"VALIDITY" OF VITTORIO GUIDANO IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to mention the most important Guidano's approach contributions to modern psychotherapy and psychopathology. In his cultural and interpretative psychology, rooted in evolutionary epistemology, the mind is the link between the individual and his biology, the external world, and his story. Beginning from the emergence of mentalism among primates, Guidano offers a new explanation of psychosis and psychopathology, for understanding and for curing, based on the integration of three levels of self-meaning: individual, familial, and social. With contextualization, a phylogenic way of remaining connected with the group, as the ontogenic way of child developing that takes place in the family context, through the attachment bonds, it becomes possible to put in sequence *the personal experience and integrate it inside the self, to maintain life coherence and continuity. Both psychotherapy and psychiatry are in need of a plausible theory of mind that is able to offer an understanding of basic inherited human feelings, language and meanings as evolutionary tools that are necessary for a functioning health human: the mind and the brain are the same thing. The primacy of affect during the evolution of brain-mind suggests that therapies need a clear vision and knowing of affective human life and what we need is a complete integration of every therapeutic tradition, having the primacy of affective development as the core.*

Keywords: *post-rationalism, cultural psychology, evolutionary epistemology, mentalism, affective development, contextualization, sequentialization.*

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First of all this work's title needs a clarification: it's not about to measure Guidano's approach with the point of view of the twenty-first century psychotherapy, but to understand for both, which are the possibilities of integration, to evaluate if scientific disciplinary convergence of the last twenty years could validate Guidano's insights and formalization together with or unlike those of modern psychotherapy and which one of the two theoretical orientations is more or less updated with what scientific disciplines are now claiming**.**

Although the powerful development of the cognitive sciences and psychotherapies, that has taken place over the last two decades, has succeeded in fostering more articulated models of human behaviour and knowing processes, the nature of human experience and the role that affectivity, meaning, and so forth play in mind's construction, are domains that have remained largely overlooked (De Pascale*,* Cimboli, Quiñones, & Ugarte, 2015; Guidano, 1991; Panksepp, 1998; Panksepp Moskal, Panksepp, & Kroes, 2002; Pansksepp & Biven, 2012, J. Pansksepp, & J. B. Panskepp, 2013).

Taking this into consideration, at the end of the 80's among non-classic cognitive, constructivistic, approaches, V. F. Guidano developed a cognitive system process and post-rationalist model that, nowadays, seems to be the best model that could pave the way for a cultural or interpretative psychology, where the mind is the link between the individual and his biology, the individual and the external world, the individual and his story. This cultural psychology is meant to investigate how people, can create their own reality through narration (Balbi, 2004; Bruner, 2004; De Pascale, 2014). This approach, called "post-rationalism", shaped by a change initiated by evolutionary epistemology that (Alleva & Branchi, 2011; Campbell, 1974; Guidano, 1987, 1991; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Panksepp et al., 2002; Popper, 1972) based itself on a vision of man intended as an organism able to actively order its reality through the production of theories whose conservation or elimination is ruled by natural selection. In the early 80's, the two chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1979, 1980, 1987), pushed evolutionary interpretation into the internal dynamics of animal groups and into the history of structural transformations and environmental changes. The founding notion is that an organism and its environment, change in an interdependent fashion: unit-environment relations can therefore be maintained only if the autonomous unit – the system – is able to generate, within its own organisational constraints, levels of reference that are suitable to coping with environmental change.

After having stressed many times that knowledge is a biological phenomenon, in his last notes and reflections, about the emergence of mentalism among primates for a new explanation of psychosis, Guidano refers to an American evolutionary neuro-anthropologist, Terrence W. Deacon (1998) who addressed, in his revolutionary book, the longstanding questions of human origins and consciousness. The latter shows that the emergence of symbolic thinking reflects the evolution of language, triggering a co-evolutionary exchange between languages and brains

over two mil-lion years of hominid evolution. The first symbolic communication evolved as the only means for our hominid ancestors to overcome the evo-lutionary difficulties of combining long-term sexual exclusivity, mostly in pair bonds, with cooperative group foraging, which became a critical factor with the utilization of animal foods. Symbolic abilities created a species that for the first time in the history of life had access to others' thoughts and emotions, and thus confronted an ethical dimension to social behaviour. Informing all these insights is a new understanding, based on the author's own research, also on the base of his observations of some chimpanzees and the latest findings in the neurosciences and genetics, of how darwinian processes underlie the brain's development and function as well as its evolution.

