Focal Suicide: Self-Enucleation by Two Young Psychotic Individuals

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The authors discuss two patients who self-enucleated during psychotic episodes. Both patients had had sexual experiences that they believed to be sinful and a history of LSD use. The authors hypothesize that the patients needed to assuage their guilty consciences by sacrifice. In this case a substitution of the eye for the self. They connect their hypothesis to the Bible, myth, religion, and talion law.

SELF-INFLICTED injury to the eyes, including self-enucleation, is a rare phenomenon (1, 2). Only ten cases of self-enucleation have been reported and these were associated with the following conditions: "mystical delirium," melancholia, "periodic psychosis," epilepsy, and schizophrenia (3). The first such report was made by Bergmann in 1846 when he described a 43-year-old woman who suffered from "mystical delirium." This patient justified her self-enucleation by a verse from the Bible: "And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee" (4).

The two cases reported here are unique in that both patients had used LSD (one patient had used it once and the other used it repeatedly). Both patients enucleated their right eyes and referred to the same biblical verse cited here as an explanation for their actions.

The "psychedelic plague" is upon us and is taking its toll in bad trips (5). The following serious sequelae secondary to LSD use have been well documented: severe anxiety and depressive reactions, panic rage states, sociopathic antisocial behavior, paranoid states, homicidal and suicidal behavior, and acute and chronic psychoses (6-11). This article focuses on a symptom, i.e., self-enucleation, that occurred during acute psychotic episodes associated with a history of LSD use.

Case Reports

Case 1. This patient, an 18-year-old man, was brought to the emergency room of a county hospital by the police, who found him wandering in the street nude and minus his right eye, which he was holding. The patient had no previous history of psychiatric care, hospitalizations, or drug abuse. He did give a history of feeling sexually inadequate. He had dropped out of high school shortly before graduation in order to work so he could travel and be on his own for the summer.

The patient had been on a four-day LSD trip, in which he took LSD daily and during which time he was heterosexually impotent. He was then involved in a forced homosexual relationship (the patient was the passive partner) and afterward felt that the devil was in control of his mind and that he was going to die. He felt he had to obey the Bible and "pluck out" his right eye because he had offended God. The patient justified his self-enucleation since he had to "rid his body of the devil." He stated: "My mind was so weak because of the LSD that the devil possessed me—now I've got the devil out of my mind since I plucked my right eye out." He displayed no remorse regarding his action and stated: "I feel good—got my religion and spirit back since I plucked out my eye." He was seen in emergency consultation by the ophthalmology department and was admitted to their inpatient service. He was begun on prophylactic penicillin and was transferred to the de-

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Amer. J. Psychiat. 128:8, February 1972
partment of psychiatry the next day; he responded well to supportive therapy and phenothiazines.

Case 2. This patient, a 23-year-old woman, had been in a state hospital for one month; she had been admitted because of a six-month history of increasing agitation, withdrawal, delusional thought, and preoccupation with mystical mediation and self-imposed starvation. She was transferred to a university psychiatric inpatient service because she had become unmanageable, a state that was climaxsed by her self-enucleation. The patient's premorbid personality was schizoid. She dropped out of college after two and a half years and "went to the hills, took LSD [six trips], and became part of the hippie community." Approximately one and a half years prior to her admission, she became pregnant after being raped while hitchhiking. She underwent a therapeutic abortion on psychiatric grounds. She then returned to the hippie scene and began using marijuana regularly and LSD intermittently [with several "bad trips"]. She became preoccupied with mysticism and occultism. Two to three months prior to her admission she had become increasingly withdrawn, guilty, ruminative over her abortion, and physically assaultive. Following admission to the state hospital, she refused to eat and was taken to the medical-surgical unit for intravenous fluids, where she became irrational and delusional and behaved inappropriately. It was in this setting that she suddenly enucleated her right eye; this followed a delusion that one of the nurses was a worker for the devil and that by removing her right eye, she (the patient) would save the world. The patient responded well to high doses of phenothiazines and a series of electroconvulsive treatments. At a later date, while in the university psychiatric ward, she realized, "I misinterpreted the Bible and took it literally instead of metaphorically."

