

Hades' embrace and the pathological gambler's experience of death-rebirth

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Abstract

The paper presents Gambling Disorder within a Jungian perspective. In all cultures, one archetypal image is God creating the world as he plays, and play is a place of transformation and meaning par excellence, where the individual can find space for creativity and potentiality. For children, play is a primary activity that regulates normal psychic development; for adults, it is a potential space where oneself and one's potential can be rediscovered.

Perhaps it is an exasperated and mad *paidia* that characterizes pathological gambling, where, within the rules and rituals that are obeyed to the extreme, freedom is between *chance and necessity*.

The land of Hades is the land of the pathological gambler, where time is no longer, where there is no progress or change, an eternal present realm with no vision of the future, only death.

The analytic relationship can help find a clearing in the complex inner negotiation that led to the pathology, where a different way of being that person can be imagined, where the psychologist is an 'activator of images' (Pedraza) that accompanies the individual towards integrating the illness into his whole psyche.

Keywords: Pathological gamblers; experience of death-rebirth.

Introduction

In presenting these thoughts on Gambling Disorder within a Jungian perspective, this direct and almost aphoristic assertion by F. Schiller instantly delivers the message that play is at the core of human existence and that play and human essence go together in one way or another.

There has always been a certain interest around play in human communities, many founding myths making reference to it, Ludus, Travel, Ritual and Initiation being part and parcel of educational activity that prepares the Individual for life.

In all cultures, one archetypical image that appears is God creating the world as he plays, expressed via *Deus Ludens* and linked to the conviction that creation is not an act of necessity but an affirmation of freedom.

In Hinduism, *lila* is the spontaneous play out of which creation and destruction originate. And in the Bible, it is Sophia, the daughter of God, who plays while He creates the world, influencing him as he is doing so.

Then in Greek mythology, it is Zeus and his brothers who, after having defeated the Titans, drew lots to share out the universe: Zeus was to get the sky, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the underworld.

And in the Greek unconscious, it is the *puer* who incarnates play in a central dimension of *existentia*: at the dawn of consciousness, Eros and other divine boys join play to Eden, thus putting into effect the idea of being able to carry out a complex task through play.

Deus ludens conceptually implies that play is both the foundations and purpose of life; this was the case for Dante, too, where play involved both the aesthetic manner of man and the activities of angels and demons in something that can be transformative.

And play is in fact a place of transformation and meaning par excellence, where the individual can find space for creativity and potentiality, starting with scrupulosity towards one's life. For children, play is thus a primary activity that regulates normal psychic development; and for adults, it is a potential space where oneself and one's potential can be rediscovered. This makes play a necessary moment, and through its ritual and its presiding role over freedom, playfulness, joy and creation in purposeful and socializing activities, growth can be fostered, play finding itself situated in an intermediate state between constraints in external reality and the infinite possibilities offered by imaginary creation.

The human being is *ludens* to no lesser an extent than he is *sapiens* and *faber*, if, as J. Huizinga wrote back in 1938, 'human civilization rises and develops in play, as play', imagining play as *the* driving force behind all human activity, a sort of primordial big bang out of which 'planets' of art, literature, theatre, law, science, religion, philosophy and all that can be contemplated in human civilization are formed. 'Culture rises out of play, first it is played [...]. With games and through games, social life takes on suprabiological forms that give it greater value.' Huizinga goes on to say that in a certain sense play is a physiological activity that can, however, in the animal world too, transcend the limits of biological activity, in that it is not connected to goals of survival or subsistence. The individual who plays is free, he plays out of choice, he is free to consciously establish a fake reality that differs from everyday life and to do so impartially, with no material or survival gains; he plays within an exact spatio-temporal dimension where he can perform specific actions under the aegis of a temporary, absolute and perfect order, expressing himself within a system of precise, artificial and binding rules to which he who subjects himself to it does so of his own free will. And this subjugation reflects the essence of the '*in-lusio*', the illusion, of being-in-the-game, in a kind of conscious and active disguise as opposed to passive and unconscious endurance, where pretending, the player's action par excellence, is not connected to deceit, but is a simulation that more closely resembles an experiment, growth, development, and evolution.

