

The sources of meaning in hearing voices



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1. Consulting room

Mary Even when I was working in (place) I asked my supervisor - 'cos she was dealing with the psychiatry people - do they exist, people that are causing this sickness? 'Cos I'm fully confident, fully satisfied now it's not the medication that makes me with all the symptoms. It's the those people that are after me.

Con yeah mm

Mary I feel sick an everything. I blame them.

Con yeh well what do you think I think? (*smiling*)

Mary mm?

Con well I think you have an illness that's fairly well under control at the moment.

Source: McCabe, R., Leudar, I. and Antaki, C. (2004) .

2. Psychological sciences and meaning

- **Psychology and psychiatry are natural sciences.**
- **Their aim to explain human behaviours and experiences rather than to understand them.**
- **The explanations of behaviours and experiences are to be scientific and objective (in practice physicalist, hence the obsession with looking into brains).**
- **Such explanations ignore meanings of actions and replace them by objective causes (e.g. faulty reality testing, neurological problems).**
- **Ordinary accounts of behaviours and experiences are un- and pre-scientific and thus inadequate.**
- **The scientific explanations are meant to substitute for ordinary accounts people have of what they do in everyday life**
- ***But, if they did substitute for ordinary accounts they would abolish what they were meant to explain - the everyday life and the people.***

3. Anti-psychiatry - Thomas Szasz

- **There is no such thing as 'Mental Illness'.**
- **'Symptoms' of 'mental illnesses' are 'personal problems of living'.**
- **Psychiatry effects 'transubstantiation of personal and social problems into medical diseases.'**
- **Instead of explaining actions in terms of aims and goals, it accounts for it in terms of causes and compulsions**
- **Psychiatry withholds moral agency from psychiatric patients - 'when we are culturally developed, we treat agents as objects'**

Source: Szasz, T. (1987) *Insanity*, CUP.

4. Conclusions so far

- **Psychology cannot ignore meaning, otherwise it is not explaining what it should be explaining.**
- **Even so, Psychology can provide rigorous and explicit descriptions and analyses of what allows people to act meaningfully and to account for their meaningful actions.**
- **Psychologists must pay attention to ecological, cultural and historical variations in meaningful human experience.**
- **Nothing new here – Laing proposed ‘Science of persons’ in service of anti-psychiatry (Laing, 1967)**

5. Meaning of Voices

- **Voices are meaningful to those who experience them.**
 - **In everyday life treating them as meaningless symptoms constitutes an accomplishment!**
- **They are not private and idiosyncratic experiences.**
 - **Whilst only the voice hearer may experience a voice as it happens, in broader sense voices are situated in the world and shared as any experience. Other experiences can be just like that.**
- **Since voices talk, what meanings they convey and how they do so can be documented and analysed just as in more ordinary talk.**
- **Voice talk is of course not necessarily altogether ordinary (e.g. some elements only of ordinary speech may be preserved in a voice)**

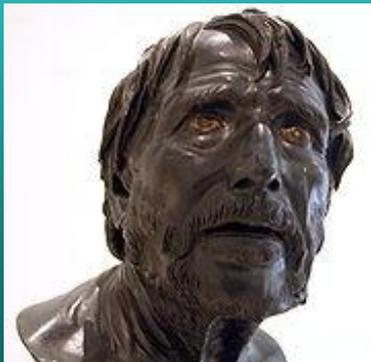
6a. Example 1 - *Theogony* by Hesiod (800 bce?)

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me -- the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis:

(ll. 26-28) 'Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.'

(ll. 29-35) So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvelous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things there were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last. But why all this about oak or stone?

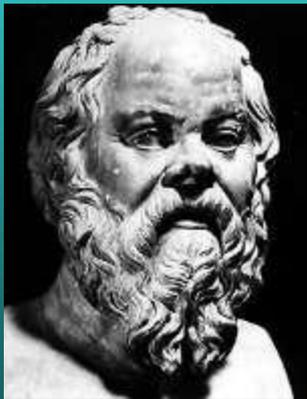
(ll. 36-52) Come thou, let us begin with the Muses who gladden the great spirit of their father Zeus in Olympus with their songs, telling of things that are and that shall be and that were aforetime with consenting voice.



