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The Agony of Death

by

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Agony, powerlessness and revolt menace each of our lives but they indicate a road to truth about oneself. Such trials can be liberating, which is the subject of this article.

More than fear, the consciousness of death produces an agony. Fear has a certain knowledge of its cause about it which can define fear. Fear is not totally strange to us: the growl of a dog, fear of heights and airplanes, the noise of thunder and the crackling of lightning. Agony introduces us into another experience because its object escapes all representation.

Death is absolute strangeness. What can we say about it? The contradictory responses (religious or not) reveals an unbreakable resistance: resurrection, reincarnation, nothingness. We simply cannot know. Our spirit is broken here because it is powerless and knows that all our representations are vacuous and mostly without meaning. It is precisely this impossibility of representation which gives birth to our agony which is a sort of spiritual dizziness which results from the absence of assured representations.

The rituals of grief, with their visions of afterlife, attempt to attenuate agony by offering an ensemble of meanings: resurrection, reincarnation, burial, cremation, chants, celebration, funeral rituals. But these rituals concern the living, not the dead. Grief is the affair of the living. No one has ever come back from the great passage which is death. Death escapes every attempt by the spirit to represent it because it is a total unknown, the threshold beyond which every representation fails. The agony which this gives rise to is thus distinguished from fear but also from pain and suffering.

Fear knows its cause and has certain traits. So, too, pain, which is situated in space and time. It appears in a part of our bodies at such a time. Science can even specify the cause: a broken arm, a tumor, an infection.

Suffering has its reasons which can be more or less identified: it may be psychological or a humiliating word uttered long ago. But agony is characterized by an incapacity of creating any representation around its object because of the radical unknowability of the thing itself.

Consider the verses from Psalms 22: 14-16:

I am poured out like water
And all my bones are dislocated.
My heart is like wax
It is melted within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws
And thou doth lay me in the dust
Of death.

As one novelist put it surrounding a character: "What Mr. Perier knows at that instant is the vacuity of the world, the great emptiness of everything." The body is no longer a familiar presence. It becomes cold and dry. A strange emptiness takes over the place of my familiar world. Collapse is total and it is the night of identity. Who am I?

This collapse of the world and myself teaches us the fundamental condition of man. The meaning we give things are not only signs but they render present to us the world and me to myself. They are mediations by which they come to be for us. We are conscious of ourselves by means of the world we elaborate, the tissue of representations which give us meaning. This collapse of representation brought about by an unexpected and radical event goes together with the collapse of my world, of my body, of myself.

Agony teaches us that the world, others, myself are "just not there." They presuppose a silent, secret work, the giver of meaning. Meaning by which each of them is present to ourselves. The child recognizes himself by the loving look of his parents. We are conscious of ourselves only by means of representations. We are the source of meanings which constitutes us as meaning. Agony is a blow brought to this basic source of meaning. Man is not static like things; he is project constituting the world which surrounds him. Agony breaks that spontaneous elan by which the subject comes to himself and the world.

Agony affects our manner of being because it undermines our living time. The perspective of death breaks the possible representation of the past and of the future. The future is no longer. My projects are broken on the rock of the unthinkable. This thought of death, this representation of self at the end of life is only a suspicion in him for whom death is only a far away possibility. It hides a prospective illusion.

In agony of death, the present definition of a future becomes intolerable, revolting. At the end of life, he is no longer certain that the future remains a necessity to give meaning to the present. That is why death is more revolting when the subject is young.

The future loses its meaning. If we are broken, if we have worked, suffered only to disappear — what good is it? The revolt grinds against the meaningless. Life appears as a foolhardiness and a cynical farce. Without a past and future, man hardly knows who he is. He projects on to his environment what he feels interiorly: desolation and chaos.

Interior collapse which constitutes agony illuminates the way we live time. The past and present feed each other on a possible future. When the future becomes unthinkable, it is time itself which loses its consistency. Agony tells us that time is not an immediate given. The present takes body on the foundation of a possible future. The present is not rich enough in itself to stand by itself. An impossible future disqualifies the present in which we are living. The present is held only by the future. The present must find consistency of meaning by the representation of a possible future. But life is there only insofar as we are living.

This richness of the present has become strange to us because our culture places us in a situation which supposes a future, like the artist who does not know beforehand the traits of what he creates. At the end, the artist himself is astonished at what he produces. Technology, on the other hand, must control the future as much as possible, leaving nothing to chance. The present is valid only for the future which gives the present its meaning. This conception of time situates the subject on a horizon of power nourished by a scientific and technical culture. We are in control — of our death and birth. The discourse of science lets us understand that today's limits are only obstacles to be overcome tomorrow. Modern man is not projected to a foundational ultimate beyond but to technical power. The violence of religious fundamentalism expresses the force of this revolution. Agony before death is thus revelatory of a culture marked with the brands of all powerfulness.