And here R. Caillois comes to mind with his work *Les jeux et les hommes*, 1958 (*Man, Play and Games*), where, in proposing a *syntactic* classification of games on the basis of four irreducible '*ludemi*', he appears to identify in play a kind of laboratory in which the motivational drives at work are the same as those in the ordinary universe: 'The need to prove one's superiority; The desire to challenge, make a record, or merely overcome an obstacle; The hope for and the pursuit of the favour of destiny; Pleasure in secrecy, make-believe, or disguise; Fear or inspiring of fear; The search for repetition and symmetry, or in contrast, the joy of improvising, inventing, or infinitely varying solutions; Solving a mystery or a riddle; The satisfaction procured from all arts involving contrivance; The desire to test one's strength, skill, speed, endurance, equilibrium, or ingenuity; Conformity to rules and laws, the duty to respect them, and the temptation to circumvent them; And lastly, the intoxication, longing for ecstasy; And desire for voluptuous panic.'

So, the *ludemi* are *Agon*, or competition, which would appear to involve the subject's skill, ability, confidence and responsibility; *Mimicry*, or imitation,

where pretending or fantasizing about the world and changing it is what dominates, in a sort of parallel world where you can take refuge in order to break the mundane flow of everyday life; *Illinx*, the whirlpool, the dizziness, where you can seek that shiver, that brief but intense feeling of panic; and finally *Alea*, where abandoning oneself to destiny, tempting fate, is taken to the extreme, putting oneself at risk to the full. Perhaps this is the most typical way that human beings play, since play more than any other activity has to do with abstract symbols, numbers and ideograms, thus reflecting homo sapiens' unique tendency, that of not just manipulating objects but symbols, too.

These are the four play impulses that can combine, even binarily, and which according to Caillois govern the world of play as well as the ordinary world, moving along two fundamental but different coordinates of tension, that is, two different ways of experiencing play: *paidia*, without rules, and *ludus* with. *Paidia* finds its expression through 'early, primary freedom', which, however, to various degrees, remains an indispensable driving force in play, even in its most complex, highly-organized, ritualistic and regulated forms. Perhaps it is an exasperated and mad *paidia* that characterizes pathological gambling, where, within the rules and rituals that are obeyed to the extreme, freedom is sought, the kind that J. Monod would say is between *chance and necessity* in hue, freedom of he who tempts fate and puts the unchangeable laws of nature to the test, searching for new strength, unconsciously and omnipotently, seeking it out in mere chance which violates those laws, seeking some kind of strength or another that can regulate that universe, which man, at a more or less conscious level, is part of, revealing who knows which mystery, which enigma, that since time immemorial he has always sought to grasp and understand. But this mad operation, far from creating an opening towards freedom and creativity, turns into an insane wish to become as the gods are, and it ends up as a tragic defeat, as pathology.

In pathological gambling, the ritual and playfulness are lost and play becomes a compulsive pathological ritual in which creativity and related psychological growth disappear entirely.

As Riccardo Zerbeti has stated, playfulness is the very archetypal representation that expresses the freedom and creativity of the universe's generating forces.

And in this sense, pathological gamblers no longer know how to play, as they no longer enjoy play's inherent pleasure of freedom.

Archetypically, the function of play is that of keeping in a *coincidentia oppositorum* psychic areas that feature different characteristics, such as seriousness and triviality, or fantasy and cognition, that is, a dimension that does not only belong to the world of children or the superficial, but is typical of undirected thought in Jungian memory. It is an imaginal world that presents itself as a transitional area between the adult world and that of the child, inside and out, thought and feeling, similar to that *mundus imaginalis* where Corbin described a dimension that was neither literal nor abstract but all too real with its laws and goals proper. It is a world the Greeks attributed to Dionysus and which they called *spoudogeloion*: that concurrence and blend of serious and comical that runs through all Greek literature and allowed Aristophane like Socrates to criticize their fellow citizens alongside the errors and faults of democracy.

So, it may be said that the pathology originates out of rigidly keeping to only one of two levels, that of compulsive gambling and its related ritual, and not the rituality inherent in playfulness.