More recently, and according to Guidano's intuitions, Deacon (2012) offers in *Incomplete Nature*, a radical new explanation of how life and consciousness emerge from physics and chemistry: notwithstanding physicists' theory of the universe and biologists' molecular description of the complexity of life, in their scientific vision a glaring incompleteness appears. In its comprehensive "Theory of Everything", the science includes everything but us: the feelings, meanings, consciousness, and purposes that make us (and many of our animal cousins) what we are. It is an unacceptable omission that these immediate and incontrovertible phenomena, are left unexplained by the natural sciences because they lack the physical properties that are assumed to be necessary for something to have physical consequences in the world. Deacon accepts what other theories try to deny: that, although mental contents do indeed lack these material-energetic properties, they are still entirely products of physical processes and have an unprecedented kind of causal power that is unlike anything that physics and chemistry alone have so far explained. Paradoxically, it is the intrinsic incompleteness of these semiotic and teleological phenomena that is the source of their unique form of physical influence in the world. *Incomplete Nature* meticulously traces the rise of the special causal capacity from simple thermodynamics to self-organizing dynamics, to living and mental dynamics, and it demonstrates how specific absences (or constraints) play the critical causal role in the organization of physical processes that generate these properties: we are made of these specific absenses—such stuff as dreams are made on—and that what is not immediately present can be as physically potent as that which is. It offers a figure/background shift that shows how even meanings and values can be understood as legitimate components of the physical world. This could be the way in which the science could validate Guidano's point of view!

The biological organization is the ongoing activity of neurobiological systems as well as the process of human knowledge: this is the main core of any scientific, clinical and psycho-therapeutic practice that are nowadays inextricably related to biological phenomena – and therefore to clinical investigation - including those that pertain to the development and knowledge, including the more abstract domains of thought and language. The regulation of emotions is initially developed in the

framework of interpersonal relations (Novak & Suomi, 1991) and has evolved during phylogenesis in a complex process of self-organization that leads to the acquisition of self-organizing abilities and the construction of personal meaning.

Founded upon the concepts of complex systems (Bocchi & Ceruti, 1985), this theoretical and clinical approach is based upon the integration of two conceptual models: one is the cognitive post-rationalist, that addresses the internal narrative dimension, not directly observable, focusing on the developmental processes and the maintenance of individual identity, the self-organization of personal meaning, and the other is the relational systemic one, that considers the structure of relations, its paths and boundaries, focusing on the mode of interpersonal communication. The cognitive systemic model springs out of the integration of these two different ways of observing our object of investigation: intending to improve the individual knowledge and its relational context and "tailoring" reliable psychotherapeutic strategies discerning the different therapist styles (Quiñones & Ugarte, 2015).

As already stated (De Pascale, 2014b), today the major challenge facing neurosciences and all the psychological disciplines seems to be the attempt to understand how brain structures can generate the consciousness of the Self, how the brain is able to perform an abstract function, starting from a concrete activity (Feinberg, 2009). Starting from speculations that have been widely debated from the very dawn of philosophical thinking, Denton (2005) makes an assumption apparently very close to the post-rationalist view, focused on complex systemic processes: consciousness seems to have progressively manifested throughout animal evolution in the form of "primal emotions" such as hunger, thirst, need for air, sexual drive (and perhaps later of some motivational systems like gambling, cooperation and all those activities matching and specializing interactive skills and needs), i.e. all those pressing forms of activation-arousal that are highly functional to the survival of an organism and that force it into action. Denton's assumption, that primal emotions are the first emergence of primary consciousness, takes him to a deeper consideration of Damasio's idea (1999) that "emotion and the experience of emotion are the direct expressions of the highest level of bio-regulation in complex organisms"; emotions and the development of their regulation processes drive the Self towards increasingly complex systemic functional states (Davidson, Fox, & Kalin, 2007; Guidano, 1987; Young, Liu, & Wang, 2008). With the expansion of the traditional epistemological, associationist empiricist perspective and the elaboration of a psychology of the Self that embraces cybernetics, systems theory, and artificial intelligence, i.e. the forefront of the "cognitive revolution" burst in the '70s and '80s in the anglo-saxon world, the post-rationalist approach mainly takes shape with the work of V. F. Guidano (1987, 1991). He was one of the major theoreticians and spokesmen of the epistemological change that occurs transforming *knowledge from the point of view of he who possesses it* into a method for psychotherapy and a conceptual model to explore individual development and knowledge. The "post-rationalist" attribute introduced by Guidano at the end of the

80's hinted at a new way to view psychology, based on the recognition of individuals' irreducible characteristic of constructing meanings.

