



The positive role of aggression in HEGEL, LACAN and SPITZ

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ABSTRACT

Common sense opinion holds that aggression is bad and should be avoided. In this paper I will argue, on the contrary, that aggression, mobilized in a civilized form, is desirable. This is a different idea than the one already discussed in psychological literature, i.e., that positive affects are present in aggression. Here I am not discussing the emotions that go into aggression. I discuss the positive effects of mobilizing aggression. I will show the positive consequences of mobilizing aggression in three cases: first, in the transition from sense awareness to perception; second, in the acquisition of the meaning of the word "no" and third, in sibling rivalry.

A. Aggression in the transition from sense awareness to perception.

A schizophrenic patient, referred to me, came with two problems. He stated that when he related to the world by means of his senses, the world was infinitely rich. If he tried to put the richness of his sense experience into words, he felt that he lost the richness of the world revealed to him by his senses. Thus, for this patient speaking was experienced as involving a loss. The patient revealed that he had a second problem. He wanted to know everything, but he started to realize that this was impossible. So, said the patient: "What am I supposed to do." Presumably this patient wanted to have it all and had difficulty to accept any loss. From a Lacanian point of view, this patient seemed not to have the advantages achieved by undergoing the psychic transformation imposed by the Oedipus complex. Instead of wanting it all, a person having undergone the Oedipal transformation will devote her/his energies to pursue a specific ego-ideal, like become rich or intelligent or well-spoken. These characteristics of the ego-ideal are often characteristics admired in the father-figure by the mother-figure.

This patient was very shy and withdrawn. He seemed to have difficulty inserting himself in the world. He reported that he mostly read, but did not share the content of his reading with anybody.

We wish to connect this patient's difficulty to the transition from sense awareness to perception with the shyness of his character, i.e., the absence of aggression needed for self-assertion.

In sense awareness a human being has to be passive and let him/herself being bombarded by sense impressions. In sense awareness a human being has to be in a receptive mode. The ego has no constructive function. Furthermore, in sense awareness one is alone in one's awareness of those sense impressions. One has no idea how other people experience their sense awareness of the same world. Sense awareness is a lonely enterprise.

Perception is a more active human activity. As Kant teaches us, a human being is invited to change the passivity of sense awareness into the activity required by perception. Specifically, human beings need willingly or unwillingly to make use of the twelve categories identified by Kant. Thus, when I look perceptively at my family table I can see that beside my wife there are three children. As I have four children I see that one is absent.

One additional difference between sense awareness and perception is that in sense awareness the world presents itself as a contiguous source of impressions. In perception a human being is active in the sense that he/she constructs objects out of the world of sense impressions. But in order to

construct objects and see for instance a table and six chairs, a human being must cut the world of sense awareness into pieces. Without cutting the world of sense awareness into pieces a human being cannot begin the Kantian labor of constructing objects. Thus, the simple act of perception requires the mobilization of aggression in order to cut the contiguous world of sense awareness into separate pieces which then can be perceived and labelled.

An additional symptom of persons afflicted with schizophrenia is referred to as the negative symptom of "avolition" (DSM V, 99). Avolition is the inability to insert oneself into the world. To insert oneself in the world is making civilized use of aggression.

Palle Villemoes, a Swedish psychiatrist, created a protocol to treat schizophrenic patients. The first part of the treatment consists in describing the sensual details of the consulting room (Villemoes 2002, 647). As I experienced it, this part of the treatment seems to make a deep impression on the schizophrenic patient.

In one of the beginning sessions with a schizophrenic patient, a student from one of the top American universities, I described, for a whole session, the figures and the colors of the rug in the room. I have never seen a patient more fascinated than this patient. My interpretation of the fascination of the patient is that I did for my patient what he could not do for himself. I was able to accept the feeling of loss that comes with the verbal description of the sensual world. There was for my patient one more benefit in listening to my description of the sensual world he experienced. Through my description, my patient might have felt that we belonged to the same world.

In a next phase of the treatment, we then invited the patient to describe for me his own room at home. In doing so, the patient was invited to elevate his sense awareness of his room into a description of his room. But in order to be able to describe his room, the patient was invited to change his sense awareness of his room into the active and aggressive act of perceiving his room. The transition from sense awareness to perception requires a greater activity for a person (Ver Eecke 2019, 144; Sokolowski 2000, 79). It even includes a form of aggression because in perception one has to cut the continuous world of sense awareness into separate pieces, which can then be described (Ver Eecke 2019, 146).

One additional result of moving from sense awareness onto perception and description of the perceived objects is that the ego of the patient is asked to do work. Indeed, the cutting done by perception is a task performed by the ego. Asking a patient, afflicted with schizophrenia, to describe the world of their sense experience is therefore providing such a patient with the opportunity to let his ego grow. But the growth of the schizophrenic ego is conditioned on the patient being asked to mobilize his aggression in perception.

Interestingly, the patient, mentioned above, reported that

my treatment helped him avoid suicide. Presumably, the aggression, present in the patient, as it is present in any human being, was by my therapy directed to objects outside of the patient. One more point needs to be mentioned.

