Beyond the Psychosomatic Phenomenon

Reflexions on the Life of Blaise Pascal

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The term 'psychosomatic phenomenon' could, in our view, be defined as the characteristic 'inner emptiness' or 'lack' of the psychosomatic patient, that is, his meagre fantasy, poor interpersonal relationships and his inability to experience and elaborate in the psychic sphere {Stephanos, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976/77b). This phenomenon is rooted in disturbances in the area of primal identity (Lichtenstein, 1964) and primary identifications, which have resulted in the subject remaining bound to his primary significant object in an inescapable relation of dependence throughout his life.

The lack of adequate 'primary maternal preoccupation' (Winnicott, 1956) in very early infancy is a major factor contributing to the establishment of this primary deficiency in the patient and to the corresponding psychosomatic fixation mechanisms: he responds to tensions directly with somatic disturbances, which can lead to organ lesions and even death. This is what we call the pathological disorganisation. Disorganisation and reorganisation processes work together to determine the specific economy of the individual, influencing the development of his illness and with it his fate.

The hypothetical scale in figure 1 shows how a person can be characterized according to the degree to which he is dominated by the primary deficiency or filled with psychic life, as the case may be. The primary structural 'lack' is localized at the lower end of the scale. Here we find the patients who, with no neurotic defence processes at their disposal, are always more or less at the mercy of destructive forces. At the upper end of the scale are the character-neurotic patients whose primary deficiency is embedded in a psychic organisation, remaining largely compensated. Between these two extremes are the patients with 'allergic fixation mechanisms' and the 'mechanistic character neurotics'.

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4. Partial regression-, character-neurotic patients
3. Global regression: patients with 'allergic' fixation mechanisms
2. Progreident disorganisation: 'mechanistic' character neurotics
- Primary structural 'lack': patients with unstable 'vie opératoire'

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Pense'e opératoire and extent of mechanistic sector

Variance of Psychic sphere

mechanistic sector (fantasies, neurotic
due to constitutional defence mechanisms)factors

Fig. 1.

The concept of the psychosomatic phenomenon has recently brought about a number of misunderstandings. It has often been mistakenly assumed that the entire personality, and not just a sector of it, is claimed to be affected by the primary deficiency. For this reason it seems to us to be especially important to stress how very complex the psychosomatic phenomenon can be, and in particular to show how the extent to which a person's life is influenced by it depends upon how far his individual capacity for elaboration has been able to develop. If he is able to suffer from his inner emptiness and, through experiencing it, to work it over on a psychic level, his primary deficiency and psychosomatic affliction can help him towards a differentiated form of reorganisation and so even to creativity.

The life of Blaise Pascal, the 17th century religious philosopher and genius in physics, offers us a good illustration of this thesis.

Blaise Pascal was born on 19th June 1623 in Clermont-Ferrand as the third child and only son among four children. His eldest sister died as a

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small child. His second eldest sister, Gilberte, was 3½ years older than Blaise, while Jacqueline was 2½ years younger. His father was a high-ranking civil servant with a passion for mathematics, whose house was a meeting place for the highest intellectual circles. His mother, Antoinette, well known for her piety and self-sacrificing love for the poor, died when Blaise was 3 ½ years old. Towards the end of his first year Blaise was taken ill with a disease which decisively moulded his psycho-biological evolution. He suffered from 'cramps' which lasted 12 months and then spontaneously disappeared. In his biographies (by Gilberte Pascal-Périer, his

sister, and Marguerite Périer) we find the reference: 'il tombe en chartre' (Anzieu, 1975). These biographies provide detailed descriptions of his symptoms: 'He screamed, kicked violently and fell into a state of agitation.'¹ ² Conditions were also described which showed signs of death: 'He had neither pulse nor voice nor feeling, and became increasingly colder; after a while he returned to his senses.'

Two situations precipitated these conditions: when he came in contact with water, or when his parents approached each other in his presence.

In our view, this indicates in all probability a typical example of infantile affective spasms, in this case of the serious pallid form which, according to Lombroso and Lerman (1967) comprises 19% of the affective spasms known to occur in childhood. The more frequent cyanitic form (81 %), which particularly affects the respiratory system, is seldom accompanied by generalized muscle cramps.

The pallid spasm is usually caused by pain or excitement and is accompanied by a standstill of the heart for 8–10 sec and a cerebral anoxia. The child turns pale and loses consciousness, with tonic-clonic fits often to the point of epistonus. This functional disorder, typically occurring in the second year of life, is described by Kreisler et al. (1974) as a deep-rooted pathological disorganisation which is comparable to the experience of the 'petite mort' (the temporary 'little death'). The involvement of the entire social environment is another important element of the syndrome.

