The experience of physical and psychological suffering - Its cycle and meaning (Part One)

How many of us are aware of the benefaction of suffering? How are the daydreams of Rousseau linked with Ecclesiastes and Ramakrishna? Why, since suffering is a stimulus to evolution, are we afraid to look it in the face? Is this reaction natural, or is it a product of the dominant way of thinking of our civilisation?

Which thinkers have proposed an Orphic model for dealing with suffering, in contrast with the widespread Promethean model? How is the rejection of suffering related to sadomasochism and its political and economic consequences?

How is Kazantzakis linked with Aurobindo and the objective of freedom?

Suffering is the basic field - as is satisfaction - on which instinct works in terms of orientation and strategy. Suffering is the sense of a cause with which we must regulate our relation. However, it too has an evolution, since it is not confined to physical suffering, but through the processes of the mind, desire, and sensibility also develops psychologically, with a tendency to take on dimensions as concerns our apprehension, our future evolution. Suffering is apprehended as suffering of the mind, the intuition, and empathy and not as a forecast, but as existential, interpretative, perceived sharing in the tragic nature of being. Suffering is manifested also both in transcendental mystical dimensions and experiences and in the dimensions of the pain of the intellectual process.

Acceptance and rejection of suffering

Pain is a crucial and now structured factor for functioning in our life and consciousness. There are many adjustments for dealing with pain:

There is the process of rejection of pain – both physical and psychological – where the pain is not conveyed to the consciousness and where practices of the subconscious are applied.

There is the process of the reverse incorporation of pain. Masochism, in its sexual version, acts as a bipolar reverse incorporation of pain. This is a product of long-term confusing
familiarisation between pleasure and pain which is a manifest background of totemistic and fetishistic fixation, which is incapable of being raised to the purity and causative interpretation of the phenomena of suffering.

In psychologically aggravated states, off the scale of sexual problems and expressions of psychological phenomena, it also operates as depression and melancholic nostalgia. In the face of the dynamic of pain, civilisation functions and evolves with a strategy of indirectification, substitution, rejection, concealment, and avoidance, even in circumstances where this is impossible. Distraction, the theatrification of life, one could say, starts out from a central pain, from a central pressure / discomfort which we attempt to avoid. This is the strategy of the 'ostrich', as Charles Sanders Pierce would have said.(1)

Vital, social, psychological, and existential suffering
The concept of discomfort and irritation, as a state and as a process, tends to take on a dramatic generalisation in our characteristics and to constitute a basic feature of our identity, our existence, and of our life. There are multiple goadings of pain. On the one hand, there are the vital goadings of pain, and, on the other the social provocations which are made up by comparisons, as well as by the terms and conditions of life, and then there are the psychological and the endogenous, which extend as far as the existential. In pain, on the one hand, instinct, and, on the other, the learning process of the consciousness, of an evolution, are at work, both in dealing with its causes on the level of phenomena and on the level of the consciousness itself.

The main problem is that among the results of this process and of the learning, sensitivity increases - and has to increase, because, as dualist nature, sensitivity functions dialectically and transcendentally, including both pain and joy or pleasure, enjoyment, happiness. The tragic and transcendental nature of this strength of suffering is apparent in conditions of consciousness which are not direct in terms of the senses, and which, naturally, no trace of distraction can touch.

