



## DIALOGUES

### **Descriptive richness and abstract theorizing pertaining to schizophrenic disorders**

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Gaetano (2011) commented on the problems that exist in diagnosing schizophrenia and argues that more effort should be devoted to understanding relevant subjective experiences. I am not convinced that this is necessarily so.

I have argued previously (2010; 2011) that diagnosis of clinical disorders is unlikely to work well in the absence of a theory on which the diagnostic system can be based. At present, there is very little theory concerning schizophrenic disorders, or at least very little theory that elicits wide agreement and has definitive empirical support.

Suppose that schizophrenia researchers change course in the way Gaetano (2011) recommends, and let us even suppose that the result is a collection of richer descriptions of the subjective experiences schizophrenics have. Will this collection of rich descriptions lead to a strong theory on which a diagnostic system can be based?

Although matters might work out in this way, I would not bet on it. Consider that in the successful sciences, the proposed theories are at increasingly *more* abstract levels, and so there is *less* descriptive richness. Rather, the descriptive richness comes in at the level of assumptions outside the theory, that describe initial conditions, linkages between unobservable constructs and observable measures, and so on. For example, it is often said that Newton's theorizing al-

lowed physical scientists to predict the orbits of the planets. This is not technically correct. The planets, nor their motions, are even mentioned in Newton's theorizing. The truth of the matter is that Newton's theorizing, *in combination* with other assumptions, sometimes called *auxiliary* assumptions, about the present positions and speeds of the planets, enabled these predictions.

The universe is too complicated to be described by a single theory. Therefore, theories are abstractions; they postulate simplified universes. If the simplified universe can be connected to the real universe via valid auxiliary assumptions, then the theory can pass strong empirical tests and be corroborated, though not proved (Popper, 1934).

Because theories are abstractions, the goal is precisely *not* to have descriptive richness. This is so not just in physics and astronomy. Consider Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution. The actual theory is presented in less than two pages! The other 400 or so pages pertain to setting the stage, addressing potential counterarguments, and mostly in describing and defending auxiliary assumptions.

It is important not to misunderstand here. I am not claiming that descriptive richness is bad. Darwin's famous work is one of the most descriptively rich contributions in the history of science. But the descriptive richness is not at the theoretical level! It is at the level of auxiliary assumptions.

Nor am I arguing that a collection of descriptions never leads to good theory. Obviously, Darwin provides a contrary example. Had Darwin not been a keen observer, he might not have discovered the theory of evolution. In his case, descriptive richness was very important.

On the other hand, there are many areas of psychology where there is much descriptive richness that has not led to strong theory. And this brings us to my main point. If researchers collect rich descriptions of subjective experienc-

es of schizophrenics, in the interest of generating a strong theory, at a level that is abstracted away from the richness of the descriptions (as with Darwin), progress seems likely. But if the rich descriptions are collected for their own sake,

with no effort at abstracting away from them, then that is all we will have. We will have a collection of rich descriptions, no strong theory, and very little ability to make valid diagnoses of schizophrenic disorders.

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