

Why Did Van Gogh Cut Off His Ear? The Problem of Alternative Explanations in Psychobiography

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One of the tasks of personality psychology is to explain the behavior of individual human beings. Vincent Van Gogh, for example, cut off the lower half of his left ear and gave it to a prostitute. More than a dozen different explanations of his actions have been proposed. Is one of these explanations true, are all of them true, or, perhaps, are none of them true? And how can we know? This incident is examined in order to explore some of the problems in applying personality theories to the life of a single individual. A sequential procedure for generating and critically evaluating alternative explanatory conjectures is presented as a partial, although not a complete, solution to the problem of multiple interpretations.

Late Sunday evening December 23, 1888, Vincent Van Gogh, then 35 years old, cut off the lower half of his left ear and took it to a brothel, where he asked for a prostitute named Rachel and handed the ear to her, asking her to "keep this object carefully."

How is this extraordinary event to be accounted for? Over the years, a variety of explanations have been proposed, and more than a dozen of them will be sketched below. What sense can be made of such a variety of interpretations? Is one of them uniquely true, are all of them true in some way, or, perhaps, are none of them true? And how can we know? This incident is examined in order to explore the problem of alternative explanations in the study of lives (Allport, 1961, 1965; Hogan, 1976; Murray, 1938; Runyan, 1978, 1980a, 1980b; White, 1963, 1975) and to contribute to a growing literature on the logic and methodology of psychobiographical studies (e.g., Anderson, 1981; Crosby, 1979; Elms, 1976; Gedo, 1972; George, 1971; Glad, 1973; Izenberg,

1975; Lifton & Olson, 1974; Mack, 1971; Mazlish, 1968; Meyer, 1972; Runyan, in press). The discussion is intended to raise basic issues encountered in applying personality theories to the life of a single individual, whether a historical figure, a research subject, or a clinical patient.

A Variety of Explanations

1. One explanation of Van Gogh's behavior is that he was frustrated by two recent events: the engagement of his brother Theo, to whom he was very attached, and the failure of an attempt to establish a working and living relationship with Paul Gauguin. The aggressive impulses aroused by these frustrations were first directed at Gauguin, but then were turned against himself (Lubin, 1972).

2. A second interpretation is that the self-mutilation resulted from a conflict over homosexual impulses aroused by the presence of Gauguin. According to this account, the ear was a phallic symbol (the Dutch slang word for penis, *lul*, resembled the Dutch word for ear, *lel*), and the act was a symbolic self-castration (Lubin, 1972; Westerman Holstijn, 1951).

3. A third explanation is in terms of Oedipal themes. Van Gogh was sharing a house with Gauguin, and Gauguin reported that on the day before the ear mutilation Van Gogh had threatened him with a razor but, under Gauguin's powerful gaze, had then

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run away. According to this interpretation, Gauguin represented Van Gogh's hated father and that, failing in his initial threat, Van Gogh "finally gratified his extraordinary resentment and hate for his father by deflecting the hatred on to his own person. In so doing Van Gogh committed, in phantasy, an act of violence on his father with whom he identified himself and at the same time he punished himself for committing the act" (Schnier, 1950, p. 153). Then "in depositing his symbolic organ at the brothel he also fulfilled his wish to have his mother" (Schnier, 1950, pp. 153-154).

4. Another interpretation is that Van Gogh was influenced by bullfights he had seen in Arles. In such events the matador is given the ear of the bull as an award, displays his prize to the crowd, and then gives it to the lady of his choice. The proponent of this interpretation, J. Olivier (in Lubin, 1972), says: "I am absolutely convinced that Van Gogh was deeply impressed by this practice. . . . Van Gogh cut off the ear, his own ear, as if he were at the same time the vanquished bull and the victorious matador. A confusion in the mind of one person between the vanquished and the vanquisher" (p. 158). Then, like the matador, Van Gogh presented the ear to a lady of his choice. (The following explanations, unless otherwise noted, are also from Lubin's [1972] comprehensive analysis.)

5. In the months preceding Van Gogh's self-mutilation, there were 15 articles in the local paper about Jack the Ripper, who mutilated the bodies of prostitutes, sometimes cutting off their ears. "These crimes gave rise to emulators, and Vincent may have been one of them. As a masochist instead of a sadist, however, it is conceivable that he would reverse Jack's act by mutilating himself and bringing the ear to a prostitute" (Lubin, 1972, p. 159).

