Anorexia as Religion: Ocularcentrism as a Cultural Value and a Compensation Strategy in Persons with Eating Disorders

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8.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the philosopher Charland's concept of feeding and eating disorders (FED) as *passions*—long-standing tendencies that represent a rupture in the fleeting and transitory character of emotional life [1]. This view paves the way for understanding the being-in-the-world of people with FED as a kind of *religion* [2], driven, mainly, as we will show here, by cultural values such as ocularcentrism. The values and other elements of this religion are evident in the following personal testimony from one of our case studies.

8.2 Anorexia as Religion: A Personal Testimony

I understand, now, that anorexia was my religion. According to its commandments I knew how to regulate my time, how to spend my days and nights, what to aim to, what was right or wrong. It provided me with undoubtable principles according to which I could behave and choose.

All my questions—who am I, who I want to become, whom I should try to look like and all my doubts about dependence and autonomy—turned into just one scruple: being thin and starve myself. Fat equals sin. Fat was wrong, eating was wrong, starving was right and thinness was right. Fat people were bad; exercising was good. Fat was a sign of loss of control, the sign of a moral sin. Fat people were sinners. Now I can confess that I was fascinated by the dead I guess because I was fascinated by the skeleton.

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*These ethical principles went hand in hand with aesthetic ones: roundness was ugly; sharpness beautiful. My sensibility was affected. I remember that seeing a ball bouncing caused in me a feeling of disgust. I saw the whole world according to this dichotomy: more than a religion it was a heresy, like Manichaeism! (she smiles). Heaviness and lightness; matter and spirit. I read that book: I too wanted to be light as a butterfly! (she refers to Michela Marzano's *Volevo Essere una Farfalla* [I Wanted to be a Butterfly], [3]). Always in movement, without touching the ground, not even 1 mg of fat!*

This religion had also its ontology—although an involuntary ontology: since I could have no wings, bones were to me the essential part of the body, touching my bones was touching my own Self. Bones were the core of being. Having my bones in my hands, meant to have control over my body, over myself, including my instincts and desires. When I became anorexic I finally knew who I was! Yet I did not realise that my 'philosophy', my 'truth', including its aesthetics, ethics and ontology, derived from my uneasiness about my body. The strength of such a philosophy is its absoluteness: being absolute; that is unconnected with personal needs, necessities and desires. Truth comes from above, doesn't it? What kind of truth may come from the flesh? From the flesh come only dirt, shit, hunger and so on.

But my 'truth' came from there; it came from below—from the disgust for my body; from the fragile bond between my Self and my body. Now, I realise that my philosophy stemmed directly from my lack of being, from my disembodiment, from the weak connection between my bodily feelings, myself and my identity.

8.3 Passions and Values as Sources of Stability

Persons with FED, especially in the early and more fluid period of their condition, often report difficulties of the kind so vividly described in this personal testimony, difficulties of feeling their own body in the first-person perspective and of having a stable and continuous sense of themselves as embodied agents. Doubts about one's identity ('*Who am I, who I want to become, whom I should try to look like*') and about moral issues ('*what was right or wrong*') can be seen as consequences of the person's emotional life being a ceaseless ebb and flow of incoherent and sometimes vaguely perceived feelings [3]. Passions represent an abnormal break in their discontinuous bodily and emotional experience, helping them to answer questions like '*how to regulate my time, how to spend my days and nights, what to aim to*'.

A passion can be defined as a persistent, pervasive and egosynthonic emotion that provides a stable normative structure through which a substantial proportion of relations with the environment are evaluated and processed. Thus passions may help to respond to questions like '*what was right or wrong*' providing '*undoubtable principles according to which I could behave and choose*'. Passions offer fixed points of orientation that endure over time suggesting interpretations and explanations, and at the same time moving the person to action in accordance with fixed goals.

Passions not only help to direct and organise feelings and emotions but also *crystallise* in fixed intellectual ideas or *values*. The fixed ideas involved in passions are indeed just that, values—what a person deems of fundamental importance in her or

his life—or are strongly connected with and rooted in values [4]. Valuing is a process founded on the emotional dimension of life. Values are attitudes that regulate the felt-meanings of the world and the significant actions of the person, being organised into concepts that do not arise from rational activity but rather within the sphere of feelings.

Values coalesce in explicit or implicit structures that offer a stable and more or less consistent background for actions. This is also the case with the values involved in FEDs, especially explicit values such as *thinness* and *starvation*, which give to FED persons a steady goal by which to orientate their lives. More implicit values, like the cultural value of *ocularcentrism* (see below), make up the pre-intentional background against which one may experience oneself and the world. Such values include *cultural* values in that they imbue the society in which we live. As such, they can be difficult to detect due to their *mimetic* nature—they are as it were hidden in plain sight, and, yet, reproduced in FED individuals as a direct reflection of the social order to which they belong. We return below to a more detailed account of one of these cultural values—ocularcentrism—and of its role in driving the ‘religion’ of anorexia.