Discussion

In comparing these patients, it is worth noting that both had difficulty with sexual problems. Both experienced "forced" sexual intercourse prior to psychotic episodes that were triggered or catalyzed by LSD and that led to the self-enucleations. They both maintained delusions that by enucleating their right eyes they would rid themselves of the devil and would either be saved or would save the world. This magical transformation of reality, i.e., chemical regression, and the drug mystique of LSD may be related to Gerhard's observation that patients who carried out self-enucleation did so during the course of melancholia and delirious manifestations that had mystical themes accompanied, at times, by terrifying hallucinations (3).

It has been postulated that self-enucleation (and other forms of ocular self-mutilation) are symbolic forms of castration (12, 13). This same relationship (self-enucleation and castration or guilt associated with taboo sexual acts) has a rich literary and mythological history, i.e., the Bible, Oedipus Rex, and the Teutonic god Wotan (4, 14, 15).

As has been pointed out by one of us (D.H.R.), the eye has long been considered to be an organ substitute for castration. Freud stated (16): "A study of dreams, phantasies, and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated." This dread of castration is considered to be the nucleus of the dread of conscience (17). In the two cases reported here the paradigm would then be that sexual transgression is in direct conflict with a tyrannical conscience that can be appeased only by the concrete sacrifice of the offending part or its symbolic substitute.

However, there may be another way to understand the "substitute." Menninger (13, p. 269) depicted a case in which no substitute for the offending organ existed. Why, however, should a replacement of targets be necessary in someone convinced of the autonomous guilt of his genitals? Is the substitute the result of an unconscious strategy in which the eye is valued less, so that a balance is struck between the propitiation of the conscience and the value of the offending organ? Perhaps not. What the eye may represent is the symbolic condensation of the self, the being guilty of the horrendous act. 1 This would be a substitution of a part for the whole; it allows one to kill the devilish responsible self and yet live. This "focal suicide" (13, p. 229), as Menninger called it, harkens back to the early months of development when the beginnings of individuation occur (18), when one begins to sense the con-

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1 It is appreciated and recognized that the exact sequence and meaning of the psychological events occurring within these individuals could be obtained most profitably through a rigorous psychological study necessitating their healthy cooperation. It is hoped that other investigators in a position that would allow more direct and discriminate investigations would be able to shed light on the proposed hypothesis. We welcome their correspondence.

Amer. J. Psychiat. 128:8, February 1972
tinuity of functions that will coalesce as a recognized integral unit.

The reason for the selection of the eye in this possible mechanism is its importance on several levels. One of the earliest and most fundamental means of self-cognition (and cognition of others) is visual (19-21); man’s major mode of symbolic thinking is visual, as evidenced by the usual dream form. An eye is a richly innervated organ of 1.2 million cortical neurons, compared to the 50,000 cortical fibers of each ear (22). An apt and concrete replacement for the self is the eye—an organ intimately related to the original sense of self and inherently valuable enough to meet the demand of the lex talionis of a primatively punishing conscience. The eye, then, would meet both a qualitative requirement (equation with the offending self) and a quantitative requirement (having enough importance to be accepted by the aroused tyrannical conscience).

The religious rationale for the enucleations is compatible with the proposed hypothesis. Religion, as well as myth, may be viewed as a metaphorical institutionalization of concrete internal concerns. In their regressed state, these individuals experienced in a malignant, concrete form the original internal concern of the biblical quotation: “And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee.” A concern about the devil precedes the literal enactment of the biblical quote. The “devil” can be understood as an anthropomorphized caricature of evil that is congruent with the experience of disowned responsibility for an evil or sinful act. This was unsuccessful to the extent that the patients felt they were doomed, and enucleation would serve to exorcise the devil and thus save them. It is at this point in the breakthrough of primal anxiety (experienced as sure death), despite denial and projection, that the hypothesized psychological mechanism comes to the fore. The primitive, tyrannical conscience of the individual is only temporarily dissuaded from demanding active expiation (talion law) of a sin not to be disowned. With an internal substitution of the individual’s eye for the responsible self, a congruence with the biblical quote is achieved. This adds whatever rationale is needed. The act of enucleation is committed, the stand-in for the offender has been sacrificed according to the punitive demand of the talion law of the conscience, the conscience has been appeased, and a state of calm ensues: “...now I’ve got the devil out of my mind since I plucked my right eye out. I feel good—got my religion and spirit back since I plucked out my eye.”

REFERENCES

4. Matthew 5:29, King James Version

Amer. J. Psychiat. 128:8, February 1972