6. Van Gogh was emotionally and financially dependent on his brother Theo, and usually spent the Christmas holidays with him. This year, however, Vincent learned that Theo would spend the holiday with his new fiancée and her family. One interpretation suggests that Van Gogh's self-mutilation was an unconscious strategy for hold-

ing on to his brother's attention, and a way of getting Theo to come and care for him rather than spending the holidays with his fiancée.

7. Van Gogh had recently been painting a picture of a woman rocking a cradle, using Madame Roulins as his model. He felt great affection for the Roulins family and may have envied the love and attention their children received. In mutilating himself, Van Gogh may have been attempting to obtain care and love from these substitute parents. The immediate response of Madame Roulins is not known, but Monsieur Roulins came to Van Gogh's aid on the night of the injury and helped to care for him afterward.

8. Van Gogh had a great sympathy for prostitutes and identified with their status as social outcasts. One suggestion is that his self-mutilation was a reflection of this identification. "In June, just a few months before butchering his ear, he had written that 'the whore is like meat in a butcher shop': when he treated his own body as 'meat in a butcher's shop,' he reversed their roles, identified himself with the whore, and showed his sympathy for her" (Lubin, 1972, p. 169).

9. Vincent felt that his mother saw him as too rough and as a bad boy. During the psychotic state surrounding this incident, primitive symbolic thought processes may have led Van Gogh to cut off his ear from a desire to be perceived more positively by his mother. "Because the unconscious mind tends to regard protuberances as masculine and aggressive, removing the protuberant part of the ear may have been to inform the prostitute, a substitute for his mother, that he was not an aggressive, hurtful male—the 'rough' boy whom his mother disliked—but helpless, penetrable, the victim of a hurt" (Lubin, 1972, p. 173).

10. It is likely that Van Gogh experienced frightening auditory hallucinations during his psychotic attack similar to those he experienced in other attacks. Afterward, while in the sanatorium, he wrote that other patients heard strange sounds and voices as he had and speculated in one case that this was probably due to a disease of nerves in the ear. Thus, in a psychotic state, Van Gogh could have felt that his own ear was diseased

and cut it off to silence the disturbing sounds.

11. In the Garden of Gethsemane scene in the Bible, Simon Peter cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the high priest, who had come to seize Christ. This scene had been on Van Gogh's mind. He attempted to paint it in the summer of 1888, and also mentioned it in a letter to his sister in October. In his delirium, Van Gogh may have acted out the scene at Gethsemane, carrying out the roles of both victim and aggressor.

12. Another explanation is that Vincent identified with the crucified Jesus and that the Virgin Mary lamenting over the dead body of Christ represented Vincent's mother. "In giving the mother surrogate, Rachel, a dead segment of his body, Vincent symbolically repeated the scene on Calvary" (Lubin, 1972, p. 179).

13. Vincent Van Gogh lived in the shadow of a dead brother, also named Vincent, who died at birth exactly 1 year before Vincent the painter was born. It is suggested that Vincent had the feeling he was unloved by a mother who continued to grieve over an idealized lost son. Killing part of himself may have been an attempt to win his mother's love. Vincent's self-mutilation "represented a symbolic death, exhibiting Vincent in the image of his dead brother, the first Vincent—someone mother adored. As a gift, the severed ear was specifically the gift of a baby, a dead baby. Thus it was both a reliving of wishes to unite him with mother and a bitter mockery of his mother's attachment to her dead son" (Lubin, 1972, pp. 182-183.)

What to Make of These Alternative Explanations?

Here are 13 different psychodynamic explanations for why Van Gogh cut off his ear and gave it to a prostitute, and additional interpretations have been proposed (Lubin, 1972; Nagera, 1967; Schneider, 1950; Schnier, 1950; Untermeyer, 1955; Westerman Holstijn, 1951). There is also a substantial list of biological explanations for Van Gogh's disturbances (Monroe, 1978; Tralbaut, 1969). How should we interpret these alternative explanations? Are all of

them true, are some true and some false, or, perhaps, are none of them true? Do the various explanations conflict, so that if one is chosen then one or more of the others must be rejected, or do a number of them supplement each other? Is there, perhaps, some other explanation that would replace all of these possibilities? Do we end up with a feeling that we understand Van Gogh's behavior, that we know why he acted as he did?