First, however, there is an even more significant mimetic cultural value than these, to which we would draw attention, namely the search for *identity* and the kind of practice needed to achieve it [5]. People with FED cannot take personal identity for granted. It is for them a task to be achieved. This is because, alienated as they are from their body and emotions, they lack a solid and permanent ground on which to establish their identity. Again, this is graphically described in the above testimony, in terms of the subject’s bones: ‘*since I could have no wings, bones were to me the essential part of the body, touching my bones was touching my own Self. Bones were the core of being. Having my bones in my hands, meant to have control over my body, over myself, including my instincts and desires.*’

8.4 Pro-Anna Websites

Pro-Anna websites and blogs provide further evidence of the religion-like nature of FED. We will illustrate these briefly before returning to the role of the particular sense modality (namely sight) through which we normally experience ourselves and the world, and its role in shaping the values from which the lack of identity of people with FED stems.

Consider this example from: theproanalifestyleforever.wordpress.com.

8.4.1 Ana’s Rules

1. *If you aren’t thin you aren’t attractive.*
2. *Being thin is more important than being healthy.*
3. *You must buy clothes, style your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself and do anything to make yourself look thinner.*
4. *Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.*

5. *Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.*
6. *Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.*
7. *What the scale says is the most important thing.*
8. *Losing weight is good/gaining weight is bad.*
9. *You can never be too thin.*
10. *Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.*
11. *Ana is a lifestyle not a diet.*

8.4.2 Pro-Ana as a Religion of Thinness and Starvation

Pro-Ana websites and blogs are very good sources for understanding what is valued by anorexia and bulimia patients. *Ana's Rules* make explicit the values of thinness (or as it is sometimes called, *thinspiration*) and starvation (#1, 2 and 3) and their connection with moral themes like guilt and incontinence (#4, 5). These are imperatives whose purpose is to discipline eating behaviour and prescribe a certain appearance. They are mainly related to food intake (#3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10) and thinness (#1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 10). #5 brings together the anti-values of fat and of eating fattening food with punishment, thus with the theme of guilt. Guilt is also present in #4 in connection with food intake. #10 clearly connects thinness and starvation with the values of will power and success. #6 and #7 are about the value of starvation connecting it to what we call digitisation, i.e. counting calories and measuring one's body.

Many of the thinness items are combined with other themes: #1 with attractiveness/look/appearance, #2 health/wellbeing, #3 starvation/purging and #10 power and success. Rule #11 makes clear that this credo is not merely about food and dieting, but prescribes a thorough lifestyle, that is a philosophy of life and a world-view. *Ana's Rules* then are indeed the imperatives of a kind of *religion* - the same religion expressed in our personal testimony above. These imperatives are not merely about food as a partial aspect of life, but about the worth of life and the way to make one's life *meaningful*. They are experienced as the table of commandments by its believers. Also, these rules belong to an overall structure that has the same arrangement of all religions having its own values, goals, creed and practices. Its goal is authenticity and achieving a place in the world, and more generally the Good Life.

The world, one's identity and one's place in the world are chaos without *Ana*. *Ana* is the saviour, a goddess to worship in order to be saved from anarchy and confusion. Food has a moral value: it is a sin and a temptation. Fatness has a moral value too as indicative of laziness, lack of self-care and self-control. Thinness is more valuable than anything else including health because it means self-achievement and self-realisation. Strict rules are needed not to do wrong and to be led astray. Starvation is the unique salvation practice.

8.4.3 Cultural Values: Ocularcentrism

Many of *Ana's rules* bring together values of thinness with appearance (#3). This connection with the dominant medium or sense modality (namely sight) through which we experience ourselves and the world takes us to a key cultural value

underpinning the ‘religion’ of anorexia, *ocularcentrism*. This as we put it above is a ‘mimetic’ value, i.e. one that is so widely shared by the majority of people in Western civilisation as to be invisible. Yet, its influence is everywhere. Indeed, our culture is permeated by visually imbued social and cultural practices [6].

This is evident in particular in what may be called the ‘ocular permeation’ of language and the hegemony of visual metaphors. We speak of insight, far-sighted or short-sighted attitudes, we say that one may overlook things and one’s reasoning may be more or less perspicuous. Light as opposed to darkness and vision as opposed to blindness play a fundamental role in religious thinking and experience. Wisdom is connected with being clear-sighted—although with some and relevant exceptions: Homer, Oedipus and Tiresias in Greek culture, blind prophets and poets from antiquity to modern times. Western culture is often accused of ocularcentrism—the prevalence of vision over other senses, such as touch and hearing. The hierarchical ordering of the senses and the predominance of sight is claimed not only to affect philosophical theories of perception and knowledge, but also self-experience and self-understanding.