In the post-rationalist psychotherapy generated by Vittorio Guidano, is also evident how it is important to underline the permanent relation between theory and facts in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy.

As we stressed in our previous article (De Pascale, Quiñones, & Cimboli, 2016), "*In the XXI century, psychotherapy has a fundamental role in western culture and proof of this is in the progressive growth of the public and private service in all western countries. At the same time, we observe a massive demand for intervention, including a range of 460 different kinds of approaches and methods… psychotherapy is a part of the public health care system in western countries and it is considered a valid and reliable component of the treatment process. The post-rationalist approach applies these concepts and considers research to be the fundamental premise to develop the comprehension of the complexity of human suffering and to change and improve mental health*".

For a scientific investigation of the mind (that does not neglect the study of interiority), knowledge had to be intended as an active, adaptive and historical process, conducive to the creation of certain structures – or theories – that living beings generate during the course of their interaction with the environment. Instead of empiristically considering cognition as a system of hierarchically ordered beliefs that guide people's actions and emotions, Guidano (1993) and Mahoney (1993) regarded cognition as a process corresponding to the "interiority" of individuals and explored the active role that each subject plays in the construction of his or her reality.

Guidano's theoretical and clinical cognitivism (1987, 1991) had the merit of having gone beyond the associationism of the empiricists and the methodological positivism of some psychologists and 'classic cognitivisms' (Piattelli Palmarini, 2008), trying to create the rise of a system-process oriented approach to psychopatology: post-rationalist cognitivism, from animal models (mainly primatology) to personal meaning. Biological systems are very likely determined by physical and chemical laws of spontaneous self-organisation, and changes in evolutionary and learning processes are guided by exogenous factors, as well as by internal and endogenous constraints (Solé & Goodwin, 2000). Guidano's point of view allowed generations of clinical psychologies to continue to analyse and operate according to its notions (Quiñones, Cimboli, & De Pascale, 2014). The contribution of neuro-science and modern biological psychopathology, along with the experiences derived from clinical practice, case formulations based on research (Quiñones, 2014; Quiñones, Melipillán, & Ugarte, 2012), clinical inquiries (Fonagy et al., 2004), has extended to areas such as affects regulation, attachment theories, mentalisation (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004; Fonagy & Bateman, 2006), subjective time in psychotherapy (De Pascale & Maiello 2010; Quiñones, Ceric, & Ugarte, 2015b, Quiñones, & Ugarte, 2015), development of the Self (Fonagy et al.,

2002), consciousness and language (De Pascale, 2011; Searle 2002), narratives (Bruner, 1986, 2004; Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Nelson, 1989) thus providing evidence to theories that in the past were confined to the exclusive competence of philosophy.

The formulations of V. F. Guidano (1991, 2001, Cutolo, De Pascale, & Cimboli, 2017), his powerful heuristic anticipations of many current scientific evidences (Hill & Lambert, 2004), and his several practical suggestions for the psychopathology, mainly psychosis and the process of psychotherapy, were guided by the main interest in the relationship between the individual, his development and his contest.

Today, both psychotherapy and psychiatry are in need of a plausible theory of mind that is able to offer an understanding of basic inherited human feelings, language and meanings as evolutionary tools that are necessary for a functioning health human: the mind and the brain are the same thing (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). The main issues in psychotherapy and psychiatry will produce a real revolution in the field of clinical practice and psychopathology, offering a more extensive vision on the way in which human emotions operate, and the possibility of creating better and specific strategies and medications to cure them (Greenberg, 2007). In recent years, I stated "…the possibility of constructing a bridge between psychotherapy and psychiatry" (De Pascale, 2011). Now, according to this, the primacy of affect during the evolution of brain-mind suggests that therapies need a clear vision and knowing of affective human life; what we need is a complete integration of every therapeutic tradition, having the primacy of affective development as the core (Panksepp & Biven, 2012), not what each therapist or researcher thinks, but what a model, a paradigm, could integrate and organise what research says better than others, with a lower level of confusion and with improved operative results during the session, taking into account the biological interpersonal aspect of every (and patient/therapist) relationship.