<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm>

6b. Example 2 - Socrates (469-399 bce)

'Socrates ... happened to be making the ascent toward the Symbolon and the house of Andocides, putting some question to Euthyphron the while and sounding him out playfully. Suddenly he stopped short and fell silent, lost a good time in thought; at last he turned back, taking the way through the street of cabinet makers, and called out to the friends who had already gone onward to return, saying that his sign has come to him.' (Plutarch, OSS: 580d-e)



Source: Leudar, I and Thomas, P. (2000). The Sign of Socrates. In *Voices of Reason, Voices of Insanity*. London: Routledge. (chapter 1).

6c. Example 3 - Theresa of Avilla (1515-1582)

“Like imperfect sleep which, instead of giving more strength to the head, doth but leave it more exhausted, the result of *mere operations of imagination* is but to weaken the soul. Instead of nourishment and energy she reaps only lassitude and disgust: whereas *a genuine heavenly vision* yields to her a harvest of ineffable riches, and an admirable renewal of bodily strength. I alleged these reasons to those who so often accused my visions of being *the work of the enemy of mankind* and *the sport of my imagination*.”



Sources: Teresa of Avila, *Autobiography*, 1911, p. xxvii;
Leudar, I. (2001).

6d. Example 4 – John Bunyan (1628-1688)

‘But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of Cat, and having struck one blow from the hole; just as I was about to strike it second time, a voice did suddenly dart from Heaven into my Soul, which said *‘Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to Heaven? Or have thy sins, and go to Hell?’* At this I was put to an exceeding maze; wherefore leaving my cat upon the ground, I looked up to heaven, and it was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down at me, as being hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices’



Sources: §22, John Bunyan, 1666, *Grace Abounding to the greatest of sinners*; Leudar, I. and Sharrock, W. (2002). The cases of John Bunyan. Part 1: Taine and Royce; Part 2: James and Janet. *History and Psychiatry*, 13, 4, 401-417 & 13, 3, 247-265 respectively.

6e. Example 5 - Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911)

During the night—and as far as I can remember in one *single* night—the lower God (Ariman) appeared. The radiant picture of his rays became visible to my inner eye (compare footnote 61), while I was lying in bed not sleeping but awake—that is to say he was reflected on my inner nervous system. Simultaneously I heard his voice; but it was not a soft whisper—as the talk of the voices always was before and after that time—it resounded in a mighty bass as if directly in front of my bedroom windows. The impression was so intense, so that anybody not hardened to terrifying miraculous impressions as I was, would have been shaken to the core. Also *what* was spoken did not sound friendly by any means: everything seemed calculated to instil fright and terror into me and the word “wretch” was frequently heard—an expression quite common in the basic language to denote a human being destined to be destroyed by God and to feel God’s power and wrath. Yet everything that was spoken was *genuine*, not phrases learnt by rote as they later were, but the immediate expression of a true feeling.



Schreber, D.P. (1903/1955). *Memoirs of my mental illness*.
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

7. Elements of Voice Meaning

• Linguistic elements

- phonology, prosody, lexicon, syntax, semantics

• Pragmatics

- **Voices tend to regulate and evaluate voice hearer 's activities.**
- **Voices tend to be focused on the voice hearer rather than directed into the world.**
- **Voices are not impulsions but tend to provide reasons for doing or not doing things.**
- **Unlike ordinary talk, voices tend not to be not reflexive.**

Sources: Leudar, I., Thomas, P., McNally, D. and Glinski, A. (1997)
and Leudar, I. and Thomas, P. (2000), chapter 9.

8. Voice-talk in settings

- The meaning of voices is not exhausted by their linguistic or pragmatic analysis.
- The voices are experienced in settings.
- Such settings may extend from the immediate *here-and-now* to more extensive biographic space.
- Settings are not available in advance but are created for specific voice experiences.
- In accounting for voices, voice hearers make use of social, religious medical and cultural *semiotic resources* (or ‘grand narratives’, perhaps?)

Leudar, I., Sharrock, W., Hayes, J. and Truckle, S. (2008).