The crucifixion of Jesus, the Dark Night of the Soul of St John of the Cross,(2) the conditions of suffering pain, of renunciation, renunciation through which the consciousness must pass in order to experience ecstasy, blessedness, nirvana, the necessary giving up of desires which the achievement of the happiness of Rousseau's Daydream suggests, the transcendence of the alterations in the mind, of forms, and of desires in order to achieve the isolated unity of Samadhi – all these things point to a very difficult process of handling of the consciousness, at a time when the nervous system increasingly develops greater conductivity and feeling in the body and when the interaction of brain and body, of understanding and brain increases dramatically.
Basic belief about suffering
The basic belief which was devised at an earlier date about the management of psychological suffering is the process connected with:
-- the deeply-rooted philosophical and religious tradition as we see it in Stoicism and Platonism and in other trends;
-- the rehabilitation of a balance of freedom of the inner being, of the soul from matter;
-- the rehabilitation in incarnation of a renunciation of the field of desires as the generating cause of desires, as stressed by Buddhism;
-- the observations about vanities and the abstinences of Ecclesiastes;
-- the attempt to follow the noble middle way (in Buddhism) or the patristic measure, in Christianity, with the prospect of a hesychast joyful sorrow, and, in the end, of blessedness. In this perspective, the acceptance of the experiencing of an inner entity, a factor which makes the consciousness its expression which must take it up from its organ, the brain, the nervous system, and the senses and remove it from the tragic cycle of interpretation and desires.
At the same time, however, the nervous system remains conductive of suffering, and this is where modern approaches which also have a historical background come in: from acupuncture and the acupuncture centres, which show a credible ancient knowledge, intuition, and teaching as to the nature and the archetype of the body (the ethereal or energy body) or of the connection of the body with a more composite and multi-dimensional algorithm, to the modern approaches of the neurological and pharmaceutical sciences, with the use of analgesics and psychoactive drugs.

Suffering as a stimulus to evolution
The problem of suffering remains as a stimulus to evolution. The problem of depression is a vast cultural problem which has its roots in an erroneous education. It stems from the rupture of the more refined libidinous or harmonious contact of the embryo or the new-born child through its immediate family circle of life, and then through the social cycle of experience and everyday life.
The breaking of this contact is caused by errors in education and existential stimuli, which we either foolishly attempt to disperse and to avoid, or to apprehend without any assistance, any teaching, and so it is difficult for us to transubstantiate them, to transform them more constructively.
The pressure of infinite being, the fear of annihilation, the sense of weakness and insecurity which is diffused from the bodily to the spiritual field form a dramatic experience joyful sorrow lurking in wait which very many philosophers have tried to face up to, until we have arrived at the trend of existentialism, and, naturally, the science of psychology. Psychology has had an individual approach to the problem of suffering by each of its schools of psychoanalysis, starting out from the Freudian and arriving at the existential.

In the end, the issue of suffering is one of self-knowledge, but at the same time it is a social and
cultural matter. Poverty and the inability to form a normal relationship within a human unit or group are particularly important points. In the last analysis, the concept of humanitarianism in its later version - in the version generated by Henry Dunant with the Red Cross or Florence Nightingale, and by other great figures in history, with a trend towards solidarity with the human factor and human suffering in all its forms, as well as humanitarian opposition to human enslavement, springs from the imagination and the sympathy generated by the imagination, as Adam Smith would have said as to the version of humanitarianism in the form of 'moral sentiments'. We are speaking here of the capacity for sympathy and for solidarity in the face of the suffering of the other, of healing collaboration, participation, and action.

Suffering remains together with death. Often it could be said that suffering goes beyond even death, and through exceptional or tremendous love for family and friends, surpasses individual death as a dramatic, existential experience.

Suffering is a great liberating factor not only as seen by Eastern philosophies and religions, but as it was identified by Ecclesiastes in ancient Judaism or as Christ portrayed it both in the Beatitudes and in his own example, or as Christian mysticism, or, at an earlier date, the philosophical thought of Plato and the Stoics viewed it.

Suffering functions as a basic teacher of human life which leads to the union of spirit and matter, to the quest for the liberation of the inner entity from the bonds of reliance on the senses, and of matter. Here we must also define the necessity for joy. Joy is a perspective of evolution as to its process and the fundamental factor of human learning, self-knowledge, and evolution.

We are taught about the inner entity through suffering and death and this was also the foundation of the ancient mysteries. But we are also taught about social solidarity, sympathy and harmlessness at all levels. We are taught about discrimination, detachment, apathy, and indifference.