Clinical cases

T., a 35-year-old man, married with two children aged 10 and 7; he lives at his mother-in-law's; he's his brother-in-law's right-hand man in the latter's company and has always gambled; he has his brother-in-law's clients' credit cards, begins to use one of them, convinced that in a short space of time he can clear the debt, without anyone realizing anything..., but that's not how things go. He's found out and fired by his brother-in-law; kept at a distance from his wife's home, he now lives at his mother's and is looking for work.

When I met T for the first time he said:

- 'I gave no one news of myself for two whole days, I disappeared, then I couldn't hold out and went back home...'
- 'Because I knew that everyone knew I'd done it.'
- 'Now the children are asking when I'm coming back home, they've been told that I'm away on business, but my elder son especially, in my opinion, doesn't really swallow it...'
- 'I know I was wrong... I deserve all this... I'll do anything to make up for it as fast as possible.'
- 'What could my brother-in-law have done but fire me???'
- 'I could have told the truth, instead I kept on lying... then I lost it and fled...'

Pathological forms of addiction and pathological gambling alike symbolically represent a crushing embrace, that can kill: psychopathological aspects related to these forms of addiction bring to mind the sulphurous, the diabolic and death.

If sulphur is dia-bolic, then a reference to such mythology would seem fit, to Hades in particular and to his descent to the Underworld as the *dia-ballein*, namely, that which keeps apart, separates, does not embrace, but divides, dissociates.

This is the place of mystery, the depths, the shadows, but at the same time it is also primigenial energy and the terrain of every rebirth of the soul. Hades is the great sovereign of the world beneath the earth, the realm of the underworld and hidden treasures. He is described in the Ilyad as the mortals' most hated God, whose name alone, as Plato stated, instils fear. This is why a preferred name for him was Ploutòn, 'the dispenser of riches', as he was also connected to the wealth of the earth, to harvests above ground as well as to mines below. As god of the depths and abysses, he was considered as beneficent, riches coming from the depths of the earth, and as such he represented a positive underworld god, symbolized by the horn of plenty. The term Ploutòn also reflected the influence of the Eleusinian Mysteries, during which he was portrayed alongside Persephone as he welcomed initiates in the afterlife, no longer being seen as a violent kidnapper but as an accompanier in a process of transformation towards contemplative vision.

Like Hades though, he is the god of the Underworld, the expression of darkness and gloom, he is invisible, and an encounter with him is always both violent and violating, his symbolic representation being a serpent and the three-headed dog Cerberus; however he may be, his immense power and wealth gained him the name *Dis Pater* (from dives, wealthy), which is how he was known among the Romans.

In Greek his name means 'The Invisible One', and other names he goes by are 'The Good Counsellor', 'The Renowned', 'The Host to Many', 'He who closes the doors or who nourishes' and 'The Hateful', his ambivalence and chthonic nature conveyed in his very name. He is the god of wealth, gold and fertility, but these are invisible; and he is mysterious and represents both sacred and destructive dimensions at the same time; he is that hidden presence that nourishes the Soul.

The land of Hades is the land of the pathological gambler, where time is no longer, where there is no progress or change, just an eternal present realm with no vision of the future. This is what the compulsive gambler

experiences, as Hillman (2003) reminds us, that remote place of judgement for his actions, a place where judgements can be made in the present from within reflex inhibition, which is internal to his actions.

In fact, torment in the realm of the dead is conveyed not through the tortures of Dante's inferno, but through images of frustrated desires, punishment for *hubris*. Mythical figures who find themselves in the underworld have pushed themselves beyond the limit, violating natural law and challenging the gods, and it is for this that they are punished.

Hades does not impose his law on the civil behaviour of men, he does not embody morality, and punishes not instinct but a lack of respect for the divine, and in particular, betrayal of oneself and one's true essence, the strongest natural law of all. He is the great avenger of the law of nature and he reminds us that every living being has his own well-defined level and limits. By pushing ourselves beyond these, we will draw the Erinyes towards us our path.

