

## Psychodynamic aspects of drug experiences

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Human beings, living together in a specific place, are guided by common images of good and evil. These images are subject to historical changes and social patterns that assume a definite position in each and every person.

The word 'rebellion' is a term applied by society to behaviour that departs from conventional standards. Our first problem therefore will be to formulate a definition of 'deviation from established rules'.

The simplest means of labelling a person a rebel is through statistics—defining him as one whose behaviour is very different from the average. When a technician examines sugarcane, he can describe which is exceptionally long and which is exceptionally short, in relation to the average. In the same way, we can state that what is different from the average is a deviation. Seen from this point of view left-handed and red-haired people would be deviations when compared to right-handed and dark-haired people. The statistical approach, therefore, seems simplistic and even trivial.

A less simple criteria, even though a more common one, is to call all pathological behaviour deviation; but for this we are faced with the obstacle of finding a well-defined standards system, through which a typical behaviour can be evaluated.

Some sociologists and psychologists have used deviation patterns based on the processes that take place within society which tend to reduce its stability, diminishing its probabilities of survival. They classify the processes, and identify them as symptoms of social disintegration. The problem we are faced with when using this system is that the goal of a given group may often be political, and the group is not then guided by the advantage to be obtained for the organization. We can

affirm, however, that the rebel is the person who does not obey, internally or externally, the rules proposed by a given group.

During the last twenty years—and this may be due to the influence of literature and philosophy—the need for rebellion against the rules established by the social context has been emphasized. Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *Existentialism* states that: 'Since God does not exist to care for man, he is condemned to liberty, and man, in his abandon and despair, is faced with the terrible responsibility of making something of himself and of Society.'

In the Preface to Jean Genet's recently published *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, where all sorts of triangular and quadrangular homosexual experiences are described, Sartre declares that, in spite of Christian doctrine, man was born with a capacity for evil. Human beings have tried to avoid facing this fact, pretending that evil was outside and not within themselves, trying not to live it. Elsewhere in the Introduction, the leader of French existentialism declares that 'Genet is a Saint', and that the book constitutes an 'epic of masturbation'. It would perhaps be useless to try to embrace, in modern literature, all the authors who have contributed to the creation of the type of patient I shall try to describe in this work; but we should remember the names of H. Hesse in *Steppen Wolf*, Camus in *L'Etranger* and Barbusse in his novel *L'Enfer*, for they have helped to originate the kind of rebellion and in-conformity that gave rise to the search for esoteric experiences through artificial means, so as to hide the unhappiness caused by the actual anguish of man.

In 1929 when he published *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud already wrote about intoxication by means of chemical substances, saying that these were the most effective way

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of obtaining pleasant sensations; he compared the state resulting from their ingestion to mania.

In some primitive societies, hallucinatory drugs have been known for thousands of years, and had been used for divination, the treatment of all sorts of diseases, the communication of all kinds of supernatural powers, or in order to maintain the social unit.

In the Western Hemisphere, the ingestion of hallucinatory plants in Pre-Columbian times was limited; it was used from the southwestern zone of the United States to the Amazon Basin. Among the Aztecs, there were professional soothsayers who obtained their inspiration from peyote and hallucinatory mushrooms. These were said to be distributed during Moctezuma's coronation ceremony to give it a more spectacular aspect.

Hallucinatory drugs began to attract academic interest during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Havelock Ellis and Weir Mitchel wrote articles on the subjective effects of peyote. These essays stimulated the interest of pharmacologists, who isolated the active principle—mescaline—in 1896.

The rest of the story was the research carried out by the Wassons, and the publication of *The Door of Perception* by Aldous Huxley.

Hallucinatory drugs have been the object of a heated debate in medical and psychological circles, culminating in the recent controversy that took place at Harvard University, first among researchers because of methodological reasons, and then in relation to the mental health of the students subjected to these experiments. Psychologists Leary and Alpert carried out what they called their 'naturalistic' research in their private apartments, and tried to find out the effect of psilocibine on creativity, perception and memory, as well as on coenaesthetic sensations. Both researchers took the hallucinatory drugs at the same time as the experimental subjects, and stopped teaching their classes; this accounted for their expulsion from the university.

On the other hand, there are constructive uses for these drugs. In spite of the obvious

differences between the 'model psychoses' provoked by these substances and the natural psychoses, there seem to be more than enough similarities to justify an intensive research in that direction.