In his masterpiece *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Walter Benjamin shows how human sense perception is influenced by historical circumstances. Everyone knows that what is valued beautiful or ugly is historically determined—but also the sense modalities (what Benjamin calls the ‘medium’) can change in the course of human history. The ways human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. ‘*During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence*’ (p. 216). One relevant change that can be seen in art history is from tactile to visual perception, that is from more to less embodied forms of perception.

Ocularcentrism is the dominant medium implicated in contemporary society. Ocularcentrism is not only the philosophical subtext of the modern and postmodern value-structure. It also permeates our contemporary pop culture and social practices, as argued (among others) by Guy Debord’s [7] *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord calls ‘spectacle’ the mainly visual representation of our real lives. The society of the spectacle has an alienating power as in it social relations are mediated by the images imposed by media and its implicit or explicit advertisements. Passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity.

8.5 Ocularcentrism and FED

People with FED experience themselves first and foremost through sight, specifically, as we have argued elsewhere [4], through the others’ gaze. Another way of expressing this is to say that in people with FED, self- and body-experiences are allocentric, that is, mediated by the other’s vantage point. Two factors contribute to this allocentric acquiescence of people with FED to the others’ gaze: one is negative, their need for self-definition that is not accomplished by embodied, proximal and self-centred forms of self-perception; the other is positive, the cultural-societal vector of ocularcentrism.

Debord's [7] focus was certainly not on anorexia, but on modern Western society as a whole. Yet his analysis helpfully clarifies how the cultural-societal vector of ocularcentrism may contribute to the allocentric self-perception of people with FED [8]. In our culture, the predominance of sight is claimed to affect the way we experience the world and ourselves. As he puts it 'for one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings' (thesis 18, emphasis added). His explanation of the rise of ocularcentrism continues, since the image's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different senses, it is inevitable that it should elevate sight to the special place once occupied by touch. In this way, the most abstract of senses, and the most easily deceived, the sense of sight, is also the most readily adapted to present-day society's generalised abstraction.

In the resulting ocularcentric society, the individual is not only a passive receptor of the images coming from the media; rather, *the very relationships between people are mediated by images*. The other is an image for me, and I am an image for the other. Sight, that is the sense that produces images and representations, is the means through which individuals relate to each other. This form of relating through images is the opposite of dialogue. Thus, in this kind of society, images and representations depart from embodied, participated and 'immersed' kinds of vision, being disembodied and passive forms of 'seeing'.

8.6 Conclusions

We have illustrated through personal testimony and evidence from Pro-Ana websites the way in which anorexia may be understood as a kind of religion. In this religion, being fat and eating have an explicit moral value, not simply an aesthetic one. Fatness is seen as indicative of laziness, lack of self-care or lack of self-control, and therefore, contemptible and disgusting. On the other hand, starvation is seen as a salvation practice since it can help regain a sense of self-worth and authenticity. These values in turn we have argued reflect more implicit (or 'mimetic') cultural values illustrated here by ocularcentrism.

Clearly, there is more that needs to be said to fill out this account. First, there is other evidence supporting these observations, for example, the careful qualitative studies of the psychiatrist Jacinta Tan and colleagues in Oxford [9]. Second, a focus on changes in body experience in people with FEDs may be important to establish a differential phenomenology between this condition and other pathologies in which abnormal bodily experiences occur as for instance schizophrenia [10]. Third, a phenomenologically rich account of anorexia and its relation with abnormal bodily experience and the predominance of sense of sight may help translational research to find biological correlates of this disorder [8]. Fourth, a full account would have to encompass the full range and diversity of these and other disorders, and their variation across cultures and different historical periods.

We hope nonetheless that our analysis of anorexia as a religion, and of the origins of this religion in the cultural value of ocularcentrism so dominant in contemporary society, may be helpful not only in illuminating but also in contributing to the treatment of

this increasingly important and often devastating form of psychopathological condition. At the very least, clinicians, while projecting treatment plans for people affected by the ‘religion of anorexia’ and related feeding and eating disorders, should be aware that the unshakable certainty with which the values of thinness and starvation are held by their patients, are not merely negative cognitive distortions. They perform rather the positive role of providing a shelter in which those concerned find relief from their difficulties in attaining a stable sense of self-identity in an age dominated by ocularcentrism.

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