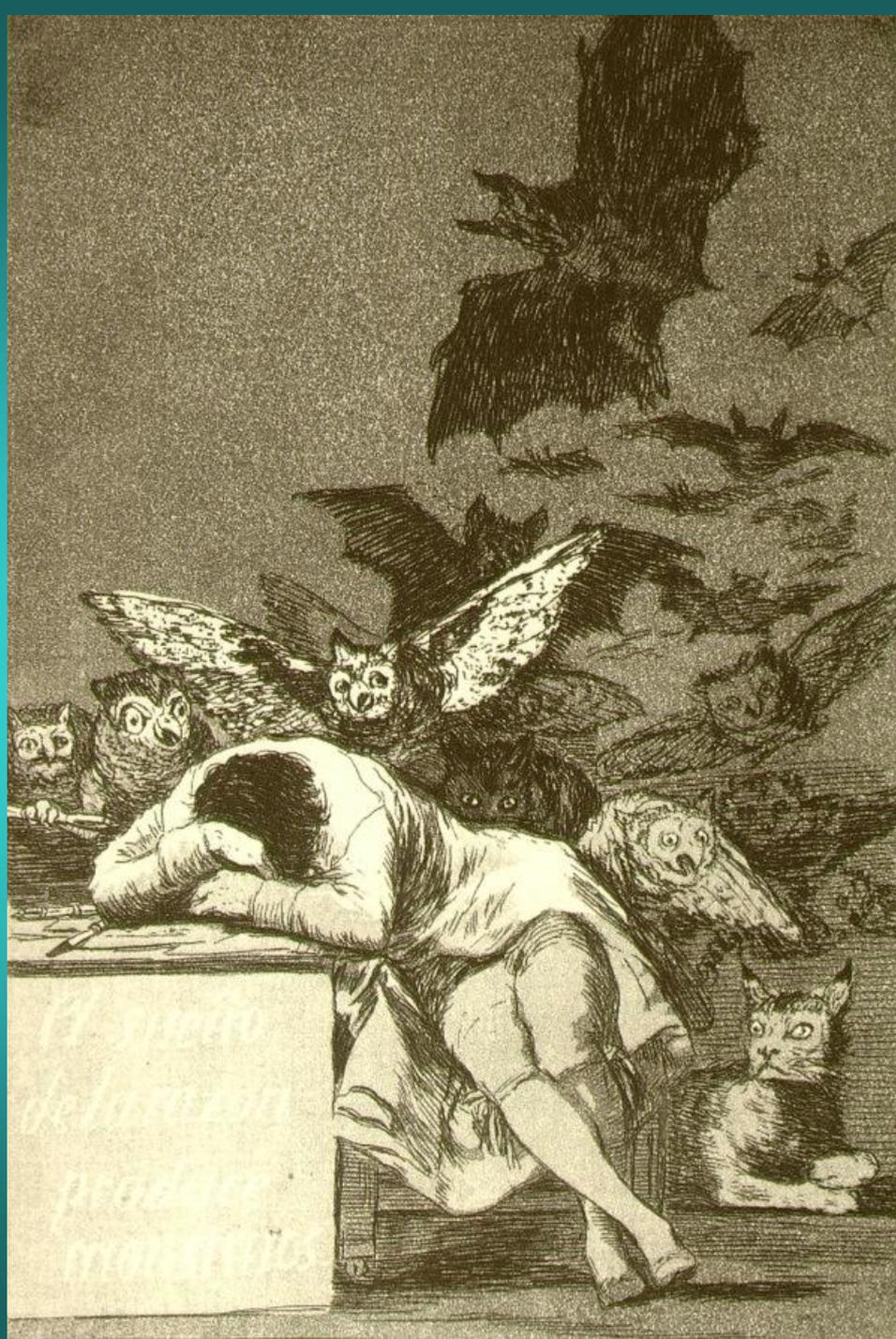
9. Conclusion

a. Implication for examining voice experiences

- **Examine linguistic/pragmatic aspects of voice talk.**
- **Examine how voice hearers' contextualise their experience in their accounts.**
- **Examine how 'grand narratives' are used as resources in making sense of specific experiences and what they afford the voice hearer.**

9. Conclusion

b. Historicity of Voices



References

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