In self-defense against his own aggression, the patient must have developed a severe super-ego. Hence, the outlet of the patient's aggression had to either escape the super-ego or be acceptable to the super-ego. The aggression involved in cutting the domain of sense awareness into pieces in order to make of them objects of perception seemed to satisfy the above requirement.

B. Aggression in no-saying

Children depend upon a maternal figure for their survival (Aulagnier, Mannoni, Spitz 1945). In his theory of the mirror stage, Lacan argues that the child makes use of the mother figure to accept its own body. The dependence upon the mother for the child to accept its own body is visible in the eight month's anxiety where the child shows signs of anxiety when looked at by strangers but finds comfort in being seen by the mother (Ver Eecke 1984, 59). This dependence upon the mother for living in one's own body is severed between the age of 12 and 15 months.

Indeed, when the child starts to crawl and then to walk, the child is outside of the reach of the mother (Ver Eecke 2006, 83). In order for the child not to hurt itself or for the child not to break things, the mother must rely on distance control, which is verbal control. The mother starts to multiply the "no-saying." But this no-saying by the mother, is experienced by the child as aggression, which frustrates the child (Ver Eecke 2006, 83-4). At some point the frustration caused by the increased "no-saying" of the mother is overwhelming. The child needs to find a way to get rid of its overwhelming frustration. The child realizes that an important source of frustration is the "no-saying" of the mother. By identifying with the aggressor, the child can then borrow the tool that frustrates itself so much and the child starts saying "no" to the mother, knowing that the "no-saying" will be experienced by the mother in the same way that it is experienced by the child (Ver Eecke 1984, 68). By borrowing and using the word "no" from the mother the child is able to exercise its own aggression in a civilized way (Spitz 1957; 1958; 1965).

The mobilization of its aggression provides the child with several positive results. First, instead of having a temper tantrum, the child expresses its aggression, caused by the frustration imposed by the no-saying of the mother, by a simple word "no" (Ver Eecke 1984, 68). Second, according to Spitz, no-saying is the first real form of communication. Before the no-saying period, the child communicated to the mother by smiling or crying or saying "mammy." But smiling, crying or even saying mammy can have multiple meanings which the mother must guess. In saying "no", the child expresses exactly what it means: "I differ from you in this moment". The child, in using "no" affirms its separate individuality (Ver Eecke 1984, 77, 85; Ver Eecke 2006, 85 ff.).

C. Aggression in sibling rivalry

It is very well known that siblings have complicated relations with each other. They admire and imitate each other. But admiring and imitating each other means that siblings alienate themselves by not doing what they want but do and want what they see the other siblings do. This might be liking jam rather than peanut butter on a sandwich, or liking soccer rather than baseball because the sibling likes jam on her sandwich and likes playing soccer.

Siblings also show other behavior than imitation, i.e., jealousy (Lacan 2001, 43; De Waelhens 1978, 77). This jealousy finds its origin in the experience that the sibling is an intruder depriving the first sibling of the exclusive attention of the mother. This jealousy causes the siblings to fight each other. This fighting can take verbal and physical forms. Many parents dislike both behaviors. Physical violence should be avoided. But I want to develop an argument that verbal aggression between siblings is healthy.

In verbal aggression siblings are separating themselves from the sibling which they, in other circumstances, admire and imitate. Such a separation has the positive consequence that the aggressive sibling is now forced to start thinking of what he/she wants to be or become. The verbal aggression between siblings is thus an invitation for the aggressive sibling to become authentic.

Lacan argues that paranoia can be explained as resulting from a psychic structure built upon the fear of aggression against the sibling (Lacan 2001, 40-43). Lacan's argument, which is similar to Hegel's analysis of the Romantic reformer, goes as follows. A child who fears aggression is in need for creating an imaginary world, where aggression is absent.

One important area where individuals experience aggression is when laws, experienced as unjust, are imposed on them. Hence, such people imagine a world in which the only laws that would be applied would be the laws that they want themselves (Hegel 1977, # 367). Hegel and Lacan then point out that when such persons succeed in creating a law they want, they will experience unavoidable disappointments because that law too has limits and thus could be criticized (Hegel 1977, # 371; Lacan 1975, 159]. A law which is the expression of one's wishes is fixed. But, one's wishes change and then the law such person created is restricting the achievement of one's changed wishes. To experience that one's essential life task is a disaster might lead such a person to believe that one is crazy (Hegel 1977, # 376). But such an experience needs to be avoided at all cost. The solution is to use the hidden and repressed aggression to defend oneself against the feeling of craziness. That aggression can be used to accuse others who interfered in the noble project of creating an ideal world by not implementing one's law or by making amendments to one's law (Hegel 1977, # 377). In mobilizing his hidden and repressed aggression this Romantic reformer thus becomes a paranoid person.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I provide arguments against the commonsense depreciation of aggression. I demonstrated that aggression is a necessary component of perception and in the acquisition of no-saying. I also demonstrated that the absence of fighting between siblings makes the repressed aggression available for paranoia.

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