Individuals may vary widely in their responses to this material. From one point of view, it is a richly woven tapestry connecting a single event to many themes, conflicts, symbols, and unconscious wishes and processes in Van Gogh's life. According to the principle of "overdetermination," which suggests that actions typically have multiple causes and meanings, this material can be seen as a rich set of complementary explanations for Van Gogh's behavior. Lubin (1972) for example, after discussing a number of possible explanations, suggests that "there may be truth in all of these suggestions. One's motivations include the superficial factors that are well known to oneself as well as deep, troubling factors that one would vehemently deny when confronted with them. Man carries his conflicts from one period of life to the next, and each stage of development puts its mark on the next" (p. 163). From the standpoint of overdetermination, it would be surprising to find a single explanation for any human action, and events can be expected to have more than one cause, more than one meaning. At other points, Lubin states that "various aspects of Vincent's life converged in this single episode" (p. 155) and that what we have is a set of "interrelated" explanations (p. 182).

A second way of making sense of these multiple explanations is to note that several of the different explanations are concerned with different aspects or features of the larger episode. For example, the choice of an ear may have been related to Van Gogh's observation of bullfights, the fact that it happened at Christmastime may have been associated with the presentation of the ear as a gift, and his choice of a prostitute as the recipient may have been related to recent publicized accounts of Jack the Ripper. A substantial number of interpretations, how-

ever, are concerned with similar aspects of the event. His choice of the ear has been related to his observation of bullfights, the newspaper accounts of Jack the Ripper, the ear as a phallic symbol, a belief that auditory hallucinations may have come from diseased nerves in the ear, and his concern with the Gethsemane scene.

A third approach is to work from the assumption that several of these explanations may be valid while the others are not, and that procedures for critically evaluating alternative explanations are needed in order to assess their relative credibility. The doctrine of overdetermination may be correct in that psychological events often have multiple causes and meanings, but to assume that all possible interpretations "are ultimately members of one happy family is to abandon critical thinking altogether" (Hirsch, 1967, p. 164). For therapeutic purposes, it may be useful to explore as many meanings as possible for a single event, but for scientific or explanatory purposes, it is necessary both to critically assess the plausibility of alternative explanations and then to examine the extent to which the remaining explanations supplement or conflict with one another.

A fourth possible response is to think that all of this symbolic interpretation is somewhat arbitrary, perhaps even hopelessly arbitrary. If interpretations can be generated merely by noting similarities between the event in question and earlier events and experiences, then connections "are embarrassingly easy to find" and "the number of possible (and plausible) explanations is infinite" (Spence, 1976, pp. 377, 379). It can be argued that the process of interpretation is so loose and flexible that it can be used to explain anything, and its opposite, not only once but in many different ways. A milder version of this criticism is that the process of psychodynamic interpretation is perfectly legitimate but that it has been used with insufficient constraint in this particular example.

The Critical Evaluation of Explanatory Conjectures

This incident forcefully raises several basic questions about the logic of explanation in

psychobiography. What procedures exist, or can be developed, for critically evaluating alternative explanations of life events? How can we know whether we do or do not have a "good" explanation of a particular event or set of events in a life history? The Van Gogh example is useful in that it pushes the explanatory endeavor further than usual by suggesting a wide range of possible interpretations, with supporting evidence for each. In doing so, it raises with unusual clarity questions about the generation of explanatory hypotheses, about the critical evaluation of such hypotheses, and about the choice among, or integration of, a variety of explanatory possibilities.

It seems helpful, following Popper (1962), to distinguish between the processes of conjecture and refutation and to make a distinction between the processes of generating and critically evaluating explanatory conjectures. The literature on Van Gogh provides an excellent example of the processes of explanatory conjecture, and can also be used to illustrate the process of critically evaluating such conjectures. Consider, for example, the hypothesis that Van Gogh may have been influenced by contemporary newspaper accounts of Jack the Ripper. This particular explanation depends on the assumption that Van Gogh read these stories in the local paper, that he noticed the ear-cutting detail mentioned in 2 of the 15 stories, that it made a lasting impression on him, and that it influenced him the night he mutilated his own ear. This explanation depends on a chain of assumptions, none of which has direct empirical support, which leaves this particular conjecture relatively unsubstantiated.

In comparison, the probability that he was influenced in his actions by visions of a matador and bull may be somewhat higher (although still perhaps low on an absolute basis) in that his letters indicate that he had attended bullfights in Arles. There is evidence that he had at least witnessed this scene, and that it had made an impression on him, whereas we can only presume that he may have read about Jack the Ripper and his cutting of ears.

Consider also the theory that he identified with a prostitute by treating his own body like meat in a butcher shop. The phrase "the

whore is like meat in a butcher's shop" occurred in a letter in June of 1888, 6 months before the ear-cutting incident. Without further supporting evidence that this image occurred to Van Gogh nearer in time to the ear-cutting incident, there is little reason to believe that it played a significant part in his self-mutilation.