Might not the pathological gambler live somewhere anhedonic or alexithymic, in a place where emotion-affect regulation, that gives colour to the world, is defective and tells us of a complex crisis that is not just economic but value-based and related to feeling stable and secure at an individual as well as a collective level?

And so perhaps it is really the realm of Hades that can best give voice to pathological gambling, this highly elusive phenomenon, that is difficult to classify and whose aetiology remains uncertain.

And here, just as Dostoevskij, himself a gambler, sustained, as he plunged further into infernal chaos, can we find the meaning of compulsive behaviour: 'in gambling, transgressive pleasure found satisfaction, and at the same time, in the humiliation of losing everything to the very point of losing everything and literally reducing oneself to starvation, it was the sense of guilt for that transgression that found satisfaction' (author's translation). There is a sort of self-tenacity to keep on playing, in the face of loss, knowingly, as if needing to atone for something, at all cost. It is in the realm of Hades, in the darkest obscurity, that perhaps the gambler experiences great temptation and provocation that potentially runs through every individual; or rather, it is the chance to tempt fate, to face up to one's troubles, to foresee one's destiny, to feel omnipotent, to solve, with the slightest possible risk, all one's problems. It is temptation and provocation that the majority of men do not yield to, or better still, they choose to stay at the threshold, not heeding the ambivalent and fascinating call, which is constructive, 'my life can change and I shall be able to realize my dreams'

but destructive at the same time 'my life can be ruined and turn into a nightmare'. Or perhaps he heeds the call in all its tragicalness and, unlike those who shy away from it, he is both fascinated by it and trapped within it; or maybe he borders desire-fear, in the hope that life will change, with just one go, one glimpse of hope, one slight breach. What can be felt in this fear and taking up the challenge is the myth of Faust, and that in the end the devil will want his counterpart; or Icarus, who went too near the sun, got burnt and plunged into the sea; perhaps without even establishing whether the strongest attraction is the illusory chance to ascend, or paradoxically, that of falling, of destruction, finding in gambling in this ascent-cum-fall into the deepest of abysses, an opportunity to lose, which is perhaps more likely. Either way, fate is tempted in an bid to meet one's destiny, to anticipate it, to provoke it.

R, a 57-year-old woman, separated with a 25-year-old son; she starts to play video poker compulsively after a new romantic relationship ends, one which she fully believed in and gave her all to. After a short while, she also began her fight against breast cancer and after several cycles of chemotherapy is now better. During the therapeutic work, R is gradually able to say:

- 'Those psychedelic lights always hypnotized me... I would go into a trance when I went inside that place, I would be totally out of it'.
- 'I didn't want to have my head on my shoulders... Maybe I didn't want to feel anything... Just tempt fate, my destiny!'
- 'The strange thing was even a kind of perverse fascination that that weird game exerted on me, a sort of house of horrors... Who knows what it really meant!!!'
- 'Perhaps loneliness, pain...too much pain...but not a fear of death...I don't care about that! Perhaps the fear of leaving my son on his own....or making my son experience the solitude and pain that I live with!'
- 'It's hard for me to think about when I gambled, but I know now that I didn't want to feel anything... it was the idea of a challenge, the biggest in my life, it let me not think and above all not feel!!!'

Despite all this burden of pain, it is here and only here in these barren lands that one can experience the double archetype: great destructiveness and great potential. Hades is in fact Zeus' opposite, his dark twin, while their two worlds are the same thing seen from different perspectives. This is how

gambling can be inebriating and give you the chance to savour risk and quench the feeling of power and winning, but lead to rack and ruin at the same time; or yet again, it may be a place where one can set out on a journey of transformation. The realm of shadows runs alongside that of life, affording in part inner richness and depth. And if this realm marks the end, then it also marks the ends, the goal, the *telos* of each soul in search of his or her most authentic being.

Discussion

Pathological gambling can therefore represent the gap, the crevice one can pass through to enter into contact with the world of Hades, plunging to the depths of despair to experience desperation and loss, especially the loss of internal reference points and one's usual psychic structures.