Besides, there undoubtedly exists a fragmentation within the ego of the person taking the drug; and the symbolism present in the hallucinations can be interpreted according to the subject's psychodynamics, as I have already shown in a previous work. The material I am going to present here is taken from the case-study of a 30-year-old patient called Sandra. It will be used to point out some important aspects of the experience with drugs.

#### CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION

We are dealing with a Jewish woman; an only daughter; of medium height, rather attractive, red-haired, who usually dresses in a strange, exhibitionistic way that is out of place most of the time. She has been married but sterile for the past ten years. She started her treatment because she was in a completely unproductive period of life, in spite of the fact that in previous years she had been a very successful painter, and had even been awarded some prizes in exhibitions in the United States.

The patient is sexually frigid with her husband, except on occasions when they smoke marijuana together. She has reached her greatest sexual fulfilment in contact with coloured people; she states that the contrast of the skins has an unusually exciting effect upon her. What really happens is that she needs devaluated objects in her internal world to respond to a man.

Her history has a certain psychodynamic interest. Her father is a man who works for the government and has kept a bureaucratic position all his life, even though as a young man he wanted to be a singer, and even attended a music school at the same time as a well-known baritone. He is wary of showing his affection and is nearly always distant. His behaviour is characteristic of an obsessive personality.



The mother is described as a saint; she is incredibly devoted to her home and to Sandra, but she is also an extremely possessive woman who created a pathological symbiosis with her daughter in order to compensate the lack of communication with her husband.

Sandra has been away from her parents for several years, but she never writes to them; when she is in the city where they live, she rents a hotel room far from her home, and we could practically say that she avoids them.

My patient's husband is an intelligent man who at one time underwent therapy due to some difficulties in his work and a certain fear of impotence.

I want to emphasize here the system of beliefs of this patient, which have led her to react against her family background, that she classifies as mediocre.

Sandra sees herself as an artist, and believes she has qualities that place her apart from other people. Her talent is something that cannot be acquired through education. This attitude gives her the idea that she is different and better than other people, especially in her creative activity.

Since she feels so intensely different, Sandra does not feel obliged to follow the conventional behaviour of those she considers narrow-minded. Therefore a therapist cannot tell her how to behave. The explanations are vivid, as if one tried to convert her into a member of the conformist group. These people lack the talent she thinks she had, and would therefore make her paint in a non-creative way.

The patient presents an intensive masculine protest, which has rendered her sterile. Any interpretation is tantamount to rejection, and makes her afraid of being symbolically defundated, and of creating something together with someone else. Pregnancy, for her, is something conventional. All women can get pregnant, and this evidently must be controlled. However, we know that this rejection is above all an attack against her mother, who frustrates her and makes too many strict demands upon her. At the same time, there exists a fear of becoming her mother as well as

of being a mother. Consequently, she avoids maternity and acts in a childish way.

Now I am going to discuss in detail the mescaline experience that Sandra carried out. From it we shall be able to extract some general ideas on the impulses that guide patients to search within themselves.

The story that I will now present was told me during the session, and the experience was carried out by the patient without therapeutic incitement.

Let us hear her:

Everything had been planned beforehand. I took the pill at 9 a.m. It was a very large capsule, and there existed the natural fear that precedes any new experience.

We went to a small church in San Angel (Mexico), and my escort showed me a monument erected in memory of a batallion of Catholic Irishmen who fought against the United States in the war of 1847.

The effects came about slowly. We went to a forest near the city. I saw fabulous pine trees, but I still felt no reaction. I began to hear the noise of the wind. I kept thinking that I still did not feel different, that these were things that I had experienced all my life.

Near there, we saw a woman making 'empanadas' (maize pancakes.) I thought she belonged to the forest, that she was the mother earth. I also felt the rays of the sun breaking against my skin. We were standing on the road, and a car went by, near us. Some people greeted us, and I thought that the feeling of friendship I was experiencing was due to the drug. Actually, they were acquaintances of my escort.

After a few minutes, I said I felt nauseous. I thought to myself that the effect of the drug was already starting, and that I could do nothing to avoid it. I sat in the car because I could not stand up. I tried to stand, but I had to lean against my companion. He took my hand and led me for a few steps. He said he saw that I could walk. I felt within me: 'Oh, it is possible that I may learn to walk.'