The same thing that happened at the beginning of the 80's still happens nowadays. A discrepancy is increasingly evident between the logic "linearity" of descriptive psychiatry and the multifaceted "complexity" of human experience that would converge in clinical practice; we need the research that allows us to work at an integration of the developmental hypotheses that focuses on the interface between individual (biological and psychological), family and social processes.

The studies on self-organized systems support the introduction of a new methodological perspective in cognitive sciences, different from the predictive model of physical sciences (behavioural and rationalist-cognitive) that are mainly founded on the anticipation and prediction according to rational principles: if we want to understand why a person behaves in a certain way in a specific situation, rather than accurately predicting the person's cognition in that specific instant, as indicated by a prediction-based approach, it could be more useful and explicative to reconstruct the internal dynamic of an individual able to give meaning to a set of

events according to his own coherence. The method is *re-construction* (rather than prediction) of the system's operations and of their internal coherence, that must account for the observed behaviour as a phenomenon emerging from the system's dynamics.

In the subsequent steps of his research on the models of development and dynamics of the self, the Guidano's post-rationalist approach aims at an evolutionary model of psychopathology and a definition of the related strategies of psychotherapeutic intervention, thus coming to define the complex relations among emotion, thought and identity in the course of individual life, claiming that these relations are unitary and unstable in time due to the continuous transformation deriving from the assimilation of experience in terms of "organization of personal meaning". Neurotic or psychotic clinical unbalances can be "reinterpreted" as critical, problematic reorganizations of personal meaning that individuals may have experienced throughout the different stages of their life cycle.

Emotions are the central process of brain activity and their regulation is initially developed in the framework of interpersonal relations, that evolved during phylogenesis in a complex process of self-organization that lead to the acquisition of Self-organizing abilities such as the emergence of mentalism and language (Cutolo, 2011, 2014; Cutolo et al., 2017).

If knowledge is seen as a self-organizing process, the marked propensity to structure an intense emotional reciprocity with the care givers, appears as the *ontological constraint* at the root of any possible ordering of experience, thus underlining *the organizational and regulatory* role played by emotional and affective processes -primarily those of attachment- in the course of individual development. Reciprocity is perceived as a key element in ordering development, as emerged from the numerous research conducted on groups of anthropomorphic primates (Cirulli, Berry, & Alleva, 2003; Davidson et al., 2007; van der Worp HB, et al., 2010).

This depends on the opportunity to develop within the earliest significant and meaningful relationships (typically established inside the family) a sense of belonging and similarity together with a sense of separation, differentiation and autonomy.

The attachment system is biologically pre-programmed to enable the survival of animal species at growing levels of complexity up until the evolutionary state of being human: the functions of attachment are not confined to childhood, but rather characterize the affective styles in adulthood and accompany humans throughout their entire life.

The creation, maintenance and break up of significant affective bonds (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1977, 1980) are connected to basic emotions and to the fundamental role played by parents in determining their correct development.

From his evolutionary approach, Guidano conceptualized psychosis as a particular disease of the reordering of immediate experience (sequentialization),

shortly before his death. It is the ability of integrating personal experience into a 'before' and a 'after', through explicative and reorganizational language abilities, through superior neurocritical functions, developed during both phylogenesis and ontogenesis; it allows itself to be put in a spatial, logical, thematic and temporal context, what the person, time by time, explains to himself about his reality and life experience. With psychosis this ability is compromised: the lack of, the difficulty, and the failing to take into account the context, are present at every level of mind functioning. This difficulty appears when the individual utilizes language to refer his own experience to himself, to make it become part of himself (integration). In particular emotional situations, when the person is overwhelmed by a great deal of quantities and qualities of sensory perceptions and emotions that doesn't succeed in substaining/processing the interpersonal space, he can keep them out by making them become something external and stranger to himself, not recognizing them as his own, transforming them in delusion and hallucination.

