

Casual Notes on Creativity and Schizophrenia

Jack Joseph Challem, B.A.¹

The objective of this brief paper is to casually consider some of the similarities between the perceptions of schizophrenics and those who regularly experience the creative process. The following notes are based upon personal experience, observation, and discussion. While this is admittedly unscientific in approach, I present them for two reasons: One, most discoveries are borne out from anecdotal experience. Two, it is hoped that the suggestions presented herewith will become the basis for further discussion and much more clearly defined research.

It has commonly been suggested, both in scientific and lay literature as well as in day-to-day conversation, that there is a fine line distinguishing insanity from genius, or insanity from creativity. For our purposes here, and perhaps for general practical purposes, genius can be considered as a form of creativity.

Applied genius obviously involves logical thought with a problem-solving objective. Yet genius as a form of creativity often includes the ability to examine an existing situation or problem with a fresh viewpoint and perhaps alter that situation or solve the problem as a consequence. Genius often begins with a creative spark of the

imagination or, as Linus Pauling has explained, genius is the ability of the mind to develop many ideas with only a small percentage really being exceptional. Yet it is creative to be able to entertain old thoughts in new forms, to come up with many bad ideas with a few good ones. The trick is the vast number of ideas which can be entertained.

The term genius tends to be applied to creativity which occurs in the realm of problem solving. The genius may study and solve mathematical problems; he may solve a dilemma in aerodynamics; or he may resolve a difficult and volatile political situation.

Creativity has been used more specifically to describe endeavors in the nonscientific areas, or rather in nonfunctional aesthetic pursuits. Thus the creative person might be the poet, the writer, the jazz musician, the painter, the sculptor. But creativity extends to other areas including humor and with. It may also include a creative and original chef, interior decorators, and the many other areas in which imagination is valuable.

Creativity at its most essential level involves the ability to transpose ideas. Many advances in science have come, not from a particular scientific institution or school of thought, but rather from someone outside that paradigm who arrives at and applies different concepts. Examples might include

5432 N. Campbell Avenue. Chicago, Illinois 60625.

Banting, the bone doctor who discovered insulin; Evan Shute, the obstetrician who realized the therapeutic application of vitamin E; or Abram Hoffer, who approached the study of mental illness from the biochemical standpoint without having adopted traditional and popular beliefs of psychogenesis which might have otherwise impeded his discoveries.

In the arts, creativity may appear in the form of a new metaphor to describe an age-old scene or condition of mankind (e.g., a river to symbolize the flow of life); or it may appear in writing that is stylistically radically different from precedents (e.g., the prose of Richard Brautigan); and it might appear as a different form in sculpture (e.g., Alberto Giacometti's sculpture), or as an unusual brush technique in painting.

Yet what is it that makes or allows the creative person—or for that matter, occasionally allows an average person—to transpose ideas in a manner so different from those around him? What helps him to see "the obvious," at least for a moment, when others cannot? What is it that is involved in the creation of a metaphor, a symbol, a pun?

The answers I suspect—as do many others since this is not really a new hypothesis—lie where the answers to schizophrenia rest. If those in Orthomolecular psychiatry can be considered close to understanding the chemistry of schizophrenias, they may be equally near to grasping the brain chemistry of creativity.

The ability to create, to form a metaphor, to strike a new form of art, I believe, lies in the distortion of perceptions which otherwise could be considered a **transposition of perceptions**.

The schizophrenic demonstrates these transpositions or dysperceptions involving some or all his motor skills: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. He may see stationary objects move, hear sounds that have never been created, taste poisons which are not present in his food, touch insects that are not actually climbing on his skin, smell odors which do not exist.

The schizophrenic's thinking processes also change, and they may be illogical, irrational, or inappropriate.

In creative persons, these dysperceptions and alterations in thinking occur, though usually not to the extent where they impair (1) the individual's functioning with at least a limited number of persons, and (2) their ability to convey the creative thought. The creative person is able to function in the real world, but he has what can be considered lapses into periods of perceptual disorders and the transposition of one idea over another which is the essence of creativity. His ideas are socially acceptable, at least to a limited group, perhaps socially useful, or aesthetically pleasing.

When the creative person's ability to deal with other people becomes somewhat limited, or his ability to convey his creativity (in the form of poetry or painting, for instance) is limited to the point of being esoteric, he may be considered a bit eccentric rather than downright crazy.

Without retaining some mental organization, logic, the poem, or painting would not be possible. It is at the point wherein this organization is lost that the characteristic of transposing ideas—or subjective views of reality—becomes a serious mental health concern. Sadly, it has not been uncommon to observe a creative person degenerate to a schizophrenic state in which creative expression cannot be accomplished.

History, I believe, will show—at least with respect to those famous in the arts and of whom we have knowledge of lifestyle—that creative persons lived under extreme stress. These stressful situations might have ranged from outright malnutrition to alcoholism (which can induce malnutrition) to genetic defects (which can impair body and brain chemistry) to psychological problems (which can influence our appetite and biochemistry). Stress of one sort or another seemed to be a consistent factor among these creative persons, and very likely remains as a consistent factor among large numbers of creative persons.

