

# The Epistemological Crisis in the Theory of Vittorio Guidano

Mauricio Otafza Morales

**Abstract**—This work shows a basic philosophical difficulty in the constructivist foundations of the cognitive posrationalist psychology of Vittorio Guidano. This is a difficulty caused by the problem of the existential crisis. It will be analyzed how Guidano's suggestions about this problem depend on felt experience. Then it will appear how Guidano's philosophy and psychotherapy must turn towards a phenomenological approach. Finally, some references are given about Eugen Gendlin's philosophy which could be considered as a radical way to confront these questions.

**Keywords**—Cognitive posrationalist psychology of Vittorio Guidano, Epistemological crisis, Existential crisis, Experience as directly felt.

## I. THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

WHAT is an existential crisis? Martin Heidegger describes this phenomenon with the case of real boredom:

*This one [the real boredom] is not the one that occurs when only this book or that spectacle, this occupation or that leisure bores. It appears when 'one is bored'. The deep boredom is rolling across the bottom of the existence as a silent fog and levels everything, the men, and ourselves in a strange indifference. This boredom relieves us the entity as a whole [...] This founding-oneself, characteristic of mood, not only makes patent, in its way, the entity as a whole, but this discovery, far from being a simple episode, is the radical event of our existence ([8] p. 110).*

It could look like as if this problem were brought from philosophy to psychology. But we know from Aristotle that a question of philosophy is not a question about a peculiar entity but about the entity as a whole (*tá pánta*). Martin Heidegger speaks about a *real* boredom and says this: "The affective arrangement [*die Befindlichkeit*] is very different from the verification of a psychological state" ([9] p. 136).

What is here interesting is not that an existential problem arises in the context of a philosophical discussion, but that it appears as a concrete phenomenon inside the practice of a psychotherapeutical approach, with a postmodernist twist: the cognitive post-rationalist psychology of Vittorio Guidano.

This psychology was born with a strong influence of Humberto Maturana's cybernetics and biology of knowledge of and it has been classified as a constructivist psychology.

Nevertheless, due to its own psychotherapeutical method, this approach seems to require a phenomenological philosophy

and psychology, instead of constructivism in its epistemological foundations (or so will be argued here).

It seems that a deep revision of the epistemological foundations of the psychology of Vittorio Guidano is still required.

## II. 'SELF-SYSTEM' IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VITTORIO GUIDANO

The Psychology of Vittorio Guidano is centered on the personal identity. It is considered a post-rationalist psychology because it overcomes the classic cognitive approaches that suppose two theses: (1) The "I" is a rational subject characterized by a search of objective knowledge; and (2) the emotions are only the effect of cognitions.

Personal identity is, according to Guidano, an "I", i.e. a type of emotional self. This identity auto-organizes itself constantly and it is essentially a system of emotions. The self is not the subject of acts, knowledge or memory, neither it is the idea of oneself or a subject that narrates something, but it is a dynamic system of emotions with felt limits. In this context the emotions determine the cognitions.

Vittorio Guidano affirms that the feeling of being oneself has a basic tendency to support the continuity of the changes in the daily life. In consequence this feeling makes these "changes easier to deal, more understandable" [4]. In summary, indicates the author: "every change is subordinated to the maintenance of its identity as system" [4].

Guidano distinguishes four types of personality or Personal Meaning Organization (PMO). Every PMO has its own dynamics of identity. For example, in the PMO that Guidano calls "phobic", the sense of being myself is achieved administering the protection and the physical nearness of a protective figure (a father, a partner, etc.). He who has this type of personality can feel disorganized when the protective figure moves away or approaches more than it is tolerable. The manners of suffering this disorganization of the self in phobic are, respectively, episodes of panic or episodes of anguish.

The self-system also pre-arranges the future emotions inside its own emotional limits. For example, someone with a style of personality with tendency to feeding disorders -says Guidano-, which self-esteem depends on external opinion, very probably will tend to feel discrepant opinions as critiques. The process of maintenance of the identity has an adaptive function and

its purpose is to detect psycho-physical dangers in order to survive<sup>1</sup>.

The psychotherapy of Guidano tries to close the gap between the immediate experiences of the patient and his explanations or stories about himself. This approach is centered on the emotion as it has been felt. In other words the explanations are valid just in so far as they are connected to the emotions. Then, this psychotherapy is not a process of refutation of "false cognitions" but a process of self-knowledge.

