

Extrodution to the COV&R 2023 panel Religion, Madness, and Mimetic Theory

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Now that we've heard the presentations of Michael Elias and Berry Vorstenbosch, I will now take the floor to conclude this panel. I will try to shed a narrative-philosophical light to the theme of religion and madness, particularly psychosis, to show that psychosis is not so much something incomprehensible, irrational, or absurd, but that the possibility or the risk of psychosis belongs to human existence; that this possibility or risk is just part of being human.

So, if there is *anything* characteristic in René Girard's vision of human existence, it is his conception of being human as relational. Girard coined the term "inter-dividual", together with psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian, as a variation on and in opposition to the predominant modern ideology of individualism in our culture. According to mimetic theory, being human is *essentially* relational, including all the positive implications (being able to learn, being able to cooperate) and the negative (such as rivalry and the scapegoat mechanism). Essential, that is, permeating all aspects of being human. For the theme of this panel, this raises the question of what can be said about madness and religion from the relational view on humans of mimetic theory?

We can shed a phenomenological light on this question by mentally placing the basic condition of our relational view in brackets. That is to say: by switching off relationality (temporarily, in mind). The French novelist Michel Tournier (1924-2016) has done just that, in his philosophical retelling of the (originally eighteenth century) story of Robinson Crusoe. In his novel, entitled *Friday* (1967), Tournier explores what it means to be all alone, without relationships with others. He does this in a fictional way through the contrast character Robinson, a 'normal person', whose condition, however, differs from ours, namely that he is alone, not for a few days or a few weeks, but for years. What does that do to a person? I'm asking this question, and I'll give Michel Tournier's answer, to show that madness and psychosis are human phenomena, as I said. Just like for example addiction, psychosis is not an absurdity, but a possibility within human existence.

Not long after the shipwreck that landed him on the island, Tournier's Robinson begins to doubt his perceptions. It starts with him having to keep looking back to see if the island behind him is still there. But also what he sees in front of him – the things, the trees and the animals on the island – gradually becomes more shadowy and hallucinatory. Even the ground he stands on becomes unsteady because there are no others standing on the same ground. Thus, Robinson discovers by contrast, in the absence of others on the island, that it is normally the others who give our observations reliability and meaning. We know what we perceive because others can perceive the same thing. *Can* perceive. Others do not have to actually and always confirm all our perceptions, but it must be possible. On Robinson's island it is not, because there are no others.

Robinson feels that his life is in decline, that he is going mad, and he desperately tries to reverse this decline. He maniacally starts to keep a diary, so as not to lose at least his speech, and with that his humanity. He also imposes a strict order on his life. He does his daily things

at fixed times. To this end he builds a water clock, and sets a calendar, with a Sunday/rest-day on which he does not work. He is going to write a 'law book', with rules to abide by. He even builds a prison, in case he breaks any of his rules, and in which he indeed sets himself a few times. You wonder: why does he do that, free as he is because he doesn't have to take anyone into account? My explanation is that Robinson is trying to create others on the island, so to speak. After all, in our ordinary lives, the rules and rituals by which we live come from others, usually past others from previous generations. These forms were not invented and set by ourselves. By installing these himself, Robinson is trying to set up something of a community on his own. But there are no others on the island. Over time, Robinson sees the senselessness and hopelessness of his venture, and then he stops doing anything at all. He goes to live among the pigs in a mud puddle.

To arm himself against his impending madness, Tournier's Robinson resorts to religion and the law. One could say that he is going to lead a religious life. On his day-off he has set on Sundays, he reads from the Bible, which he apparently managed to rescue from the shipwreck. He names his island Speranza, which means hope. The daily rituals and the rules he imposes on himself also acquire the force of law through the religious sanction he gives them. As a result, the laws acquire a transcendent character, transcendent in relation to the precariousness that is also inherent in his life. That is precisely why the law provides guidance. But because Robinson is alone, and there are no others to support his footing, religion and the law do not function as real institutions for him. Yet religion and the law give him something important, something that helps him to persevere, namely discipline. Discipline allows lonely Robinson to remain human. Inevitably he will experience a relapse now and then, but thanks to discipline he doesn't have to stay in it, among the pigs in the mud puddle.

What does this narrative exercise by Michel Tournier tell us about the theme of this panel? One could say, Robinson's situation resembles the delusions and hallucinations of the psychoses that the experts in this panel have just talked about. In an earlier conversation with these two, in the Dominicus Church in Amsterdam, the phenomenon of psychosis was described as a state (1) in which you have lost your grip on reality; (2) in which you see or hear things that are not there, that is: that are not there for others or at least have a different meaning for others (i.e., hallucinations); and (3) in which you are convinced of ideas that are not correct, that is: that others think are not correct (i.e., delusions). This definition of psychosis hinges on the role of others in your perceptions and beliefs, which is in accordance with the insights of mimetic theory. The fictional story of Michel Tournier philosophically clarifies, by contrast, this substantial role of others in our perceptions and beliefs, in psychosis, but most of all *in general*. We can learn from this story that if there is no resonant interaction with others, or if others are simply absent, discipline may help us. René Girard's mimetic theory provides this necessary discipline.

Thank you so much for your attention.