
Book Review

Reviewed by Irene Calesini

Email: iri.cale@gmail.com

Istinto di morte e conoscenza [Death Instinct and Knowledge]

by Massimo Fagioli

Published 2010

by L'Asino d'oro edizioni, Rome, Italy

ISBN-13: 978-88-6443-001-0

About 40 years after its first edition (printed by Nuove Edizioni Romane, in 1972) the book *Death Instinct and Knowledge* by Massimo Fagioli has now a new publisher, l'Asino d'Oro Edizioni. At least 12 editions of this book have been released from 1972 to 2007. The first book by the Italian psychiatrist has the vitality of a masterpiece and a few rare scientific texts. What is the secret of so much interest?

The volume has been enriched with several preambles, and recently (2010) with a postscript 'The invisible violence. Forty years later'. The book introduces a new theory of human birth, in particular regarding the birth of human thought.

In contrast to widespread psychoanalytic/psychiatric concepts and with classical antropological/philosophical cultures that assert an original fragmentation/chaos of the human psyche, the theory developed by Massimo Fagioli shows the native psychological health and the psyche-soma fusion at birth. More precisely, he describes and demonstrates the *birth's physiology of mind and thought*, starting from the human biological reality.

The text begins facing the study of *annulment drive*. It starts from the concept of psychic absence and the reaction to such an absence. Based on his clinical findings in severe mentally-ill patients, the author explains how the annulment drive is pathogenic when used in the context of interpersonal relationships. He also demonstrates how an adequate interpretation of this dynamics in the context of a coherent psychotherapeutical relationship including the interpretation of dreams, can have a curative effect. This concept is illustrated by the story of a patient at the end of the first chapter: *Storia di un caso*.

In chapter two, the author analyses the first psychic dynamics that happens upon birth when the newborn comes to the light (i.e. at the precise time of uterine separation), and the purely biological reality of the foetus is transformed into human reality. It is exactly at the time of such separation that human life begins, both physically and mentally.

In the uterine milieu, the retina of the foetus does not receive any light stimulation. At birth, retinal stimulation by light triggers an *immediate drive reaction* specific to humans. The fragile newborn, not bearing the attacks exerted by the external environment (light, air, cold...) closes his eyes and 'makes the dark' making the outer world inexistent. But, the newborn has the '*vitality*', developed during the last months of pregnancy and then activated by passing through delivery canal. Thus, he will realise the 'memory fantasy' of the

past experience. In fact, the baby arises from the dramatic contrast between the homeostatic exposure to amniotic fluid and the completely new extrauterine situation in which he/she is exposed to light.

So, at birth there is not a pure death instinct/annulment drive (that would bring the newborn to death), but a *disappearance fantasy* (*fantasia di sparizione*), a purely human ability. The newborn rejects the inanimate world and realises humanity in himself.

'Vitality' is to the author a specific characteristic of the human biology: a foetal biological reaction of sensitivity and 'perception' of homeostasis in the amniotic fluid and a fundamental basis to the transformational process at birth. We can observe that the newborn's survival, provided adequate assistance, is possible not before the 23rd–24th week of gestation.¹ This term coincides with the time of retinal formation and completion of nervous connections between thalamic geniculate nuclei and visual cerebral cortex, that enable the retinal function to respond to the light stimulations at birth.²

The process that occurs at birth, during the first moment of life, before the first breath and before the relationship with the breast and the mother will enable to think with images and is the matrix of fantasy and creativity. According to the author this is the first form of thought. At birth the disappearance fantasy, which contains 'vitality', creates a 'first internal image', a *thought* which the author called 'unconscious calm sea' to indicate a first integrated and quiet internal image of him/herself. This is the 'capacity to imagine', integrating both the visual experience of birth and the biological experience of the months spent in contact with the amniotic liquid. In the last few years, Fagioli insists on the concept of 'the capacity to imagine', as the result of the huge transformation at birth. The newborn begins to think in the first moments of his/her extrauterine life independently of any verbal ability and of the first breast relationship.

This 'capacity to imagine', is a typical human characteristic, which supported by the body maturity and experiences will lead him/her, two years later, to speak. Human language will have a large background of sensations, images, affections, feelings and thoughts. Therefore, we don't learn it passively but it is a creative human acquisition.

Once again, at birth, the baby is powerless in his muscular actions, and would die if not cured and protected, but he/she is already a complete human being, with a psychophysical integrity and no split between mind and body, with a lively mental activity and a natural tendency to relate to humans. From this moment he/she begins both the psychic and body dynamics of interpersonal relationship. The baby, with his/her identity and already integrated ego needs to be confirmed by interpersonal relationship, through mother's milk and adult's presence, that will bring nutrients, interests and love.

In that way, the baby will grow healthy, both in body and mind and will be aware of his/her own and someone else's reality. However, repeated desire disappointments in the child's ever need and search for love and care (more in terms of mental than physical reality) will lead the baby to sick, altered interpersonal relationships up to mental illness (obviously the child intuitively feels the presence of a human substance which can answer, but cannot verbalise it).

In the following chapters, the author elaborates the fundamental dynamics of the first years of life and psychic life in general. Concepts are redefined as desire, sexual investment, castration, annulment, negation, envy, indifference and anaffectivity, to mention only some of them.

Just a few words to explain the reasons why we want to draw the attention of the readers of this scientific journal to this text written 40 years ago.³ First of all, as we mentioned before, for the topicality of the various concepts developed in the book. Indeed, concepts like human birth, beginning/end of human life and all their ethical, cultural, and medical consequences are discussed daily in our societies. Furthermore, because of the originality of Fagioli's concepts of mental health and originary psychophysical integrity, and their important social and sanitary consequences. Moreover, for the scientific method with which it has been written, after years of clinical practice and for the language, because even if specialised and taken from psychiatry and psychoanalysis vocabulary, it can be understood by everybody, thanks to its concreteness. To each term corresponds a concept-image, well re-defined and visualised in its essence (which is unusual when dealing with psychology, psychiatry, or psychopathology).

As scientific researchers involved in human health and development this text is interesting for its concepts of native intact psychophysical state, native mental health and original non-violence in the interpersonal relationships. We are also interested in the scientific demonstration of equality, in birth and for birth, for all human beings. This is the necessary basis in order to guarantee everyone equal rights for psychophysical health during the whole life. Because science cannot be regardless of equality of all human beings and of the equal value of any human life, in order to achieve its task.

Notes and Reference

- 1 For a detailed synthesis on the relationship between foetal development and possibility of human life, see Gatti, M.G. (2008) 'Leggere la biologia e la vita umana', *Il sogno della farfalla*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp.5-9.
- 2 Hevner, R.F. (2000) 'Development of connections in the human visual system during fetal mid-gestation: a Dil-tracing study', *Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology*, Vol. 59, pp.385–392.
- 3 At present, extracts of *Death Instinct and Knowledge* are available in English, French, Portuguese, Chinese (consultable on the website www.lasinodoroedizioni.it). A translation of the book in German, edited by A. Homberg, C. Iannaco, A. Marinelli, is now available: Fagioli, M. (2011) *Todestrieb und Erkenntnis*, Stroemfeld Verlag, Frankfurt am Main und Basel. ISBN 978-3-86600-076-6. The book was recently presented at Lipsia, Germany (19 March 2011) with the presence of the Author, the Editor and the translators; the presentation is available at: video.associazioneamorepsiche.org.