Part of the evidence supporting an Oedipal interpretation of the incident also seems open to question. Gauguin did not report that Van Gogh threatened him with a razor until 15 years after the incident; indeed, in Gauguin's account to a friend 4 days after the event, this was not mentioned. Gauguin left Arles for Paris immediately after Van Gogh's self-mutilation. It has been suggested by Rewald (1956) that Gauguin was concerned about the propriety of his conduct, and may have invented the threat story later as a justification for having abandoned Van Gogh in a moment of crisis.

In yet another explanation, Untermeyer (1955) suggested that Van Gogh "had cut off an ear and sent it to one of the prostitutes he and Gauguin had visited. It was a Christmas present, a return for being teased about his over-sized ears" (p. 235). There are several reasons for being suspicious of this particular explanation. As far as I have been able to determine, there is no evidence that Van Gogh was teased by the prostitute about the size of his ears. This highly relevant circumstance is not mentioned in such primary sources as Van Gogh's letters or Gauguin's memoirs or in far more extensive biographies of Van Gogh, such as Tralbaut's (1969) or Lubin's (1972), which contain detailed analyses of the ear-cutting episode. Furthermore, the same paragraph containing this assertion has at least two other factual errors in its description of the incident. Instead of supposing that Untermeyer's book of 92 biographical sketches has access to information unavailable to scholars such as Tralbaut, who has spent more than 50 years studying and writing about Van Gogh, it seems more reasonable to conclude that there is no reliable evidence supporting this explanatory conjecture and that the evidence was fabricated in order to produce a plausible account. Similar criticisms may be made of Meier-Graeffe's (1933) story that the pros-

stitute had earlier asked Van Gogh for a 5-franc piece, he had refused, and that she then said that "if he could not give her a five-franc piece he might at least honour her with one of his large lop-ears for a Christmas present" (p. 163).

An explanation not based on such unreliable evidence rests on Van Gogh's report several months later in the sanatorium that other patients heard words and voices, just as he had, probably because of diseased nerves of the ear. Such beliefs may have played a part in the ear-mutilation episode.

Perhaps the single most strongly supported explanatory factor in Vincent's breakdown was the perceived loss of his brother's care. Specifically, the ear-cutting incident and two later mental breakdowns coincided with learning of Theo's engagement, his marriage, and the birth of his first child. In each case, Vincent was threatened by the prospect of losing his main source of emotional and financial support, as it seemed that Theo might redirect his love and money toward his new family (Tralbaut, 1969).

A masochistic response under situations of rejection or loss of love was not alien to Van Gogh. In 1881, he had visited the parents of Kee Voss, a woman he loved but who was avoiding him. When he heard that Kee had left the house in order to avoid seeing him, Van Gogh "put his hand in the flame of the lamp and said, 'Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame'" (Tralbaut, 1969, p. 79). They blew out the lamp and said that he could not see her. These other incidents make it seem more likely that Van Gogh's self-mutilation was influenced by a perceived loss of love from his brother.

It is no easy task to winnow through a range of explanatory hypotheses, and given limitations in the accessible evidence about historical events, it is sometimes impossible to directly test every explanatory conjecture. However, substantial progress can still be made in identifying faulty explanations and in gathering corroborative evidence in support of others. Explanations and interpretations can be evaluated in light of criteria such as (a) their logical soundness, (b) their comprehensiveness in accounting for a number of puzzling aspects of the events in ques-

tion, (c) their survival of tests of attempted falsification, such as tests of derived predictions or retrodictions, (d) their consistency with the full range of available relevant evidence, (e) their support from above, or their consistency with more general knowledge about human functioning or about the person in question, and (f) their credibility relative to other explanatory hypotheses (Bromley, 1977, chap. 8; Cheshire, 1975; Crosby, 1979; Hempel, 1965, 1966; Sherwood, 1969).

For each explanatory problem we can imagine a tree of explanatory inquiries, with the trunk representing the initial question or puzzle, each limb representing an explanatory conjecture, and smaller branches off the limb representing tests of that particular hypothesis or conjecture. Any single explanatory hypothesis can be submitted to a variety of tests, with each test providing partial, although not definitive, corroboration or disconfirmation of the hypothesis.

The least developed inquiries would consist of a trunk with a single limb, representing a single explanatory conjecture that has received little or no critical examination. A comprehensive explanatory inquiry would resemble a well-developed tree, containing a great variety of explanatory conjectures, with extensive testing of each explanatory hypothesis. This picture of an ideal tree, or of a fully rational explanatory inquiry, provides a framework for assessing the progress of particular explanatory inquiries and for visualizing what has been done in relation to what could be done.