### III. THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF VITTORIO GUIDANO

The therapy works as an old device of cinematographic edition named *moviola*. This device allowed operations such as "panning", "close up", etc.

The first stage of *moviola* is named "reconstruction". It starts when the therapist invites the patient to make a general statement of the events or "panning". While the patient makes the description, the therapist attends with special care to the emotional disturbances produced and he takes note of these moments. Once the patient has finished, the psychologist urges him to describe carefully –not to explain– the emotions underlined by the therapist; this moment is named "zoom in". In this stage the objective is to try to postpone the patient's speculations and to allow the emotions of the patient to arise. This one is also the moment in which it is possible to obtain other points of view –and other emotions– by means of "zoom out". At this stage the patient imagines himself and describes how he looks like. This allows adjectives and other verbalizations founded in realities directly sensed to appear. This moment continues in the second stage called "reformulation".

The reformulation is a new kind of explanation, in other words, it is the explanation founded in the reconstruction of emotional and personal style. When the patient achieves this new space between immediate experience and explanation also achieves a new feel of control and calm. Then, the personal identity is not completely determined by the external world. In other words, the patient has been moved from an external control *locus* to an internal control *locus*. This result is named "flexibilization": a new feeling about oneself and a new relationship with the other people and "the environment" ([4]). Nevertheless, there are some cases that show the radical insufficiency of a theory completely based in problem of the self-system.

### IV. THE EXISTENTIAL CRISES: THE LIMIT OF THE THEORY OF VITTORIO GUIDANO

Guidano perceived that many post-rationalist therapies, although successful, allow to arise strange experiences of non-sense. The author points out the following:

*Thus we still do not grasp the mechanisms underlying the emergence and dynamics of*

*complex, disequilibrating emotions such as boredom<sup>2</sup>, sense of absurdity, and so on, that increasingly pervade whole aspects of our culture everyday life. ([7] p. 213).*

At the beginning Guidano tried to explain these crises of sense as a special type of crisis of the self-system. The author said that they were the result of two personal points of view about ourself in permanent confrontation.

*While an ongoing perception of ourselves makes our actions, plans, and wishes immediately necessary and believable, in regarding our lives, we invariably also have an outside point of view from which that same necessity and credibility can appear to be groundless and questionable. ([7] p. 191).*

Under this supposition the author prescribed a very curious therapeutical position. It would be necessary to look for an increase in self-consciousness of the patient, but taking care not to increase the degree of self-consciousness to such a level that allows the arise of existential crises. This is completely evasive. Guidano himself felt the weakness of this prescription.

Guidano seems to have understood that the existential crisis does not look like a specific problem of personal identity as, for example, the need of maximum external approval with the minimum risk to critique (PMO "DAP") or the maximum degree of freedom with the minimum of fear due to vulnerability and the minimum of anguish due to overprotection (PMO "Phobic"). Certainly, these are specific kinds of feeling concerning needs of the self-system. Nevertheless, "deepest boredom", "non sense", "existential ambiguity" are very special feelings. First, they can be feelings with the same phenomenology in every PMO; secondly, it is possible that feelings of existential crisis arise independently of the psychological condition. Therefore, existential crisis is not a problem of self-system, in other words, it is not a psychological problem. This is the reason why the *moviola* showed ineffective in its treatment. The author himself said:

*Today, the problem of being a specific "me" is a problem that does not have a solution [...] It is like the conscience of death, it is something that is a limit, it is not possible to go beyond this [5].*

What can be done, then? Vittorio Guidano answered simply that:

*the only thing that I can do is to live with this as it coexists with the idea of the death, trying to establish a relation with this [5].*

<sup>1</sup> "For this reason, the maintenance of one's perceived identity becomes as important as life itself; without it the individual would be incapable of proper functioning and would lose, at the same time, the very sense of reality". ([7], p.3).

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Frankl said the same: "The existence of the phenomenon of boredom refutes the idea that the perfect satisfaction of our needs means mean self-fulfillment and not, on the contrary, deprivation and void". ([2], p. 125).

## V. SOLIDARITY AND SEARCH OF VALUES

Faced to the existential crisis the author proposes "to search for a meaning, and to search for values, to search for something that gives you sense of something that is going to stay after you have died" [5]. This contention looks like a curious declaration of moral principles in the middle of a psychotherapeutic context, but Guidano goes further. He maintains that this is *the only way* in which the therapist can face an existential question<sup>3</sup>.