Pathology can become the only place where you can enter into contact with the immense riches that lie hidden in psychic depths, segregated beyond the borders of rationality, allowing those very areas that are excluded from awareness to be recognized via a journey that entails breaking away from old identifications and conscious attachments. It acts violently, and just like Persephone, you cannot put up resistance, but just bear a feeling of invasion, intrusion and violent penetration that may, however, be what man's evolution needs, taking him closer to psychically creative places and granting him great power. As in the myth, through her pain, naive Kore was transformed into the wise and powerful queen Persephone, the lady of the shadows and guide to the lands of darkness.

In this sense, Hades' embrace can be compared to the alchemic process of *putrefactio*, that is, the wasting away and decaying of matter, for it is via this decomposition and subsequent purification that the spirit that gave it its shape can be freed.

Descending to the underworld is therefore an initiation ritual, where losing everything can be an opportunity to experience death and be born again, into a new life, and into a new shape, giving the pathological gambler the chance to find healthy rites and rituals that enable him to experience blindness towards life so that he may then see, but through objects (Hillman), and not with his eyes but through his eyes (Blake), see *brillantanza*, or spangling (Zolla).

At this point it seems only but natural to think that the sole Olympian god who could descend to the underworld free of trouble was Hermes, a psychopomp, an escorter of souls during their last journey, but also a

mediator between the gods of the sky and those of the underworld. Psychology must thus display Hermes' typical qualities that symbolize transformation and psychopomp. Mercury or the spirit of Mercury played a central role in the alchemic process: it is a symbol that unites cosmic, physical and psychic opposites; and it is the symbol of the unconscious and the union of the conscious-unconscious. Ancona describes him as, 'the lord of roads, he who marks the limits, the territory of our psyche where the outer element is outlined, and as a psychopomp, he is able to guide the journey to the foreign, the afterlife, the imagination and to diversity. In his swift giving and taking away, he favours the psychological movement of memory, recalling what has been forgotten, alternating between conscious and unconscious. The analogous sides of complexity and creativity are represented in Hermes' inherent nature of living life on two fronts. Through him we can take in a vast array of meanings and acquire greater inner differentiation. Hermes bridges the *sun-ballein*, that is, the symbol of both and neither' (2004).

This is how psychological intervention can bring the therapeutic couple to experience the *sun-ballein* dimension when faced with the diabolic side to pathological gambling. The Hermetical attitude makes it possible to enter into a relation with the meaning and direction of one's end goal and authentic vocation, facilitating the profound transformational process that coincides with being able to find once more creative areas that were formerly inexpressed, unknown, or out of sight. Indeed, working with compulsive gamblers is mainly characterised by difficulty in entering into contact with their suffering using classic psychoanalytical 'tools': often these patients' accounts stop at the bare facts without thoughts, at actions without representations, and at the broad area of non-verbal communication more than the dream or the mind.

These are patients whose ability for imagination and development of symbolization processes are lacking due to a primary failure in redefining inner and outer experience, especially with regard to affective regulation. The world of imagination is thus experienced as a source of anxiety, and the inability to phantasize leads to lowering one's level of need, desire (which needs imagination) therefore failing to develop. Faced with such a void of imagination that envisages landscapes of the underworld in a mythological desert, the psychologist, according to Pedraza, is an 'activator of images' that accompanies the individual towards integrating the illness into his whole psyche, finding and at the same time giving him a new and different

meaning to actions and reactions, so that he may discover anew his life plot and be at one with it.

Conclusion

Along this path, it is necessary to linger together in liminal space, exploring the symptoms and his experiences of anger and despair, so as to go through the deep and inexpressed pain which, behind the hard, concrete facts that are brought to us in therapy, bears its roots in unrecognized and unsatisfied needs. The relationship with the other becomes the therapeutic agent that favours the generation of meaning, determining and setting in motion a process of death on the one hand and rebirth on the other. Events which every transformation needs.

It seems fit to conclude with the words of Rilke that effectively express how losing *ludus* can lead to alexithymic territories of feeling and being, where the analytic relationship can help find a clearing in the complex inner negotiation that led to the pathology, and where a different way of being that person can be imagined.

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