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The Vocation of Psychology as a Personal-Existential Challenge – Seen through Nigerian-Allegorical Lenses

1.

While reading Robinson's target article for the second time – still undecided as to whether I should produce a commentary or not – certain image-borne reminiscences from a visit I paid to Nigeria more than ten years ago appeared on my inner screen.

The situation runs like this. I am sitting at an office desk in a hot, dusty, definitely non-airconditioned room in a Nigerian provincial town, dealing with whatever I have to deal with. At a certain point, I realize I have to get hold of a particular somebody, not present but reachable by telephone, in order to get things moving the way I want them to move. So I lift the reciever, I dial his number, and I wait. From the receiver strange noises are coming, they could belong to some weird futuristic movie: beeping, hissing, crackling, whistling, snarling… – and I wait. I know the noises somehow reflect the brave efforts, not only of my telephone, but of masses of telephones in my Nigerian surroundings to *get connected*, i.e. first locate, secondly hook themselves on to a *vacant line*, thereby making a communicational flow between potential dialogue partners possible.

After a waiting period of, roughly, one half to three quarters of a minute, the beeping, hissing, crackling… etc. – come to an abrupt halt, being followed by a dull, droning monotone. This, to me, is a signal that within the generalized vacant line hunt going on, the search efforts of my particular telephone have so far been in vain. Small wonder! It is a fact of Nigerian life that vacant lines are an exceedingly scarce commodity, at least as compared to the number of people who want them. In this predicament, however, what I do *not* do (a couple of weeks have passed since my arrival, I'm getting socialized!), is to put the receiver back where it came from with a resolution to 'try later'. Instead, routinely I place it, face up, on my desk adjacent to my various papers. This done, I press two buttons from the telephone's button display. Button number one is a 'loudspeaker' button, meaning that the receiver from its supine position will from now on 'talk' to me. The second button is a 'repeat' button, meaning that my telephone will henceforth, unless otherwise told, automatically re-dial the number last dialled. All Nigerian telefones are provided with loudspeaker buttons as well as repeat buttons!

So, here we go again: automatic dialling (making its noises) – beeping, hissing etc…… (but I don't, by now, pay that much attention, *que sera, sera!*) – yes, and here comes the droning sound (poor luck, old chap) – which in its turn makes me reach out, automatic fashion, to press 'repeat' (requires practically no mental effort) – leading to another round of dialling sounds – hissing… etc. sounds – droning sound – repeat button – dialling… Until all of a sudden, possibly on the fifth or the ninth or the fourteenth trial my loud-speaking receiver breaks the vicious circle, sending clear ringing notes to my ear, thus releasing a frantic attentional search within me: "Will he pick up? – is he home? – now, why was it I wanted to talk to him …?"

On certain days, of course, the miracle never happened, the ringing notes never appeared, leaving me with the choice of either postponing, or sending my friend a postcard instead (if only it weren't for the postal services…), or imagining his reply all by myself, or just plainly forgetting about the whole thing.

2.

What made this particular imagery find its way to my inner screen while reading Robinson's target article for the second time and at the same time trying to find out whether to comment or not? Having pondered the issue, I do find certain threads of significance linking the article and my Nigerian narrative as told above.

In his article Robinson, with much critical vigour, exposes certain aspects of psychology as a social endeavour, namely aspects related to its seemingly excessive, publicly manifested concern with (borrowing from German critical phraseology) *Waren-Ästhetik*. Present day psychology's 'business as usual' he describes as some kind of hectic (so-called) theory production on the academic conveyor belt, the more the better (in quantity, not quality), its results being immediately – as a hoped-for door opener to an appearance in Newsweek – touted as "a 'groundbreaking' treatise from a 'leading figure' located at one of our 'major research universities'" (p. 8)…, etc., etc.

As a common label for the said aspects of psychology as a social endeavour, Robinson chooses the term *professionalization*. Professional psychology is psychology offering itself to the highest bidder out there on the market place. In the second section of his target article, Robinson tells us the story about how – and most conspicuously as a "byproduct of the two great wars of the 20th century" (p 11) – society at large turned itself into an apparently irresistible 'highest bidder' for psychology's potential services, within research and within all sorts of public helping and treatment practices, thereby making 'profession' oust 'vocation' as a provider of guiding principles for psychology as a social

endeavour. With his article, Robinson is – as he tells us from the very beginning (p 6) – making "a plea for impatience", urging us not just to go on *sitting there*, but to start *doing something* about it. In the last half of his article, Robinson offers suggestions as to research themes and ways of organizing that might be helpful in starting the process of re-vocationalizing psychology.