Well, it is unusual to hear a "postmodern" psychologist "recommending" something but it is clearly more unusual to hear him recommending the search for values, solidarity, the search for meaning, to leave a legacy after death, etc. This is a proposal that seems lacking epistemological foundations in his "official" model.

Moreover, Guidano confessed:

*Lacking an explanatory theory of the mind, we are not in position to assess what kind of correlation exists between an increased self-consciousness and a perception of ambiguity that seems to go with it* ([7] p. 212).

Nevertheless, Guidano does not seem quite interested in a comprehensive theory of the mind. In fact he didn't need it to declare that "the only way of coexisting with this problem [...] is with solidarity between us, it is with affective life between us" [5].

Today, we haven't got yet such a theory but we still have the same method of Guidano. This method relieves an phenomenon incomprehensible for the post-modern constructivists, that is, the phenomenon of reference to a truth. A truth?

## VI. THE NEED OF TRUTH

The postmodern paradigm affirms that there is no truth. The apparent chaos of the desires seems the perfect stage to support this idea. Humberto Maturana is Guidano's favorite epistemologist. Maturana makes the following statement:

*Every a priori agreement is given from an particular emotional dominance in which we want what we accept, and we accept what we want, without another foundation that our desire, which is constituted in and expresses our agreement* ([10] p. 24).

Nevertheless, this argument really does not devaluate truth. To state that there is not truth because everything is desire is not a statement correctly founded in the phenomenological evidence but it shows simply a typical postmodernist prejudice. It is the typical question about the limits of objective rationality since everything would depend on some

<sup>3</sup> "This is not about a pessimistic therapist who says: 'well, this is the problem and we cannot do anything'. With his behaviour, while he shares the problem with his patient, the therapist can implicitly suggest that the only way to live with this problem (the conjunction of consciousness of death with the consciousness that one is a specific me that will not change) is with solidarity between us, it is with an affective life between us" [5].

will of pleasure or will of power, etc. But the emotions are not voluntary, involuntary or hidden desires. Guidano himself has said: "affect, besides being *the only* immediate and relevant self-referent information available, is inherently consistent over time" ([7] p. 68-69). And, in fact, the truth *appears* radically in emotions. The author presents, for example, this phenomenon: "The problem of being a specific *I*. I also have this role, I also want to be another person. What I would like to be" [5].

In this context the problem of truth is not radically a problem about the objectivity or subjectivity of desires. It is a problem about the feeling of needing truth.

Guidano says:

*It is no longer sufficient to grasp the sense of experience. It is the meaning of life itself that now must be understood –that is, what reality can be and how we are related to it. Such an epistemological shift entails the elaboration of metaphysical assumptions about reality.* ([7] p. 67).

## VII. STATUS QUAESTIONIS

Let's summarize: metaphysical suppositions that are felt as existential needs in every kind of personality; ambiguities and existential crises with *an unique way* of solution; values; legacies, etc. There is no epistemological foundation for all this, and there is a far distance with the first Vittorio Guidano, when he said:

*Knowledge can no longer be regarded as an approximation to truth –that is, as a step forward in grasping an ultimate and certain reality– since knowledge simply express a specific relationship between knower and known* ([7] p.7).

## VIII. THE RETURN TO THE PHENOMENON

How might be resumed the unsettled work of Vittorio Guidano? It is necessary to reconsider the question recovering the original orientation: the phenomenological description of feelings with the *moviola*. This methodology uncovered the existential crises and the metaphysical questions about reality in the therapeutic practice.

The serious effort carried out by Giampiero Arciero - one of the principal disciples of Vittorio Guidano- for the development of a phenomenological foundation for the approach is worth considering. Nevertheless it is not sure that his orientation is going to be fruitful. The conjunction of a careful phenomenology and postmodernist constructivism does not seem very promising.

Arciero assumes certain kind of phenomenology: the hermeneutic with the strongest nietzschean emphasis. Arciero says: "the reflection (that is to say, the union among comprehension of signs and comprehension of oneself) would not achieve but the appropriation of our act of existing through the criticism of the works and the acts that are an evidence of this act of existing" ([1] p. 11).

