability, sexuality and personal significance, which are all relevant to understanding the self. The paradox characteristic of logic beyond the constructs is the simultaneous significance and insignificance of the self.

In religious traditions, this is a mystery to be pondered, and is normally experienced as a positive, whether in the form of Buddhist negation of self, or Christian assurance of the love of God for the individual. It is in subtlety and flexibility rather than content that these ideas differ from the psychotic themes. Grandiose delusions fix on the supreme importance of the self, while persecutory voices denigrate and crush. Both can be experienced by the same individual, but they are not somehow held in balance. I would agree with the many writers, including Laing and Peter Chadwick (already cited), who suggest that well-foundedness or otherwise of the self of the individual undergoing the experience will predict whether it is a temporary, life enhancing, spiritual event, or a damaging psychotic breakdown, from which there is no easy escape.

Putting the Model in Perspective

This model does not deny a physical aspect through some disruption of brain functioning for these phenomena. In the case of drug taking, there is a simple physical cause, and indeed some ascetic practices such as fasting can create a physical precondition for mystical states in the context of spiritual practice. This model offers a complementary psychological understanding of the experience of the person suffering from psychosis as one who is trying to make sense of the world, as all human beings do, but with their usual bearings removed. It is in the tradition of the normalising exposition of psychotic symptoms in Cognitive Therapy for psychosis. Indeed, emphasising the overlap with spiritual experience brings

psychosis in from the cold region of the utterly alien and incomprehensible where it is traditionally relegated. Our society's particular illiteracy in the area of spiritual experience contributes to the even greater isolation of the person with psychosis. In 'Recovery from Schizophrenia' Richard Warner (1985) notes that in societies where experience of the spiritual/psychotic realm is valued, people diagnosed with schizophrenia have a far better prognosis than in modern Western Society. This research bears out the significance of a sympathetic spiritual and cultural context for outcome of an encounter with the unconstrued, whether labelled spiritual experience or psychosis; mysticism or madness.

I will conclude with the suggestion that this way of looking at things has implications for the extension of knowledge across the discontinuity - i.e., into the spiritual and the supernatural. I have already outlined the type of logic I see as relevant to this area; the logic of "both - and", not "either - or". If this perspective is adopted, enquiry into the unconstrued needs to be pursued with this logic in mind, with its implications of radical provisionality and paradoxicality. Fuller exposition of this subject lies outside the scope of this paper.

There will be a conference on Psychosis and Spirituality to be held near Winchester on 7th and 8th September 2000, where these ideas will be expounded more fully by the major thinkers and researchers in the subject. See leaflet enclosed with this mailing for information and details of bursaries available to Network members. The conference workshops will offer ample opportunity for discussion and examination of these ideas.

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