Blaise's illness leads us to suppose that his relationship to his mother during his first year of life was full of tension and that there were conflicts

1 Translator's note: In the absence of original English translations at the time of publication, all quotations are translated from the German sources cited in footnotes 2 and 3.

2 Gilberte Pascal-Périer: *Das Leben des Blaise Pascal* (Rüttenauer, 1938).

3 Guardini, R.: *Einführung zu 'Blaise Pascal-Gedanken'* (Rüttenauer, 1937).

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between his parents. His mother showed two typical sorts of behaviour -one overly careful and hectically oppressive, the other hysterical and phobic – which exerted a pathological influence on his development. On the one hand, as an overprotective object she smothered him with exaggerated care and attention ('pare excitation') which aroused unendurable unpleasure in him. At the same time, however, she clung anxiously to her son, whom she strongly eroticized, in order to avoid sexual contact with her husband. Various incidents that have been recorded are evidence of the discord between Blaise's parents. For example, his father once publicly accused one of his wife's proteges of having bewitched his son.

The mother had conveyed an idea of the primal scene to her son too soon, at a time in which he was still unable to assimilate the oedipal tensions. The result was a defective establishment of the primal repression, whereby his body underwent a pathological autoerotic cathexis.

In accordance with our conception of psychosomatics the affective spasm can be seen as a form of disorganisation which established itself on the basis of the primary deficiency. On the one hand it represents the violent experience of somatic deterioration, on the other a mechanistic, orgiastic discharge in the relationship to the erotizing mother. In other words, through the attacks the intolerable sexual stimuli are released directly on a somatic level, without any psychic involvement. Thus, in the course of his second year Blaise Pascal had to acquire character-neurotic defence mechanisms to enable him to keep his objects at a tolerable distance and to manipulate his environment according to his needs.

The death of his mother one year after the birth of his sister Jacqueline meant for Blaise the loss of his primary significant object. After experiencing the 'petite mort' in his own body in the affective spasms he suddenly found himself confronted with death in the outside world. His feeling of inner emptiness could now no longer be compensated. At the same time his mother's death aroused in him the guilt-ridden fantasy that he had destroyed his sexual object. This is the basis for the repression of his dependency wishes and his feminine identification. For the rest of his life he never fully cathected another sexual object and strongly resisted offering himself as such to others. On a piece of paper which he always kept on his person in later life he had written: 'It would be unjust if others were to become attached to me, however joyfully and freely they may do it. I would be misleading those in whom I aroused such a desire, for I am no object for another person and have nothing with which to satisfy them. Am I not destined for death? Thus, the object of their attachment would die. For if I am guilty when I cause another

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to believe an untruth, however winningly I may speak and however much pleasure it may give me (to be believed), so too am I guilty if I stir up love in another or if I attract other people to my person, for they should use their lives and endeavours to please God or to seek Him.'²

After his mother's death, Blaise was taken care of by his fond father and a governess who went by the name of 'ma fidèle'. Soon afterwards his father gave up his post in the Royal Treasury for a number of years in order to devote himself entirely to the education of his son. Thus Blaise never attended a school. The fact that he was caught up in a 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1965) saved his unstable energetic equilibrium. In addition, he now began to develop a close relationship to Jacqueline, the 'worthy sister'² whom he looked upon as his own daughter, later even as a substitute for his mother. Gilberte describes their relationship as follows: 'He could love nobody more than he loved my sister ... for their feelings were so alike that they agreed in all things; and their hearts were surely one heart.'

His childhood passed until puberty without further disturbances. At 11 years of age his self-taught studies in mathematics had progressed to such an extent that, without any help, he discovered Euclid's 32nd theorem. Thereupon his father offered to let him join in with the activities of his learned circle of mathematicians, a group which he had kept closed to him until then. In so doing he demonstrated anew his readiness to open up his intimate world – the highly cathected mathematics – to his son and so enabled Blaise' awakened spirit to find its first reality in the world of theoretical science (Loch, 1976). In this way Blaise found security and stimulation, even if this rational truth was not yet embedded in a sensory dimension.

The following description of the illness which began in his adolescence shows the nature of Pascal's specific psycho-biological economy.

From earliest childhood he was sickly, weak and feverish and in Gilberte's account we find that along with many neuro-vegetative symptoms he also suffered from a feeling of emptiness in his body. At 18 a series of functional disorders and hypochondrial anxieties appeared. The records mention anorectic symptoms, loss of appetite, epigastric pains, heat in the bowels, unbearable headaches and many other ailments; at times he could only take liquids administered in drops. According to his own accounts he did not live another day without pain from that time on, although this did not prevent him from continuing his work in science and mathematics. With his illness he subtly achieved a new control over his environment, for he was now dependent on special care and attention. The onset of this new bout of symptoms coincided with the marriage of his sister Gilberte and his father's

arrangements for Jacqueline's marriage. That there was an inner connexion between these events and Blaise' somatic labilization seems highly probable.

