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Becoming Self through Suffering: The Irenaean Theodicy and Advanced Development

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ABSTRACT: *Both the theories of Dabrowski and Assagioli view the highest level of personal development as the attainment of self or spirit. In this respect, they describe a state very similar to the unitive and transcendent experience described by mystics. However, the process of attaining this state is painful and arduous. The role of suffering in the attainment of transcendence is affirmed by both Dabrowski and Assagioli, as well as many others. The way in which suffering promotes advanced development is discussed. The views of Dabrowski and Assagioli are related to the Irenaean theodicy which sees suffering as essential to our spiritualization.*

Introduction

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of higher states of consciousness and their relevance to our understanding of human potential. Abraham Maslow (1971) pioneered this work in his study of peak experience and spoke of the need to define health based on the highest level of functioning of which we are capable. In some ways, the noted American psychologist, William James (1958), anticipated this in his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he noted the relevance of such experiences to psychological well-being. This is an observation that has since been reiterated by many other writers (Assagioli, 1965; Bucke, 1901/1923; Jung, 1936; Watts, 1972; Wilber, 1977).

Following this insight, the mystical state, as the highest level of consciousness, represents the true goal toward which human development is directed. An excellent discussion of this position is provided by Ken Wilber

affirm the belief that the process has meaning because it is the road we must travel to achieve perfection.

We have a natural desire to keep our lives stable and predictable, to avoid conflict. Stability is necessary in order for us to survive and make sense of our lives. It provides us with a sense of integrity, continuity and order. However, this need has its dangers and disadvantages as well. Sometimes our desire for stability becomes too extreme and we seek absolute security. We expect that things in life should always go the way we want them to go and seek total control. In his book, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, Goleman (1985) describes how our very perceptual and cognitive processes are structured to maximize stability. He also notes how these same structures can lead to forms of self-deception that pose great hazards for us.

Our desire for a predictable, conflict-free existence is ultimately expressed in resistance to pain of any sort or the belief that we shouldn't have to suffer. Citing Jung's observation, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering," M. Scott Peck (1978, p.17) suggests that the belief that life should be easy and the resulting tendency to avoid problems are the primary bases for all human illness. Our resistance to the necessary and inevitable suffering in life is the source of the majority of pain we experience. In attempting to eliminate harsh experience completely from our lives, we are afflicted with the constant frustration of pursuing an unattainable goal. We end by suffering because we are suffering.

The essential role of loss in suffering is perhaps described most eloquently in Buddhist literature (Rahula, 1974). In the Four Noble truths, the Buddha articulated the cause of and the means to end suffering. Observing that all existence is suffering, the Buddha poignantly addressed this critical issue. He saw the cause of suffering as desire which leads us to attach ourselves to things of this world. The problem is that we live in a transient world. Nothing lasts forever. And so, when the thing to which we have become attached is lost, we suffer greatly because we feel as though we have "lost everything." Since life is a process of constant change, it is also a process of constant loss. Hence, all existence is suffering.

A similar way of expressing this idea is found in the principle of disidentification formulated by Assagioli (1965). This principle states that we are dominated by anything with which our self is identified and we can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify ourselves. The process of desire causes us to stake our entire life on one thing or to define ourselves in a one-dimensional way. As a result, we become dominated by this thing with which we have so totally identified ourselves. If anything threatens this, our whole life is at stake. Through the process of disidentification, Assagioli describes how we can detach ourselves from these narrow self-definitions and thus arrive at a true sense of who we are. Who we are is self or spirit, which is the center of pure consciousness and power. [For a more comprehensive treatment of disidentification, see Firman, this issue, pp.15-29.]

We can then easily understand why the process of growth is "painful and arduous." Growth involves change and loss. In order to move toward higher levels of development, something about us and our life must die. Our sense of unity and integrity must be challenged. Predictable and secure routines must be abandoned. This point is clearly recognized in Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration. Disintegration destroys one's sense of unity and calls into question one's sense of meaning and purpose in life. However, such disruption and destruction is necessary if one is to move to higher levels and a restoration of a sense of unity and meaning.