The revolting impotence which accompanies the consciousness of death can be understood only against a background of such a mastery of time and self. It seems that there is no other alternative to mastery of one's future or death, symbolic or real. Euthanasia is just another way of affirming this mastery. Yet there is another way to experience time, another way of living.

Death is not necessarily an agonizing experience of the absurd. It can be accepted serenely as many older people do who want to join their loved ones. Death can be lived as a normal outcome of life, a decisive stage certainly, but a stage nonetheless. This approach opens another way of being; not a mastery which passes by a doing, but an acceptance. It is an

attitude which characterizes the two limiting experiences of human existence: birth and death. We do not know what life and death are but we do know that they escape us. They relate us to our finitude, our mortality. We are masters neither of our birth nor of the moment of death. We do not produce them, we only accept them, an acceptance of profound intimacy. This acceptance of life from our birth is so evident that we tend to overlook it. It is the very moment of life which desires itself. This recognition is expressed by means of sacrilization of life which is found in all religions: life, gift of God. To accept this mystery of life which is one's birth is to also accept the mystery which is one's death. This is to open a space not of what one has done but of a silence which receives both as a gift.

This is contrary to the technical view of life. If mastery is conjugated with the sentiment of power, then our mastery risks a sentiment of powerlessness in death. The mystery which religious tradition presents leaves place in the technical universe, in today's world, to impotence and revolt. The sentiment of finitude takes on the hideous trait of the absurdity of life.

Yet religion can fall into the same temptation by giving a certitude of meaning and mastery of a "spiritual technique" which prepares us for the "great passage." Certainty of knowing the traits of the beyond, to know the spiritual methods and rituals which assure peace for the present and salvation for tomorrow. But this approach comes from belief and not from faith, which recognizes with sorrow what it *can't* know. The spiritual techniques of access to serenity are attractive. But they are an illusion and suppose what is missing in agony: the capacity of the subject to give meaning. They constitute against agony an illusory defense which collapses in the shock of death. We approach the "un-representable", the "un-graspfulness" of the artist who does not know beforehand the traits of his own work.

Life is still possible: agony leaves a place, without knowing how or why, to a new way of being. It produces no object, prepares no project. The present is sufficient for itself in the serene pleasure of giving meaning by putting into words the here and now. The present is not justified obligatorily by a possible future. It is possible in that it is the present which structures the past and the future. There are present experiences which give to the past and to the future their consistence. It gives in such a way as if the present becomes greatness of a past which gives meaning and of a future which becomes possible. Such is mystical experience, loving experience, artistic creation. Moments which suffice for their richness which feed the past and the future with new meaning. Time is put into perspective: the past prepares the present. The present orientates the future.

In this perspective, agony which arises by the thought of death manifests itself the emptiness of our present. Man projects himself more

into the future and the past as his present escapes him. We return to our past time lived, taste the richness of being which finds *in what is*, nourishment for a full present. It is at such a price that a trial can be decisive. It changes our relationship to the world and to ourselves by obliging us to live the instant present because this shock of the thought of death illuminates the past and dissolves the future — a sickness, a divorce, unemployment. Deprived of social help, we discover in the nudity imposed as a secret gift, a new look on the world and on ourselves, a new savor of each moment. This is the eternal return of man confronting the tragedy of the human condition of a Nietzsche, the interior joy of Francis of Assisi in the midst of trials, the spirit of childlike simplicity of Therese of Lisieux.

A new view of oneself and the world is put in place: a conversion. The subject is affected in this original splendor of meaning which constitutes him profoundly.

Agony makes us dig deeper within ourselves, to the source of human existence; to travel far, to the very frontiers of our culture. It can be lived as a way that we take in spite of self toward a new way of being. A way that erodes the desire of mastery, to accept humbly the present burgeoning forth of life. The technological perspective becomes relative as another mystical approach comes closer. Life is seen as gift which opens to mystery.

The trial of agony thus gives testimony of the possibility for man to be witness of an interior overturning; not as a technician but as witness. This view of the world which constitutes us can now be seen as an unexpected gift through a way that *we can take only backwards*. This displacement constitutes perhaps our most profound freedom, a freedom which escapes us. At this level of experience, it is not a question of conceptual or technical mastery *but of abandon*.