In the remarkable libidinal relation to his illness that he had developed over the years, Blaise Pascal had found a psychic mechanism which protected him from the progredient disorganisation. In her biography, Gilberte writes: 'It was evident that he loved this condition, which few others could have done, for such a love demands a humble and peaceful submission.' He was inspired by the thought: '... to desire suffering, for this is the condition in which a Christian should always live.' He repeatedly prayed to God not to take his illness away from him.

In January 1646, when Pascal was almost 23, his father suffered a dislocation of the hip through a fall. We also know that about a year later Blaise was similarly using crutches on account of a hip complaint. The feelings of guilt that his father's accident aroused in Blaise threw him into a crisis which threatened to upset his inner equilibrium. He had to fear losing both his significant objects: his father through death and his favourite sister Jacqueline, by now a great social success, to another man. Through two uncles of his who came to take care of his sick father Pascal was introduced to the Jansenists, a religious sect which adhered to a strict, ascetic Christianity. Their views convinced him and he gave himself over to an intense faith. This was the time of his first conversion. He also succeeded in winning Jacqueline over to the teachings of Jansenius, thereby getting her away from her societal ambitions, and later converted the rest of the family.

Religious faith and the stabilization of his object relations in the family gave him a new inner security which allowed him to turn his attention to experimentation in physical science. In two theoretical essays which resulted from this work he refuted Aristotle's postulate of the 'horror vacui' and proved that vacuum exists as an entity in nature, although it is kept within limits and is maintained in economic equilibrium with opposing forces, such as gravity. The recognition that vacuum is no longer merely absence, or the unthinkable or unnameable, but is a definite and circumscribable reality represented a further step towards overcoming his feeling of inner emptiness, his psychosomatic phenomenon. With his thesis Pascal formulated a universal law of nature which stood in opposition to the prevailing view of the time, whose most brilliant advocate was Descartes. To this emptiness he attributed an economic function counteracting matter.

Blaise Pascal's father died unexpectedly in 1651. A few months later Jacqueline, against the will of her brother Blaise, became a nun at Port Royal de Champs, a cloister near Versailles which was well known as the strong-

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hold of Jansenism. Pascal was very much affected by these events. Shortly before his father's death a new chapter in his life had already begun, which his biographers referred to as the 'worldly period' ('la période mondaine'); this lasted for about another two years but then a growing restlessness and sense of helplessness drove him to seek refuge with his sister at Port Royal. It was in a cell there, in a nocturnal enlightenment, that he experienced his 'second conversion'. He recorded the experience of this enlightenment, a decisive moment which he apprehended as an encounter with God, on a piece of paper and sewed it into the lining of his suit. This 'memorial' was found by his servant only after his death and became an important

document on the life of Pascal the 'homo religiosus'. He became a member of Port Royal and remained so until shortly before his death, despite frequent polemical confrontations with some of the leading Jansenists there. However, he spent considerable periods of time outside the cloister as well and it is interesting to note that he always chose to use a pseudonym in the inns where he stayed during his times in Paris. Together with his sister he was very active in bitter struggles in defence of Jansenism. At this time he wrote the famous 'Pro-vinciales', a series of letters in which 'he publicly exposed his adversaries with the utmost vehemence and tied them in knots with the most insoluble dialectical reasoning' (Beguin, 1959). Now began his last great creative period (1656– 1658) during which he produced his most important philosophical reflexions, the 'Pensées'. These are 'really fragments of a complete work, at least of a larger undertaking' (Guardini)³, which he had conceived as a whole and wanted to make into an apology. Due to his illness and early death, however, he was unable to combine these fragments. In the *Pensées*, Pascal reflects on the Christian faith and the existence and mind of man in his relation to God, especially to the 'suffering Christ'. In Guardini's view, the *Pensées* arise from the intuition of a genius, are of high aesthetic quality and are guided by ethical and religious aspirations together with a will to truth.

In some of the *Pensées*, Pascal applied his physical postulates on the nature of external reality to the inner psychic world of man: in man, too, he discovered the inner emptiness, the fundamental dependency, which on the one hand through the act of thinking, on the other by striving towards the Godly – the infinite object – can be filled and overcome. The acquisition of understanding and sensual union with God, the eternal truth, set limits to the inner emptiness and thereby annul it. So he writes, for example: 'Man is only a swaying reed, the most fragile in all nature, but he is a reed that thinks', or: 'Through space the universe seizes me and devours me ...; through thinking I seize it.'