With contextualization Guidano means firstly, a phylogenic way of remaining connected with the group, a relation with the social medium that takes place by means of a consensual coordination (Maturana & Dàvila 2006); secondly the ontogenic way of child developing that takes place in the family context, through the attachment bonds: all of this defines the *inter-personal* space. Subsequently the contextualization extends to personal/individual fields also, to the relation between immediate self experience and explanation/reordering of the same, the intra-personal space.

Every self explanation is then necessary linked, according to the meaning attributed to it , to the meaning that others attribute to it, both the meaningful others and those of the social world.

The notion of *consensual coordination* is included in the term contextualization created by Guidano in 1998, to mean the link between personal experience and the others', through mentalistic abilities development first and linguistic then. This 'remaining linked with the context' assumes ways of functioning ever more complex, and moving from non human primates to humans, takes a specific shape: to *put in sequence* the personal experience and integrate it inside the self, within himself, to maintain life coherence and continuity.

In this sense *sequentialization* becomes the specific shape that this 'remaining linked with the context' assumes among the humans.

Moving from a social to a personal context, the sequentialization becomes the shape or the narrative modality, assumed by contextualization to accord/concord personal experience not only with the context external to the self (others' world) but, and this is the evolutionary novelty, with the self internal context (internal world).

Contextualization both from a phylogenic and ontogenic point of view, indicate then the necessity to remaining linked/kept in touch, that appears, from the beginning, referring to the belonging group, and that acquires in progress more and more importance during the individual development.

Conceptualizing psychosis as a contextualization difficulty (differentiating the internal from the external personal context), offers the possibility to treat or cure it and stimulate the acquisition of new integrated models of individual-familial and social intervention.

So, in the course of the evolutionary process, the construction of the organization of Personal Identity, i.e. of the set of personal meaning systems depends on the role played by the interactions with significant others (attachment-separation processes).

In parallel to the emotional processes, attention has been focused on the study of cognitive processes that are secondary to the emotions they are rooted in and built upon. "In the field of evolutionary psychology an psychopathology, emotions and their modulations are considered as tightly intertwined processes: emotions are regulated while at the same time perform regulatory functions…any processing of information is based on emotion, meaning that emotion is the energy that directs, organizes, amplifies and modulates the cognitive activity while constructing its experience and expression".

The ability to modulate affective states is equally strictly related to *mentalization*: it thus appears reasonable to assume that the ultimate goal of attachment is to produce a representational system that evolved as an aid to survival, in that it ensures the development of the brain structures useful for social cognition and to make the individual equipped to collaborate with others. Attachment seems to work as one of the main organizers of brain and human mind development, and human experience is nothing but the product of this self-organization process that in evolutionary terms has gone on for millions of years.

The ability to modulate emotions and their relevant activation, states through the so called "processes of affective regulation", plays a crucial role in the internal activities of an individual: many psychiatric conditions can be seen as disorders of these regulatory processes; this is the reason why some therapeutic approaches aimed at different levels of activity of brain and mind can be used to help the patients to acquire more balanced and functional forms of self-regulation; the patient-therapist relation can provide "external constraints" (and also biological modifications that contribute to modify personal self-organizing skills and abilities.

In Guidano's work we find one of the most promising applications of the notion of self-organization in cognitive and clinical psychology: the interdependence between self-knowing and self-ordering implies that the generation and the assimilation of any information are regulated by the personal identity patterns that have been structured to that moment, thus making possible a unitary and coherent dimension of experience.

The issue here is not "what" we study or observe to know, but "how" we assemble the data coming from different experimental domains.

What appears to be needed now is a shared epistemological approach built around notions like development, process, self-organization, self-regulation and complexity. Any observable behaviour is in fact the last result of a sequence of

processes that are structurally alike for the species, but imply different interactions and relations for the individual: even if we live in similar conditions, each one of us produces a wide range of variable behaviours that can be explained only by looking at our own evolutionary history, and at the meaning that each one attributes to one's specific experience and to the relations established over one's life.

This is what we had in mind when we proposed our considerations, with the wish to launch a much broader debate on the issues proposed, so as to gather enough experimental evidence to bridge the gap between concrete scientific work and abstract elaborations, without loosing interest in the understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of living and human systems.

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