We are speak here of a spiritual indifference, impartial towards selfishness and divisiveness, which is called upon to remain in a state of transcendental sympathy which is transformed into a liberating teaching. This liberating teaching has to do with the science of abstraction, identification, and will for the good, synthesis, recognition of the unity of the self, and the freedom of the consciousness from the fields that change it, in a pure attachment to Being. Solidarity and sympathy have very fundamental anthropological fields. Animism and shamanism are ancient heritages and cultures. We encounter them in the hunting practices of the Bushmen - this spiritual recompense to the game hunted; we encounter them in the dietary specifications of certain peoples and religions, but also in the modern philosophical trends of panpsychism which have been revived in our own times, by, for example, Ervin László. (3) We encounter them also (and this is a strange thing which demonstrates the indomitability of moral being and rational being, as Emmanuel Kant would have said) in a liberal and utilitarian Jeremy Bentham,
who goes so far as to recognise rights even in the case of objects. Unfortunately, ranged against such a superb culture is a - consumerist and advertising - naivety of the senses of the Bernays type.(4)

This mercenary culture is an unfeeling being, an intolerant consciousness of which Leonardo da Vinci once said "there will be nothing on the surface of the ground, or under it, or beneath the sea, which they will not persecute, which they will not eliminate, or which they will not destroy completely".(5)

It is a constant fall, a constant exile from Eden,(6) in which desire becomes titanic alienation.

This other side of the coin is encountered in our ruthless dietary bestiality, in ruthless experimentation on animals, in our ruthless behaviour towards plants, towards animals, and towards the Earth's resources, in the assault upon Gaia.

In theory, the suffering that mankind has gone through is very great. To a large degree we have brought this suffering upon ourselves, by war, social injustice, poverty, illnesses, and all the tragic situations for which we are jointly responsible.

A part of our pain, of our ancient ecological tragedy, is inherent in our memories, and a great part of our pain is caused by nature itself through our cells. Through pain, there is a strange relation of identity or detachment between what we sense as self and the body. We must achieve balance properly, carefully, and with alertness, with hard work upon the Self and the consciousness, in order to stop the tragic cycle of extroversion, in which work becomes a part of tragedy and of suffering in accordance with the curse of the Fall or the consequence of the Fall, or with the law of sowing and reaping in the terminology of Christianity, or with the term Karma, in the cycle of Samsara, according to the terminology of Hinduism and Buddhism.
The tragic experience of the human being in history is vast. We need only think of the pain of wars and of the pain of periods in which medicine did not have the 'weapons' which it had in the second half of the twentieth century. And yet we have learnt no lessons either as to the transcendence of our individualism, or as to our support for other beings. Of course, there is in our own times a tremendous movement in favour of the rights of animals and even of plants, which often operates on exaggerated terms, without a sense of proportion, and without an understanding of the world-wide evolutionary sharing which not only Buddha but other philosophers have discerned.

From suffering to sympathy
The existence of suffering could be regarded as an injustice and its more profound potentialities for evolution could be by-passed in this way. By doing this, we should arrive at the point of blaming the supreme being for this state of affairs - the 'injustice' of suffering; this is something which happened already in the phase of the Enlightenment, as well as at other periods. Our main problem is how to pass from suffering to sympathy without promoting a form of selfishness, which will either conceal suffering or will reject it completely, by taking care to regenerate the powers of joy and of life on the path of an inner harmony, balance, and lucidity, of the measure, and its nobility in the golden mean.

Such an attitude towards suffering has only been achieved with the greatest difficulty in the history of man. In order for us to arrive at the self-caused dialogistic death of Shankara and at the balance proposed by Aurobindo, a very long and difficult course must be followed. On this course, spiritual virtues easily become problems of faith. From the point where technology or the Promethean spirit draws man out from the totally animal cycle of tragedy, permitting him to deal with his issues by means of institutions and knowledge, to that where existential issues are covered by ontological and spiritual security - as Carl Jung or Anthony Giddens, and others, would put it - is also a long way to go.
Philosophers in Western civilisation have interested themselves in this spiritual security. Thinkers such as Gottfried Leibniz or Henri Bergson attempted to unify the issues in their approach. Poets such as William Blake or Robert Browning, and Walt Whitman tried to provide a vision, a different, experiential, escape route, and to serve this 'Orphic model' in dealing with suffering, as Lewis Mumford would call it, with this aesthetic enjoyment of the Muses.