There was a pine wood before me, and, all of a sudden, I perceived a very subtle change. A superimposition of images that moved from one side to the other, came about. I knew that I was seeing the wood as it had been a thousand years ago. It was the beginning of the world, the beginning of



time: I thought that I saw the objects at the birth of the world. Suddenly, I looked away. I did not want to go on seeing things as they had been thousands of years ago.

A few minutes later I felt the earth move. I had the sensation that, through my toes, I could feel the planet move on its axis.

We walked a few steps, and I noticed some plants with thick stems. I looked at them, and thought I saw Christ, but his face was that of a Japanese, and his eyes were slanted. He was very old; he was bent with years and had a long beard.

Then I touched a tree, and the bark became a great landscape. The holes were caves. I wanted to run, and I climbed a hill near the side of the road. I went to the very top and felt that every step was three miles long. When I arrived at the highest point, I thought it was the happiest moment of my life. With each step I took, I saw the grass sink and spring up again. I felt gigantic, very tall and looking out at the world as if it were very small. I felt completely alive. I smiled all the time, and irradiated joy. The earth was clean and beautiful. The wind struck my body. That was probably the best moment of the day.

I wanted to be alone. We walked down from the hill, and something very strange happened. I looked at my companion and he was no longer himself. He had my face. This caused me some anguish. We went on walking and, little by little, his face took on its own traits. I said nothing because I felt that words were very slow. He did not speak either. I felt that he became like me, acquired my face, because I loved him. Afterwards I thought that we are all men and women, male and female.

We went back by car and we passed through a park. I imagine now that it was the centre of the village. There were street pedlars and some music that came from the carousel. Then I noticed the taxis on the road. I liked their colours: red and yellow. I told my friend to follow the red one and then the yellow one. They were all shiny.

We went through a few small villages, but I was not sure we were in Mexico. We were going very fast. As we were going by, I saw people and thought to myself that they would have sexual relations, that they talked and ate, that sometimes they even loved.

I felt that in all these villages lived people that I would never see. That their problems would never be solved.

At that moment I remembered my husband, for the first and only time. I thought that I could live without him, and that I was related to everybody and everybody was related to me. My life was no longer important to me alone.

Problems would stop being serious; the most important thing was to live each moment as intensely as possible. It was a feeling different from all I had felt before in my life. My companion laughed because I kept asking if we were still in Mexico.

We arrived in San Angel at 3 p.m. We went to my friend's house. I noticed a horrible stone wall that separated the house from the street. I could not stand it, and I only wanted to look at the ivy leaves in the garden. He put on a record of Wanda Landowska. The music started; it was Bach's Italian Concerto. The sound was extraordinary. I don't know much about music, but, for the first time, I understood Bach because he was saying only one thing: that harmony exists in the world. The clavichord's tone went up, but it was not discordant.

A fly settled on my face; I generally cannot stand insects, but I accepted it that time. I could not touch it because it was related to me. It came near my mouth, and I felt that it knew it belonged to me, and that it wanted to kiss me. I was related to everything: to the flies, the rocks, the ivy.

However, the man-made things continued looking horrible. I disliked the stone wall, and avoided seeing it.

My heart communed with Bach, and I understood the vegetarians, the yogas, and the people in the religious orders. I understood why my companion never ate meat. Suddenly, the bell rang. I said I didn't want to see anybody. I went up to the bathroom. Some people came in, and they changed the record.

In the bathroom I found a razor and began to shave my legs. I took all my clothes off; they were too tight. I also took off my lipstick. I opened the water tap because I did not want to hear the people talking downstairs. I looked for oil to purify myself. I wanted to be myself, without any artificial touch. The only lubricant I found was baby oil. I anointed myself with it and put my dress on, on top.

I walked barefoot and felt very clean. Then, the people left. I went down and asked again for Wanda Landowska's record. I saw the position of the sun had changed, because its reflexion on the leaves was different.



It was getting dark, and I covered myself with a blanket. I felt my body fresh. I remembered that while I was putting on the oil, I was thinking of a kind of religious ceremony.

At 9 o'clock at night I had sexual relations. I asked for fruit that was liquid inside. That was the only food I took during 24 hours.

In the morning I felt tired but not exhausted, after a marvellous experience. I was calm as though I had been exposed to the more beautiful part of myself.

#### DISCUSSION

As can be seen from the material presented, we can first of all underline the fact that the patient's ego becomes fragmented, and acquires the characteristics of the schizophrenic ego.

