

The Beatific Vision as Described by Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Jung

Robert Dole

Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada

Published accounts of beatific visions are extremely rare. However, three famous philosophers recorded their own experiences of this phenomenon. They were the Frenchman Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the German Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and the Swiss Carl Jung (1875-1961). This article poses the question of whether such visions should be considered to be schizophrenic hallucinations.

Keywords: beatific vision, schizophrenic hallucination, Pascal, Nietzsche, Jung

Introduction

Blaise Pascal wrote what he called *Le Mémorial*, in which he describes a beatific vision that he had had on 23 November 1654. He carried this document hidden in his frock. It was discovered after his death and published posthumously. Friedrich Nietzsche gives a vivid account of a beatific vision that he had on August 6, 1881, on a rock in Surlej, Switzerland. Carl Jung suffered from deliria and beatific visions following a near-death experience in 1944. We shall now see what these accounts have in common.

Elements Held in Common

All beatific visions involve seeing lights. Pascal begins his account with the word “*feu*” “fire” (Pascal, 1961, p. 71). Nietzsche speaks of a “*Lichtüberfluss*” “abundance of light” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). Jung writes, “*C’étaient d’ineffables états de béatitude, avec anges et lumières*” “It was ineffable states of beatitude with angels and lights” (Jung, 1973, p. 336).

Beatific visions are always accompanied by feelings of ecstasy, joy, peace and harmony. Pascal writes of “*Joie. Paix*”, “Joy. Peace” (Pascal, 1961, p. 71). Nietzsche mentions “*eine Entzückung*” “a joy” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). Jung declares, “*J’étais comme dans une extase ou dans une très grande béatitude*” “I was as in an ecstasy or a very great beatitude” (Jung, 1973, p. 335).

In any beatific vision, eternity breaks into the temporal. Time as we normally know it no longer exists. The mystic is face to face with immutable eternity. Pascal exclaims, “*Cette est la vie éternelle*” “This is eternal life” (Pascal, 1961, p. 72). The revelation of the eternal breaks into Nietzsche’s life “*wie ein Blitz*” “like lightening”

Robert Dole, Ph.D. Retired Professor of English, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. He formerly taught at the Universities of Metz, Bonn and Lodz. He is the author of four books: *Le Cauchemar américain*, *Comment réussir sa schizophrénie*, *Mon Allemagne* and *What Rough Beast*.

All the translations from French and German are my own.

(Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). Shortly after his beatific vision, Nietzsche began his Doctrine of the Eternal Return in *Also sprach Zarathustra / Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which he asks: “*Müssen wir nicht ewig wiederkommen?*” Do we not have to come back eternally?” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 480). Jung says simply: “*C’était la béatitude éternelle*” “It was eternal beatitude” (Jung, 1973, p. 335).

For Pascal and Nietzsche, but not for Jung, the beatific vision brought tears of joy. Pascal says: “*Joie, joie, joie, pleurs de joie*” “Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy” (Pascal, 1961, p. 71). Nietzsche speaks of a “*Tränenstrom*” “stream of tears” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945).

What is most important in these beatific visions is that they are revelations of God. Pascal exclaims: “*Dieu d’Abraham, Dieu d’Isaac, Dieu de Jacob, non des philosophes et des savants*”, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and not the God of philosophers and scientists” (Pascal, 1961, p. 71). Nietzsche simply proclaims: “*Göttlichkeit*” “Divinity” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). Jung affirms: “*L’image de Dieu est, psychologiquement parlant, une illustration et une manifestation des tréfonds de l’âme*” “The image of God is, psychologically speaking, an illustration and manifestation of the innermost depths of the soul” (Jung, 1973, p. 380).

The Question of Schizophrenia

Are all beatific visions actually schizophrenic hallucinations? If Judeo-Christian religions are ultimately based on mystical experiences similar to the ones that we have described, does it mean that God is nothing other than the misbegotten creation of diseased minds? How should schizophrenia be defined?

The world-famous Hungarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz proposes this answer to our questions: “If you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia” (Szasz, 1973, p. 101). But people suffering from schizophrenia are always recognized as being mentally ill by those surrounding them. This was the case for Nietzsche but it was hardly true for Pascal and Jung.

No one who was familiar with Pascal thought that he was mentally ill. Of course, people of the seventeenth century knew far less about mental illnesses than we do today, but there is nothing in Pascal’s writings that shows signs of madness.

We know, of course, that Nietzsche sank into insanity in Turin in 1889 and never recovered. He was first hospitalized in an insane asylum called the Irren-Heil-und Pflegeanstalt of Jena, and then spent the remaining years of his life in a vegetative psychotic state receiving custodial treatment from his mother and then his sister. However, his mental illness started long before his collapse in 1889. His dearly beloved Lou Salomé confided to Nietzsche’s sister in 1883 that she thought that his writings revealed signs of insanity (Safranski, 2000, p. 310). In 1884, Nietzsche’s friend Gottfried Keller said of him: “*Je crois que ce type est fou*” “I believe that this guy is crazy” (Safranski, 2000, p. 462). It is possible that Nietzsche’s schizophrenia was the result of his repressing his homosexuality.

Carl Jung presents the most fascinating case for our study, since he was one of the pioneer psychiatrists who studied schizophrenia in depth. He had a highly scientific and yet humane approach to schizophrenics. He was one of the first psychiatrists to challenge the belief held in common by so many of his colleagues that schizophrenia is incurable (Jung, 1973, pp. 154-156). As lately as 1998, a respected author claimed that everyone knows that schizophrenia is incurable (Nasar, 1998, p. 351).

No one who knew Jung and no one who has read him ever thought that he was mentally ill. Did he not know that many psychiatrists would diagnose his religious vision as being a schizophrenic hallucination? Did he consider himself to have been momentarily schizophrenic and yet unable to admit it to the world? If we accept Szasz's definition, we have to admit that Jung was schizophrenic, and yet there is nothing in his behaviour that confirms this idea. This is a real dilemma. Two of the world's most famous psychiatrists have opposing views of what constitutes schizophrenia. Szasz's criterion for diagnosing schizophrenia admits no exceptions. Since God spoke to Jung, it means that Jung was a schizophrenic. However, Jung was perhaps the most famous psychiatrist who ever made a serious study of schizophrenia. Since he never considered himself to be a schizophrenic and since no one who knew him thought that he was mentally ill, lay people like us are totally helpless when having to choose between Szasz and Jung. One of the major complaints of the anti-psychiatry movement is that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts rarely agree among themselves, and here is a perfect example. How can a patient trust his psychiatrist when he knows that many other psychiatrists would not agree with their colleague about the cause or the cure for the patient's mental illness?

Conclusion

I have published an account of my own beatific vision, which I had in 1963, in my book *What Rough Beast*. I have always thought that this experience was a schizophrenic hallucination. I was actually diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 18 and hospitalized for 15 months. I like to flatter myself with the idea that I have proven wrong the countless psychiatrists who think that schizophrenia is incurable.

References

- Dole, R. (2017). *What rough beast*. London: Austin Macauley.
 Jung, C. (1973). *Ma vie*. Paris: Gallimard.
 Nasar, S. (1998). *A beautiful mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
 Nietzsche, F. (2012). *Gesammelte werke*. Cologne: Anaconda.
 Pascal, B. (1961). *Pensées*. Paris: Garnier.
 Safranski, R. (2000). *Nietzsche: Biographie d'une pensée*. Paris: Babel.
 Szasz, T. (1973). *The second sin*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.