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These insights of Pascal's correspond to our economic conception of psychosomatics: inner emptiness, illness and an unstable energetic equilibrium can lead to resignation, proгредиant disorganisation and even death. However, if the individual succeeds in finding basic support with his objects and in mobilizing his psychic adjustment mechanisms, he can restore his inner equilibrium. If he is further able to become aware of his inner emptiness and face up to experiencing it, this elaboration process can lead to the discovery of the 'libidinal object' {Stephanos, 1976/77'^a, b). Thus he internalizes a libi-dinal object constancy, a stable 'inner possession' and so finds the way to his own creative potential. Our analytic approach to psychosomatics aims to bring about just such a psychic maturation process (Stephanos, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976/77a, c).

In the last 4 years of his life, Blaise Pascal's physical condition declined to such an extent that he was forced to give up his scientific work. According to his sister Gilberte these years were 'one long, uninterrupted process of wasting away'. There was no new illness involved but merely a grave intensification of the many ailments which had plagued him since his youth. For Pascal himself this was a time of vacillation between meditation and helplessness ; however, little by little, he was consciously preparing himself for the death in which he saw the possibility of consummating his sacrifice to God.

On the 4th October 1661 his sister Jacqueline died and Pascal showed as few signs of mourning at this loss as he had at the death of his father. Two months later he renounced his membership of Port Royal following a quarrel with some of its leading members and abandoned his struggle for

Jansenism. The beginning of 1662 saw him totally emaciated and prey to intensely painful colic attacks and on the 19th August 1662, at the age of 39, he died – 10 months after his sister. The autopsy revealed a ‘gangrene’ of the colon.

A review of this life history shows us an interesting series of connexions. Pascal’s genius could unfold because he had overcome his primary deficiency. We are aware that it is impossible for psychoanalysis alone to comprehend the complexity of a highly gifted constitution and our aim in this study is to concentrate only on Pascal’s ‘vital economy’ {Marty, 1976}. His biography shows us his progression from absolute dependence, through abstract

science (mathematics and physics) to self-knowledge and thus to his sensual truth {Loch, 1976}. In the course of this development he was continually oscillating between his psychosomatic phenomenon, character neurotic defence and creativity.

Blaise Pascal remained throughout his life close to a maternal object, first his father’s wife and later his father’s daughter. The interest in mathe-

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matics he developed during puberty can be seen as a part of his search for the father’s feminine partner, the ‘femme amant’ {Braunschweig and Fain, 1971; Stephanos, 1976/77a, c). His unconscious archaic bond to his mother led to a number of reaction formations, such as his refusal ever to utter the word T. Pascal’s intellectual eminence stood in contrast to his infantile personality traits. Shortly before his death a friend of his, a priest, described him as naive: ‘He is a child; he is humble and submissive like a child.’² His behaviour towards his adversaries was quarrelsome, arrogant and obstinate in the extreme, which can be seen as an expression of his defence against the bad intro-ject. A few days before he died he begged his sister Gilberte to arrange for him ‘... to be brought to the “hôpital des incurables”, for he had a great longing to die in the company of the poor.’² Now that his strength had left him he wanted to seek refuge among his mother’s ‘friends’, the social Outcasts’.

Pascal had an idea of his need for support but also of his fragile basal homeostasis. He managed his relations with his external objects strategically, in order to protect himself from excessive stimulation, possessive claims and eroticism, and resisted every form of attachment. To quote Gilberte, ‘He distinguished between two sorts of compassion, one rooted in sentiment and the other in reason, and while admitting that the former may be of some use in the world, yet he maintained that merit has no part in it and that virtuous people should value only reasonable compassion which, he said, consists in sharing all that befalls our friends in every way that reason dictates – at the price of our property, our convenience, our freedom, even our life, if the object of our compassion is deserving of such sacrifice; and that he is always deserving of it if it is made for God, who must be the only aim of the compassion of Christians.’

Filled with an inexorable severity towards himself he further renounced every form of bodily gratification, in order to sublimate his drives in thinking and to deepen his inner life. Gilberte tells of the spiked belt he wore against his bare skin and of how he would strike against it whenever he felt himself threatened by vanity or pride.

The repression of his dependency, on the one hand, and the elaboration of his death fears – the ‘fear of breakdown’ {Winnicott, 1974} – and with it his psychic emptiness, on the other, helped him to develop his ego functions and to attain to creative thought. In this way he was able to prevent the psychosomatic phenomenon from gaining total control over his life, even if the constant struggle against his primary lack – the ‘nothing’ in him (‘le néant dans l’homme’) – exhausted his bodily strength early in life and the loss of his

object Jacqueline, along with the parting from Port Royal, meant the final breakdown of his biological equilibrium. But did he not find refuge in the death he had so much longed for? For in the finality of death he could at last achieve an eternal union with his 'objet infini'.

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