Suffering and development must, of necessity, go hand-in-hand. Dabrowski (1967) offers, "In relation to suffering one does not adopt an exclusively negative attitude, but begins to accept it as something that has meaning, as essential for cultural development, and as a necessary element of one's psychic enrichment" (p. 139). In the same book, he refers to Kierkegaard's (1941) expression, "fear and trembling," as an integral part of the growth process, particularly in the movement from materialistic to spiritual concerns. Kierkegaard takes this expression from St. Paul, who writes that our salvation must be worked out in fear and trembling. Similarly, Kierkegaard emphasizes that the task of becoming a self, and so achieving salvation, is one that demands much of a person and involves an increasing amount of despair until one's goal is at last achieved.

Viktor Frankl (1967) is an eloquent critic of the notion that the basic desire of human beings is to achieve tension reduction (Freud's pleasure principle). Frankl states that in order to fulfill our will to meaning (our drive toward significance), we must orient ourselves to the realm of potential meanings and values which we are called upon to fulfill. These values and meanings exert a demand upon us. Such a challenge increases our tension because it makes us aware of a "should" that we must fulfill. The absence of all challenge drains our life of meaning and, thus, of pleasure as well.

A life which is easy, because it is stale and predictable, eventually becomes stifling and boring. Colin Wilson (1972) takes up this theme by talking about life failure. When our lives become stereotypical, repetitious and routine, we become drained of energy and meaning. We need to be exposed to novel and different experiences that challenge us in order to remain psychologically healthy. The way in which we address suffering or disintegration can lead us to growth or to our sinking to a more primitive level of organization, as Dabrowski and others have suggested.

Who will respond to suffering in a way that is growth-producing and who in a way that stifles growth? Dabrowski's theory offers some interesting and valuable insights to assist us in answering this question. His concept of developmental potential (Piechowski, 1986) points to personality characteristics possessed by individuals who are gifted and talented. Along with abilities and talents, he describes five forms of overexcitability (or modes of experiencing) that contribute to an individual's psychological development. These five dimensions (psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal,

emotional) can be measured using the Overexcitability Questionnaire (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983). Persons with higher overexcitability profiles would clearly have more potential for translating suffering and personal tragedy into growth. This is a most promising area for continued exploration.

The Irenaean Theodicy: The Long Road to Perfection

The role of suffering in stimulating movement toward higher levels of development has played an important role in the thinking of a number of religious and spiritual persons. A theodicy is a system of religious thought intended to address the questions of why people do evil and why there is so much suffering in the world. There have been many theodicies developed through the years—a testimony to just how central this problem is to human existence. One way of understanding evil and suffering is that they are needed to form our character and to challenge us in a way that will eventually bring us to the perfection which God intends for us. The theologian, S. Paul Schilling (1977), describes this as the Irenaean theodicy because it was first developed by Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons in 177 A.D.

According to Irenaeus, God created human beings imperfect with the intention of bringing them finally, through a process of moral development, to the perfection that will fulfill his purpose for them. In this view, the fall of Adam was an occurrence in the childhood of the human species.... The good and evil that we find mixed in our world provide the environment needed for the growth toward the maturity that God intends. (p. 149)

This is a teleological theodicy. This means that our current troubles must be understood in light of the end (telos) or goal toward which they are directed. God intends to “make us perfect through suffering” and so the world is still in the process of creation. The process of “soul-making” requires an environment in which human beings can act as moral agents and freely recognize and endorse the good, so as to enter freely into a personal relation with God, their creator. It must be in an imperfect world that human beings struggle with the burden of freedom. However, in such an imperfect world, our choices sometimes lead to suffering for ourselves and others. Nonetheless, we need the conflict between good and evil in order to learn to seek good and hate evil and thus achieve moral perfection. Thus, the question of whether our anguish is “worth it” can be answered only in light of the ultimate goal toward which our way of sorrow takes us.