The Search for Single Explanations

Psychobiographical studies of individual lives are often criticized for being open to a variety of explanations. For instance, it is claimed that Freud's case studies "suffer from the critical flaw of being open to many interpretations" (Liebert & Spiegler, 1978, p. 50). Popper (1962) states: "Every conceivable case could be interpreted in the light of Adler's theory, or equally of Freud's. . . . I could not think of any human behavior which could not be interpreted in terms of either theory. It was precisely this fact—that they always fitted, that they were always

confirmed—which in the eyes of their admirers constituted the strongest argument in favour of these theories. It began to dawn on me that this apparent strength was in fact their weakness" (p. 35). Similarly, Gergen (1977) says: "The events of most people's lives are sufficiently variegated and multifarious that virtually any theoretical template can be validated. The case study simply allows the investigator freedom to locate the facts lending support to his or her preformulated convictions" (p. 142).

These criticisms are, I believe, overstated and apply most readily to poorly developed explanatory inquiries. It may be possible to interpret any life with any theory, but often only at the cost of distortion or selective presentation of the evidence. Any explanatory conjecture *can* be made, but not all of them stand up under critical examination. In legal proceedings, self-serving explanations of the course of events by a guilty defendant often crumble under rigorous cross-examination. Similarly, explanations of a life history using a particular theory sometimes fail to stand up under critical examination. For example, the disorders of George III had widely been seen as manic-depressive psychosis until Macalpine and Hunter (1969) persuasively reinterpreted them as symptoms of porphyria, a hereditary metabolic disturbance. Even if some evidence can be found in a life history that is consistent with a wide variety of theories, this does not mean that all of these theories provide an adequate interpretation of the events in question.

Critical testing of the claims and implications of various explanations can lead to the elimination of many of them as implausible or highly unlikely. Ideally, this process will lead to a single well-supported explanation. In some cases, though, even after a great number of unsatisfactory conjectures are eliminated, more than one explanation that is consistent with the available evidence may remain. We are sometimes faced with "many possible explanations, all of which may be equally valid theoretically and which the facts equally fit, and when this happens there is no way we can say which explanation is the most correct" (Pye, 1979, p. 53).

This problem may not be frequently encountered in everyday practice, where min-

imal resources are available for inquiry, where investigation ceases once a single plausible explanation is reached, or where inquiry stops once an interpretation consistent with a prevailing theoretical orthodoxy is produced. However, if an explanatory problem is extensively investigated, if it is approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives, or if it touches on conflicting social and political interests, it becomes more likely that a variety of alternative explanations will be generated.

Conclusion

It is sometimes suggested that interpretation of single cases is little more than an arbitrary application of one's theoretical preferences. No doubt this happens at times, but *any* method can be poorly used. Effective use of the case study method requires not only the formulation of explanations consistent with some of the evidence but also that preferred explanations be critically examined in light of all available evidence, and that they be compared in plausibility with alternative explanations. After the implausible alternatives have been eliminated, more than one explanation consistent with the available evidence may remain, but this is far different from saying that the facts can be adequately explained in terms of any theoretical conjecture.

When faced with a puzzling historical or clinical phenomenon, investigators are sometimes too ready to accept the first psychodynamic interpretation that makes previously mysterious events appear comprehensible. The case of Van Gogh's ear illustrates the dangers of this approach, as further inquiry often yields a variety of other apparently plausible explanations. When this happens, it is not sufficient to suggest that all of the explanations may be simultaneously true; this situation, rather, requires that the alternative explanatory conjectures be critically evaluated and compared in terms of their relative plausibility.

In some cases, critical analysis of the range of possible interpretations may enable us to reject all but one of the alternatives, but in other cases, we may end up with a "surplus" of explanatory possibilities, each

of which is consistent with the available evidence, and with no apparent means for deciding among them. The psychobiographical enterprise must, it seems, steer between the Scylla of inexplicable events and the Charybdis of phenomena open to a troubling variety of alternative explanations.

In spite of these difficulties, the problem of developing explanations of events in individual lives deserves our critical attention as it is inevitably encountered in everyday life and is a crucial task within personology, psychobiography, and the clinical professions. Further work is needed both on the intriguing epistemological question of what degrees of certainty can and cannot be attained in the explanation of events in individual lives and on the methodological problem of how best to develop such explanations.

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