Here, neurotic, hysterical, maniacal, market cultures have been cultivated (the naive sensuality of the seducer, as Søren Kierkegaard in his 'Diary of a Seducer' would have said, has become a commodity). These cultures have been turned into idols as mass societies and have functioned as factors in alternative movements which, in the end, have been alienated through the lack of the measure which has characterised them. We have been finally brought to the need to recover the measure for every model - both for the Promethean and for the Orphic or mystical.
other irrational features should be dealt with. This has to happen without our losing the dialectic of the measure, of the mean, and of harmony so that we end up in the deflection of the Orphic, and of the Promethean element in our everyday existence.

In this event, it is the machines that become 'Orphic factors', taking the place of the Orphic lyre, Orphic mysticism, and the Orphic mystery. If this happens, our future is ill-omened as regards dealing with suffering, that great teacher of mankind and of the animal kingdom.

In this way the law of cause and effect is not assimilated, is not transformed, is not transubstantiated into evolution, into liberation, into sharing in the spirit of collectivity, sensitivity, and transcendence. Thus a world-wide human potential is lost in conflict with the evolutionary factor and the evolutionary element, and not only that, but the causes, and, ultimately, the crises, which are the results of the causes, are reborn. We come, then, to what Santayana said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it".(8)

This famous saying, which some people have appropriated in the context of an ideological / dogmatic fundamentalism, applies to the human factor, with emphasis on its existential dimension, and does not apply to the collective idols by means of which we render history dramatically tragic. But how many times, again and again, has not the story of Creon and Antigone repeated itself in human history in various versions, and when it also has the characteristics of religious barbarity?

Almost all the founders of religions and of systems have tried to introduce an improvement in humanitarianism.

Muhammad introduced certain humanitarian frameworks which, however, it did not prove possible to complete in his times.

Christ condemned stoning, but the Holy Inquisition brought in burning at the stake and torture. Muhammad abolished the killing of first-born girls, but adultery or the suspicion of adultery in the case of women - in spite of an improvement in their position - led to tragic practices in the course of history.

Confucius abolished the practice of sacrificing subjects after the death of their ruler. In the history of human civilisation, barbarism and mysticism have had a strange equilibrium as a way of maintaining balances, and this can be seen in the case of the Aztecs, for example.

At the same time, however, more integrated primitive cultures of peace can also be seen, as in the case of certain Indian tribes, of Bushmen, or of other peoples. It is up to us to be taught an integrated humanitarianism in dealing with pain, as we have many - personal or otherwise - experiences of human sickness.

Suffering and sadomasochist deviancy

We have many experiences of the vanity of the cycle of ambitions, of the consequences of wealth, and of the provocation of injustice to another person or to ourselves. The paradox is that we are permanently trapped in feeling that we are the centre of the world, even in suffering,
despite the fact that what suffering and death teach us is that they are universal rules. In spite of this, some continue to feel superior in the management of the conditions of death, such as the wealthy or the famous, and feel a form of superiority and that this superiority is a liberation. This is, naturally, a fantasy, since there can be no superiority either in being or in suffering.

The tendency to compare with or envy towards those who are socially superior or inferior alone leads to an entrapment of our consciousness, to a selfish particularity on our part as regards suffering and death. Furthermore, we have devised the ability to cause pain and death to other human beings and to other beings as a form of displaying superiority over them as we become the causes of them. We are in a cycle in which suffering and death are universal rules and yet we function simply like Charlie Chaplin on a Ford production line of this drama, turning a screw in it – this and nothing else.

We have devised premature death for others and for other beings - over and above our nutritional needs - and we have 'taken care' that our meal should mean tragedy for other beings. A meal like that of Tantalus who attempted to deceive the Olympian Gods by offering his son's body as a meal to them. So much emphasis has been placed on the refinement of the meal that we have arrived at its supreme idealisation in the Last Supper, in Christianity. The Supper, of course, is a particularly catalytic event, and this can be seen even from the choice of the term 'companion' and 'companionship' for the bond involved. This is an exception to cannibalism, to our barbarity as hunters, which is one of the three basic taboos according to Freudian theory.