Stress, as we know, causes considerable alterations in body chemistry. With respect to Orthomolecular theory, stresses in sensitive individuals may result in excessive

production of kryptopyrrole which locks onto vitamin B6 and zinc and removes them from the body; ramifications of this stress-induced deficiency, as we know, may appear as psychiatric symptoms. Stresses in other persons may combine with genetic defects and result in the production of adrenochrome, a body-produced hallucinogen which accounts for some schizophrenias. These stresses, plus any ingested or injected hallucinogens, can act together or individually to disturb the normal transmission of brain signals and nerve impulses. Logically, the consequence can often be dysperceptions which may, if other conditions are proper, lead to creative thought.

It would appear, at least at first glance, that few if any of the great artists or writers or poets or musicians were creative from sheer joy; Thoreau, Whitman, and Mozart may be exceptions though this is highly debatable. History tends to demonstrate that writers, artists, and other creative persons were most creative when anguished or depressed.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian writer of **Notes from the Underground** and other novels, spent many years in the dark cell of a prison camp and was as a result without doubt seriously malnourished. At one point he was saved from execution by only seconds—a stressful situation if there ever was one. Dostoyevsky was also an epileptic, and this suggests some impairment of brain and nerve impulses. It may be reasonable to assume that this was the result of either an inborn genetic error or a manganese deficiency. Dostoyevsky was considered by his contemporaries, as well as by many modern literary analysts, to have been insane—and many of his characters appeared similarly. It is also evidenced in the title, **Notes from the Underground**.

Franz Kafka, author of **Metamorphosis** and many other existential novels, wrote frequent descriptions of himself as insect-like in his now-famous diaries. **Metamorphosis**, in fact, may have been little more than a fantasy about himself as a man who awakens one day to find himself turned into a human-sized cockroach. Until the

character, Gregor Samsa, dies in this form he must deal as reasonably as possible—considering the extenuating circumstances—with his own awkwardness, with his family's fears and ambivalence toward him, his employer's demands that he come to work, and the attitude of the cleaning lady. Life goes on for Gregor Samsa, even for a short while, in spite of these peculiarities.

While some readers have believed that Kafka foresaw the coming of fascism, others note the extreme paranoia of many other Kafka characters, including Joseph K. in **The Trial**. Joseph K., a man without even a last name, but a significant initial (Kafka), was arrested by the police, released, then "sentenced" to a struggle with an endless bureaucracy to learn the charges placed against him. He never did.

In real life, Franz Kafka was the epitome of alienation; a German Jew living in Prague. He had few friends. Kafka worked for an insurance company, which might explain the bureaucracy in **The Trial**. He also died at a relatively early age, 41, of tuberculosis. With our present knowledge of the role of malnutrition in the etiology of tuberculosis, we can assume with fair certainty that Kafka suffered severe nutritional deficiencies. Could his strange perceptions—and hallucinations—and his overwhelming depression have been due to these factors? Is it possible that Kafka exhibited the mauve factor? These are hypotheses that deserve consideration.

Dylan Thomas was one of the greatest of modern poets. He was also an alcoholic, and the cause of his death was laid to this addiction. Was it possible that his beautiful poetry came as a consequence of being a schizophrenic alcoholic? Were his metaphors actually a recording of his actual observations or transpositions of reality in his mind induced by alcohol?

Ezra Pound, perhaps the poetic genius of this century, was institutionalized in a mental hospital for years. While there is sortie controversy insofar as whether the institutionalization had political motivations, we can be sure that his prison diet did not furnish all that was needed for complete mental or physical health.

Harvey Ross, M.D., a Los Angeles-based Orthomolecular psychiatrist, has described a fascinating encounter with a female artist he had treated. The artist had an unusual style in that all of her paintings were composed of dots. When Ross asked her how she came to paint in this style, she explained that this was how she saw things. Her perceptions were applied to canvas, and they were considered pleasing and socially acceptable. Might we wonder whether the great French painter Seurat, who also painted in a style of dots, viewed his surroundings in this common schizophrenic view?

Along similar lines, the Cubist movement in art might also be considered. Were the originators of this style in art expressing not only a clever and dramatic way of rendering scenes, but instead courageously recording their true perceptions? And if this was the case, what are we to say of the works and lives of Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, M.C. Escher, and others?

And with regard to music, what of the tortured lives of Beethoven, or Chopin, or modern jazz musicians who bring so much pleasure to our ears? What nutritional and chemical dependencies might they have had? What of Jimi Hendrix and the other acid-rock musicians who emerged in popularity in the sixties? Their artificially, in-

duced schizophrenic states (via LSD) probably accounted for auditory disturbances which they reproduced as wailing guitar notes and what some considered to be deafening and unharmonious music. This is especially interesting to note in light of what we know about how sounds become exaggerated in volume and distorted to the schizophrenic. While many persons were repulsed by such music, many others were subject to similar auditory experiences. Still others could appreciate it as simply a newly discovered or expressed facet of the human personality.

History clearly demonstrates that artists were tortured souls—if not by the notes of their contemporaries, then by the artistic works themselves and by the moods they convey. The stresses that existed in their lives may very well have affected their body and brain chemistries seriously enough to distort their perceptions, and allow them to see a different and often mystical reality. True, their anguish gave us much beauty, but their anguish also left them with much pain.

The precise relationship between their creativity and their brain chemistries is an area that deserves further exploration. It is very possible that what the poet considers a metaphor, the psychiatrist considers a hallucination.