Daniel Paul Schreber’s Homosexuality and Schizophrenia

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Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911) was once the Presiding Judge in the Saxon Court of Appeal and a doctor of law in Germany, until he was afflicted with a severe mental illness in 1884. He was given the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. His delusional systems involved intimate contact with God and the overwhelming desire to become a woman and to be impregnated by God. He repressed his homosexuality throughout his life. He published an autobiographical account of his mental illness in 1903 in a book entitled Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken (Memoirs of a Nervous Illness), which soon became a classic of psychiatric literature commented on by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and other psychoanalysts.

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Introduction

In his book Psychiatry and Its Discontents, Andrew Scull claims: “We are almost as far removed as ever from understanding the etiological roots of major psychiatric disorders… psychiatry is now facing a revolt from within its own ranks” (Scull, 2019, p. 297). Scull, whose books constitute pillars of the anti-psychiatry movement, thus reveals that psychiatrists still know very little about the causes of horrendous mental illnesses like schizophrenia.

In my various writings, I have striven to demonstrate that the repression of homosexuality can cause schizophrenia. I have already published articles in The Journal of Literature and Art Studies attempting to show that the repression of homosexuality provoked schizophrenia in the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the Québec poet Émile Nelligan, and the American mathematician John Nash. I consider myself to be an authentic expert on homosexual schizophrenics since I am one myself, having been driven insane by a psychiatrist who tried to cure my homosexuality when I was only sixteen years old.

The case of Daniel Paul Schreber is particularly interesting since it inspired Sigmund Freud to write a book about him, entitled The Schreber Case, in which he blames Schreber’s psychosis on the repression of his homosexuality. However, his understanding of what constitutes repression is very different from what people in the twenty-first century consider to be repression. Freud, like all the other heterosexual psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who have commented on Schreber, found nothing unusual in the fact that Schreber, who had very vivid homosexual phantasies, never once had a single homosexual experience throughout his entire life.

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Schreber’s Schizophrenia

Like Nietzsche, Nash and countless other schizophrenics, Schreber suffered from delusions of grandeur and delusions of persecution. He had visual and auditory hallucinations. Most of his delirious thought system was centered on his very special relationship with God. Any selection of his writings reveals the rather ludicrous nature of much of his theology. Freud’s choice of Schreber’s religious derangements accentuates their ludicrous nature.

Here are examples of Schreber’s comments on his mental illness. “The senseless twaddle of voices in my head causes an absolutely unbearable mental martyrdom” (Schreber, 2000, p. 183). “All that is recorded in my book has led me to the certain knowledge of the existence of a living God. This entitles me to examine the relation between God and His created world from a totally new point of view in the light of the supernatural impressions I received” (Ibid. p. 227). “I am certain that the whole relation into which God brought Himself to our earth and to other human beings rests at present upon the particular relation which exists between Him and me” (Ibid. p. 256).

Schreber’s Homosexuality

Schreber’s book is replete with homosexual desires as well as transsexual phantasies. His most vivid confession of homosexual longing is this: “One morning while still in bed (whether still half asleep or already awake I cannot remember), I had a feeling which, thinking about it later when fully awake, struck me as highly peculiar. It was the idea that it really must be rather pleasant to be a woman succumbing to intercourse” (Schreber, 2000, p. 46). It is obvious here that Schreber longed to play the receptive role in sexual intercourse with another man.

He had transsexual phantasies about becoming a woman: “I would have been unmanned and simultaneously impregnated” (Schreber, 2000, p. 134). He continually had ideas about changing his body into a woman’s body and enjoying sexual intercourse as a woman.

He says: “The most disgusting was the idea that my body, after the intended transformation into a female being, was to suffer some sexual abuse, particularly as there had been talk for some time of my being thrown to the Asylum attendants for this purpose” (Schreber, 2000, p. 99). In this sentence we see the real cause of Schreber’s schizophrenia. It was his inability to reconcile his libido, which had a strong homosexual orientation, with his superego, which wanted him to be heterosexual. What he calls “sexual abuse” is precisely what his libido desired the most, but he was reluctant to admit it. He obviously sexually desired the male asylum attendants who surrounded him, but was unable to satisfy his longings for them and thus projected on them the sexual urges that he felt himself.

Sigmund Freud’s Interpretation of the Schreber Case

In 1911, Sigmund Freud published a book about Schreber entitled Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über einen autobiographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia paranoides). Its English title is simply The Schreber Case. Freud normally limited his psychiatric speculations to neuroses since psychotics were usually unable to pay for his treatment. Schreber’s case was thus an exception.

The principal argument of Freud’s book is that Schreber’s schizophrenia was caused by the repression of his homosexuality. However, his definition of repression is very different from that used by people in the twenty-first
century, for whom sexual repression means simply the absence of sexual relations in a person’s life, whether it be voluntary or involuntary. This is Freud’s definition of repression: “It is quite possibly the case that the detachment of the libido is the essential and regular mechanism of every type of repression” (Freud, 2003, p. 61). Freud does not once comment on the fact that Schreber, who was obviously a homosexual, spent his entire life without once having a single homosexual experience. How could the world’s most famous expert on sexuality miss such an amazing detail? Was Schreber’s asceticism an example of what Freud called “the detachment of the libido” (Ibid. p. 61)?

The answer to these questions is to be found in Freud’s acceptance of the puritanical Victorian sexual mores of nineteenth century Europe. Homosexuality was a sin, a mental illness and a crime all at the same time. In Germany, homosexual acts were punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment. Therefore Freud can ask in all seriousness: “Is it not an irresponsible slight, an indiscretion, and an act of calumny to accuse an ethically so elevated man as the retired Presiding Judge Schreber of homosexuality?” (Freud, 2003, p. 33).

For Freud, as for Schreber, it was simply unthinkable that a respected member of Germany’s educated and affluent bourgeoisie could possibly disgrace himself and dishonour his family by indulging in homosexual behaviour. Like most heterosexual psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, Freud failed to recognize that in order for homosexuals to maintain their sanity, the fundamental requirements of their libido must be satisfied. They include the affection, tenderness and erotic pleasure that can come solely from fulfilling homosexual relations. Neglecting the needs of the libido can cause schizophrenia, as we have seen with Schreber, Nietzsche, Nelligan and Nash. The panoply of remedies advanced by psychiatrists, such as psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, lobotomies, electric shock treatments, insulin shock therapy and psychotropic drugs, serve merely as distractions from the real problem. That Freud failed to recognize this basic fact discredits all of psychoanalysis.

Freud makes another major mistake. He says: “A surge of homosexual libido was, then, the cause of this illness, its object probably from the start Dr Flechsig” (Freud, 2003, p. 33). Dr. Flechsig was Schreber’s psychiatrist, and Freud wants us to believe that Schreber’s unrequited love for his psychiatrist was the cause of his mental illness. In actual fact, Schreber did not meet Dr. Flechsig until after the beginning of his psychosis.

Conclusion

In my writings about Nietzsche, Schreber, Nelligan and Nash, I have attempted to show that the repression of homosexuality can cause schizophrenia. By repression I mean the absence of homosexual experiences and homosexual relations for a long period of time in a homosexual’s life. I have described my own struggle with schizophrenia in my two books Comment réussir sa schizophrénie and What Rough Beast. These two books form part of the anti-psychiatry movement. I show that in the United States, psychiatrists are allowed to drive their patients to psychosis or suicide with impunity. There is no possible form of justice for their victims.

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