Murder, nevertheless, is a kind of psychological cannibalism. It could be said that it is unfitting, that it is violence to associate it with pleasure. It is also without measure in social terms, even if we should also view the problem of the lack of measure as one of the soul, a psychological, inner problem. Hence the tactfulness, and the transubstantiation of gratification, the measure or rhythm in relationships, in the sexual element, so that something which is biologically innate in the foundations of life is disconnected from cruelty and murder. Here we observe the meaning and malignancy of sadomasochistic deviancy.

Thus the Supper, even in the socialist movement on terms of comradeship and in the sense of comrades and a family relationship, as of a community of comrades, also gradually introduces features with a civilising influence, of refinement of soul and spiritual exaltation, to the point where we reach a completeness at this point if we manage to arrive at the ecological Last Supper.
Man as a factor for the transformation of himself and of nature

Man can and must act as a transformational, as an evolutionary factor working for the spiritualisation of nature and fulfilling the objective of Nikos Kazantzakis(11) - and not only him. The same objective is also set in the clearest terms by Aurobindo(12) in an attempt to change the culture and cure the distortions of Eastern spirituality. It has also been set by many other thinkers in the West.

When we reach the realization, the systemic features, that is, of the Supper, which is concerned with the economy and harmlessness, then indeed the Supper and the world will be eucharistic, as Smeeman would say. Otherwise they will retain their tragic nature, however many blessings we devise on the symbolism of the Supper. Comradeship, then, is a liberation from cannibalism.

One day ontological cannibalism must stop, and this is a matter of a spiritual alchemy, a transcendental sense of unity of being in the process of and in discernment in diet, which must extend as far as the material field. The requirement will then be that we should feed shamanistically on the philosopher's stone, bringing out the fact that we are living stones. In this way we shall resurrect the Logos in every form, and beyond form. This will be our return or the end of our fall in a completed circle of sensitivity of solidarity and its transcendence, in a synthesis which surpasses understanding. Then we shall be free both from the tragedy of life and from the tragic approach to its interpretation.

Technology can, little by little, resolve certain issues by means of its evolution, knowledge, and processes in matter. We have to achieve a reduction of suffering not through hypnosis or guile practised on the prey of our hunting - even if these are vegetation - but by means of a long road of evolution. At the moment, the priority is that we should resolve, as a matter of urgency, inwardly and externally the matter of humanitarian sharing, and then that of the tragic nature of our relation with the animal kingdom. It will be recalled that such was the vision of Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian, and, in a certain sense, a philosophical hedonist and liberal.

We must put an end to divisiveness and alienation as a vehicle and slayer of our freedom, as the economic system and our day-to-day individualism proves it to be. Our two basic points of solidarity, the issue of health and healing and that of the protection and sustainability of the environment and of nature, together with the spiritual field of the quest for health, security, freedom, and solidarity, form the field in which we must go to work immediately.

Read here the continuation in Part Two.
(1) Ubaldo, Nicola, Anthology of Philosophy [Greek edition], ENALIOS publications, p. 441.
(7) Mumford, Lewis, Art and Technics [Greek edition], publ. Nisides, 1997, p. 41: "The first teacher and benefactor of man was Orpheus and not Prometheus. That man became human not because he made fire his servant, but because he succeeded, with his symbols, in expressing companionship and love, in enriching his present life with vivid memories of the past and creative drives towards the future, in extending and reinforcing those moments of life which had value and meaning for him."
(8) Santayana, George, Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense, Scribner's, 1905, p. 284, Quotes: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". http://www.iupui.edu/~santedit/gsantayanaquotes.html
(10) According to Freudian theory the three basic taboos are: cannibalism, murder, and incest.
(12) Sri Aurobindo, wikipedia

Ioannis Zisis, writer

Photo 1 from wikipedia
Photo 2 from wikipedia