The obvious link between, on the one hand, the image painted by Robinson of present-day, professional(ized) psychology, and, on the other hand, the imagery on which my Nigerian narrative was based, is that both are referring to a market-like situational structure involving a supply-demand tension relative to a certain social commodity. In Robinson's case, the reference to 'market' is very clearcut, 'classical', so to speak. In my Nigerian narrative, the referring is done in a more roundabout manner. Nested within this basic structural similarity, however, at least two sets of value markers can be found, in Robinson's narrative and my Nigerian narrative respectively, that seem to be pointing in radically opposite directions.

In Robinson's narrative, the kind of psychological commodities being exchanged and being subject to pricing through market forces are commodities that tend to lead psychology and psychologists astray from the 'better' road of vocational guidance, and tend basically to corrupt psychology as a social endeavour. In my Nigerian narrative, the searched-for commodity, around which market-like competition is going on, is simply 'vacant lines', i.e. sites in a communicational space that may serve as potential channels for personal expression and inter-personal dialogue.

In Robinson's narrative, the din of the psychological marketplace with all its self-advertizing, self-aggrandizement, apparently makes it difficult to concentrate on the pursuit of vocationally relevant matters: psychology's profession-driven "business as usual" has "become an attractive distraction" and has "done much to reduce" psychology's inherent worthiness (p 7). The market-like competition going on, in my Nigerian narrative, between the many individuals in search of 'vacant lines' also produces a lot of noise: the beeping, hissing, etc., reminding the narrator of 'some weird futuristic movie'. For the narrative's protagonist, however, this fairly exotic type of marketplace noise does not seem to present a serious distraction. His socialization into Nigerian ways has habituated him, thus allowing him to let the noise 'just be there' as one among so many 'facts of life', while he himself, as best he can, carries on dealing with whatever day-to-day business has to be dealt with.

3.

The Nigerian narrative as presented is not the end-product of an analytic reasoning process. Rather, it 'came to me' in an unbidden fashion, much the same way a dream may 'come'. *After the fact* you may then, as dreamer or image-bearer, put analytic questions to yourself or even to others (professional psychologists are often used for such purposes!) in an effort to understand why your body 'chose' to send you these exact images at that exact existential moment (broadly or narrowly speaking), possibly functioning as a commentary on whatever theme or activity was of importance to you then and there. It is questions of that kind I have, in a loose, tentative manner, started to answer in the above section. Below I will try and formulate an answer in a more analytic vein.

Basically, I have come to see my Nigerian narrative as a personally inspired counter-narrative to the narrative told by Robinson. Choosing to call it 'personally inspired' is a consciously willed way of *not* choosing to call it '*theoretically* inspired'. I have no theoretical misgivings either about Robinson's exposition of what happened to psychology as a social endeavour during the last century, or about the inherent scientific (intellectual, in a general way inspirational…) merits of the research themes he suggests as potential energy boosters for future psychology.

Switching to a more person-oriented level of discourse, I can readily understand, and also (I believe) empathize with the kind of personally felt impatience which, for Robinson, is what his narrative 'naturally' leads up to. This impatience, however, is not one which, through his article, gets transported into *my* flesh and blood – or to put it in market-like lingo: personally or existentially speaking, I don't buy it, being the person (and the psychologist) I am. As it turned out, my body (or 'flesh and blood') instead chose, through the medium of some Nigerian imagery, to invite me to take a look at the target article's contents from an angle different from Robinson's angle. In the following, last parts of my commentary I shall, to the best of my ability and within the limited space available ('vacant lines', i.e. sites for personal self-expression *are* a scarce commodity in this world of ours), delineate some value and identity patterns probably underlying my body's choice in this matter.

4.

Yes, I am a *professional* psychologist, and passionately so. More than anything else, the cultivation and refinement of professionalism within psychology as a social endeavour is what I have made my lifelong personal-existential vocation, at least as far as adult years are concerned. To me above all, the cultivation and refinement of psychological professionalism are matters of *getting connected* and then (as far as possible) staying in (at least mental) contact, not erecting barriers or putting yourself (along with your friends) in secluded spots from where you can lament the pettiness and misguidedness of all those on the other side of the fence who happen not to have seen the light.