But the option of Arciero tends to confuse the *I* with the narration about the *I*. For Arciero "the constitution of identity is contemporary to the process of construction of meaning" ([1] p. 45). But Arciero is confused with the word "contemporary". "X" could be contemporary to "Y", but this does not involve that they are the same thing, neither there is some kind of causality or conditionality among "X" and "Y". For Arciero "the event acquires a sense due to its contribution to the development of the story" ([1] p. 45). But this does not imply that the story is the *only way* or *the radical way* by which the event acquires sense. For example, a symptom is not a narration and nevertheless it reorders the experience.

We believe that Arciero overvalues the status of "narrative identity" ([1] p. 44) because he is afraid of the evanescence of the *I*. He forgets an essential thing in the theory of Guidano: there is no isomorphism between the narration about *I* and the experience of the *I*, because always the *locus of meaning* is based on the *emotional* experience of somebody. Arciero seems to forget the critique of Guidano to Gergen. Although the experience always arises with some internal symbols the experience itself also is *directly felt*.

Then, the narrative difficulties will always be later problems, and problems which are precisely confronted with an *affective disposition*. The affective disposition in question is called by Heidegger *Befindlichkeit* and it is the radical comprehension about oneself and human existence, founding every explanation. Martin Heidegger says:

*From an ontological-existential point of view there is not the slightest right in the to reduce the 'evidence' of affective disposition, measuring it with apodictic certainty proper of theoretical knowledge of what simply is there* ([9] p. 136)

Today, another phenomenologist has given a crucial step in this direction. Eugene Gendlin says: "the human existence is felt in the body" ([3] p. 151).

#### IX. EUGENE GENDLIN

For Eugene Gendlin the "existential neurosis" is the disability of personal life to be autonomous and authentic. An unauthentic life is not dominated by me but by what Heidegger calls an impersonal subject, "*das man*" (cf. [9] p. 127).

Gendlin wonders how is it possible to know which is the authentic, which is the based on the experience. How to compare the experience with the expression? What type of story is based on the experience and which is authentic? (cf. [3] p. 151). The response is not a cognitive and discernible "what" but a "how". For Gendlin the words come from the sensations (cf. [3] p. 140). The author answers, then, that the certainty is felt.

*Focusing* is the philosophic and therapeutic method of Gendlin to listen the implicit wisdom of the body. For the author, sensations must be friendly listened. They are not mere internal psychological states but they are our sense of the real situation and they show how we and others are in it (cf. [3] p. 148).

The sensation of the authentic "takes towards ahead". In other words, this sensation opens new ways. It opens new spaces of air, hope and freedom; something in the body has been liberated. When it finds the exact words one will feel the certainty and the adequacy of a phrase during a few seconds; one will enjoy the sensation of relax that this certainty or adequacy brings, even if what is said is not merry. And then one will have a sensation: it is possible to move forward, to produce new words (cf. [3] p. 140). In summary, "there is no doubt that what is said are not only words" ([3] p. 139). On the contrary, when somebody feels that something is erroneous, he will describe or admit peacefully that it is correct because the sensation in the body tends to block that hypothetical possibility (cf. [3] p. 141).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] G. Arciero, *Estudios y diálogos sobre identidad personal. Reflexiones sobre la experiencia humana*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2005. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [2] V. Frankl, *Logoterapia y Análisis Existencial, textos de cinco décadas*. Barcelona: Herder, 1990. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [3] E. Gendlin, *Psicoterapia Experiencial y Focusing*. Madrid: Desclée de Brouwer, 1997. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [4] V. Guidano. "Los procesos del self continuidad vs. discontinuidad". VI International Congress of Constructivism in Psychotherapy, Siena, Italy, September 2-5, 1998. In <http://www.inteco.cl/articulos/008/index.htm>. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [5] V. Guidano. "Historia de desarrollo y terapia individual de psicóticos". Lecture given in Santiago, Chile (1993). Transcribed by prof. Luis Onetto. School of Psychology, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Unpublished. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [6] V. Guidano, "*Psicoterapia: Aspectos Metodológicos, Problemas Clínicos y Preguntas Abiertas*". In <http://www.inteco.cl/articulos/009/index.htm>. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [7] V. Guidano, *Complexity of the Self. A Developmental Approach to Psychopathology and Therapy*, New York-London: The Guilford Press, 1987.
- [8] M. Heidegger, *Was is Metaphysik?*, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [9] M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.
- [10] H. Maturana, *La realidad: ¿objetiva o construida?*, Madrid: Anthropos, 1997. The quotations used in this paper have been translated by me.