Patients who suffer from dementia praecox feel coenaesthetically. Sounds can acquire taste qualities. The schizophrenic patient is assaulted by perceptions that he cannot understand. In this case, we notice parts where this nearly happens: when the patient begins to feel the noise of the wind; the sensation of the earth turning on its axis, felt through the toes; the breaking of the sun's rays against her skin, etc. It is important to point out Paul Federn's concept of the ego—not as something static, but as a state of feeling, which for the author is the identity in time and space.

Hallucinatory drugs cause a disintegration of the ego in these spheres. Perceptions are extraordinarily clear and attention is usually focused on one object, which becomes identified with images of the internal world—such as the figure of the mother projected in the woman selling 'empanadas' (maize pancakes) whom the patient calls mother earth, or the stem of the plant that becomes the image of Christ.

The same thing happens in the depersonalization experienced, which is the internal image of one's self, transposed to someone else.

Sometimes complex sensations are present. The sound of music can affect the eyesight. A certain persistence or monotony are perhaps necessary to achieve the feeling of harmony. Words can also become extremely slow.

In this case we also observe the feeling of

identity between the subject and the objects that Huxley emphasized so much in *The Door of Perception*. The limits between being and not being are lost, and all is one.

It is possible that this state may condition the development of mystic experience and of ecstasy. Besides, hallucinatory drugs have been described as anaphrodisiacs, therefore this circumstance, together with the identification of the subject with objects, must have contributed to her associating it with rituals that emphasize asceticism and religion.

We must mention here that the place where the experiment takes place is extremely important. This is clearly seen in the case presented, because the experience is carried out in a pine forest, and while listening to a Bach concerto.

I would like to point out, however, something that I consider more important than the investigation of contents: that is the fact that experience with drugs is closely related to the manic-depressive state. People who take hallucinatory drugs make use of internal manic mechanisms that are activated by the effects of the substance in the blood.

The ego of the patient is weak, and lacks the sufficient strength to accept the pain of the depression; it therefore seeks the negation situation brought about by the manic phase. This mechanism can only be achieved with the help of the drug. On the other hand, we cannot forget the feeling and the oral fantasies due to the drug; neither can we overlook the fact that its pharmacotoxic effect increases the omnipotence of the drugged person.

According to Melanie Klein, the manic defences are extremely primitive and arise to control the paranoiac anguish such as idealization and identification with the idealized object, which can be partial or total. Once these mechanisms are dominated, all the frustrations and anguishes are denied and the evil and aggressive part of one's self is destroyed.

The drug symbolizes the ideal object that can be incorporated, and its pharmacological effect is used to reinforce the omnipotence. Hallucinatory drugs facilitate the possibility



of perceiving the ideal object and of identifying with it. I agree with Sandor Rado's idea, in the sense that they provoke a regression to levels of satisfaction, through the breast, just as the child uses his thumb to suggest the mother's breast. The hallucinatory experience, therefore, helps to destroy any persecutory object.

As far as drug addiction is concerned, Rado has also stated the presence of a basic depressive picture. Simmel has suggested that the frequent hospitalizations of alcoholics and drug addicts indicate different depressions in series.

I think it is important to mention Rosenfeld, who points out that the drug addict presents an important splitting of the ego, and that in the analytical situation the excess of split objects into idealized ones and despised ones make him act externally as though he were two persons. This factor contributes to an excessive acting out during psychoanalysis.

All the aforementioned points, relating to drug addicts, can be applied as well to the person who undergoes a drug experience.

I would only like to add two things in so far

as the technical handling of these cases is concerned, and especially that of the patient I have treated during the last two years. I believe the greatest difficulty lies in the creation of insight, because it is constantly denied. Another problem is that the distance between the impulse and the action is so short in these patients that the action can hardly be repressed. One example will suffice to illustrate what I mean. I once explained object-splitting between masculine and feminine; that same week, my patient tried to perform a homosexual act with a friend.

The problem of the rebel searching for himself has led him to the drug experience. Nevertheless, his conflict consists rather of his problem with life, or perhaps forgetfulness, as Nietzsche says in *The Birth of a Tragedy*:

'It is also under the influence of the narcotic potion, mentioned in the hymns of all primitive men, or because of the coming of spring that permeates all nature with happiness, that Dionysiac emotions are awakened, and the subject disappears in the world of forgetfulness.'

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