As hinted at above, I can understand, empathize with, and also respect Robinson's target article as showing a way out of a *personally and existentially felt* predicament. If, at times, the blooming, buzzing confusion of life-as-it-is-lived these days does distract one to the point of not being able to use one's talents in their proper measure, it is fitting to search for secluded spots where you yourself, along with likeminded people, can pull a plan together for doing what needs doing, and then go ahead and do it. But in so far as Robinson develops his 'plea for impatience' into a *generalized* rallying

cry, to the effect that a psychology worth having *should stay clear* of the professional marketplace, I cannot, for all my empathy, sympathize with that idea. To me, such an idea (in its *generalized* version) translates into a plea for setting up barriers between theory and practice within our field, and between Universities and the rest of the world. According to my value system (professional, scientific, vocational…), such a practice would mean giving up dealing with some of those challenges of importance to our discipline, that most urgently need our attention.

5.

Yes, and then I am also a *Danish* psychologist having had *the same tenure* for well over thirty years and *never having been in need of external funding* for my research. These pieces of self-related information are of a very practical, down to earth nature. Yet, I think they are important for understanding the obstinate unwillingness of my 'flesh and blood' (read: personal-existential foundation) to resonate with the particular impatience variety for which Robinson, through his article, makes a plea. What did, instead, resonate within me while reading the last half of the target article, was a kind of self-generated impatience of quite another type, going along these lines: "Fine, interesting, well said…, but *what stops him*, or anybody else for that matter, *from just doing it?*"

According to Robinson (as read by me), 'psychology' to an awesome degree seems to function as a theoretical control structure, putting bans and interdictions on all sorts of possible knowledge areas concerning the human condition. To me, as I have known and been in contact with psychology for well over thirty years, it is rather an extremely open, extremely uncoordinated, extremely messy semantic structure (not unlike an outsider's picture of Nigerian telecommunication!); but then also – and partly as a consequence of this – a semantic structure which, for better or for worse, puts very few restrictions on what can be said and done within its confines – *if only* (that is) *you can find a vacant line* that will carry your message, and carry it to the people you hope to reach.

As indicated above, I imagine my position as (a) a *Danish* psychologist, (b) *having tenure*, and (c) having *no need for external funding* makes it comparatively easy, and even natural for me to hold the just described view of our discipline. Below I deal with the three points mentioned, in a reshuffled order according to their vocational importance.

(a) As a long-time tenure holder approaching pension age, I do not have to worry overly about being mainstream or not, or about pleasing this or that recruitment board or not.

(b) My academic speciality (apart from teaching) is that of being a university-based action researcher, i.e. drawing my empirical data from 'live' professional encounters with client systems and using my standard quota of research time inherent in my tenure position for the processing of and theoretical reflection on the ever accumulating body of data at my disposal. My research costs are thus covered, on a running basis, by the client systems involved and by my University workplace jointly. This puts me in the privileged position of *not* having to compete with other researchers for funding in order to have 'vacant lines' opened up for me. Were I obliged to take part in such competition, I might well, for all practical purposes, find myself and my research interests squeezed out of 'official' psychological existence.

(c) For many centuries, now, as a national-historical enterprise Denmark has *not* scored high on the incidence of civil wars, class wars, colonial wars... Our 'official', generalized national ethos tells us, the Danes, that however weird the sounds and ideas are, that come out our neighbour's mouth, we should at least, politely, *lend him an ear*. Inevitable, such a climate will also put its mark on the way Danes deal with psychology as a social and scientific endeavour. This much said – and granting that Robinson does indeed experience the research themes mentioned in his article as *non grata* within 'official' psychology – I guess 'national ethos' must be one partial explanation for the fact that I experience the same themes, not only as permitted and permissible, but actually as themes about which psychology of today could well tell a story. If a student of mine suggested to me that he or she write an MA-thesis on one or other of the themes mentioned by Robinson, I would not, then and there, advise against it for fear of a lack of relevant literary sources or ideas from within the discipline.

6.

Now, where does all this leave us?

In his target article, Robinson is pursuing two main avenues of reasoning. One is critical-explanatory, dealing with psychology's progression as a scientific discipline during the last century. It paints the picture of a heavily capitalized research field, it exposes much of the intellectual pettiness that follows in the wake of capitalization, and it shows in outline how to arrive at a historical understanding of the said capitalization.

Robinson's second avenue of reasoning is critical-constructive. It paints a picture of a possible future psychology, described as a *science of human nature worth having*, and it delineates certain research themes and ways of organizing that would be conducive to the establishment of such a science.

In both avenues of reasoning I find much of value and much with which I am in basic agreement. Robinson's way of joining them together, seeing the second as, somehow, a remedy to the malaise described in the first, provokes my disagreement. With more space at my disposal, I would have presented my own thoughts concerning the practical and theoretical challenges posed to us by a psychology that has grown into an 'extremely open, extremely uncoordinated, extremely messy semantic structure'. This space not being available, my commentary breaks off here.