There are a number of important implications here for understanding the relationship between transcendence and suffering. One involves reconciling evil and suffering with an all-good and all-powerful God. One answer is: evil is relative, but good is absolute. Suffering and evil are unavoidable

by-products of the process toward the higher good of our perfection and achievement of Selfhood. Alan Watts (1972) proposed that God can be regarded as the creator of a relative evil because it serves some higher good. Suffering is the necessary medium for our spiritualization and eventually union with God.

If, then, the incarnate Self in each one of us, is, in the fullness of time, to awaken to a vision of the entire finite order of such splendor that the worst evils will be transformed into the instruments of beauty, we may judge some small fraction of the vision's glory from the very depth of those present evils which it will so much more amply repay. (Watts, 1972, p. 115)

Though at times our troubles seem overwhelming and evil seems to triumph, these ills are actually short-lived and overshadowed by the joy and peace that will be ours at the end of the journey.

This perspective on the relationship of good and evil is also compatible with the insights of the mystic. One of the central tenets of mysticism is that evil is an illusion created by the divisions and contradictions characteristic of our limited knowledge of reality (Bertrand Russell, 1951). Once we achieve unitive knowledge, we realize that all of reality is good and that the universe is essentially a benevolent place. This is not to deny or trivialize the suffering of countless human beings. Within the narrow limits of our typical consciousness, our anguish is very real. The same process toward transcendence stimulated by our experience of suffering enables us to overcome suffering once transcendence is achieved.

A second implication is that the traditional interpretation of the story of Genesis as the fall of the human race from perfection is in error. The inadequacies of this position are excellently discussed by Alan Watts (1972) and John Hick (1974). The Irenaean point of view is much more compatible with what we have learned about human evolution. The story of Adam and Eve actually relates to an important step taken by the human race in its growth due to our development of the ability to become self-conscious and to exercise freedom. According to Ken Wilber (1981), “They did not get thrown out of the Garden of Eden; they grew up and walked out” (p. 298).

The Irenaean perspective expresses the doctrine of the “happy fall.” In eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve were able to distinguish good from evil and this consciousness completely transformed them. No longer could they dwell in a state of undifferentiated oneness with all of creation (not unlike the “oceanic feeling” of the infant). They had become individuals who could distinguish themselves from others and who could exercise autonomy and self-determination. They had become aware of the polarities and conflicts that so often afflict us, but that also make freedom, creativity and love possible. These developments are the basis of

our capacity for transcendence. In outgrowing Eden, they unhappily lost the security and comfort which it offered them and discovered the suffering and insecurity which come with freedom and autonomy. However, they had happily taken a necessary and most important step toward the Second Eden, the attainment of selfhood in unity with the Absolute. The message of Adam and Eve is again that suffering is the necessary medium for our positive development.

Conclusions

The process of attaining selfhood, of living out and fulfilling our transcendence, is often described metaphorically as a long, difficult and dangerous journey—an upward ascent involving struggles and pain as well as joy and exhilaration. Perhaps the greatest danger of all that we meet on this journey is a false sense of satisfaction and a coming to rest far short of our intended destination. Nikos Kazantzakis (1960) in his spiritual exercises warns, "Be always restless, unsatisfied, unconforming. Whenever a habit becomes convenient, smash it! The greatest sin of all is satisfaction" (p. 68). For Dabrowski this journey includes the process of disintegration as a necessary part of higher development. For Assagioli, it includes the process of disidentification. In either case, we are called upon to relinquish the habitual, easy and familiar in order to take another step closer to self-realization.

While each step of our journey brings us closer to our destination, it also brings with it new challenges and difficulties—often more difficult than those that came before. Both Dabrowski and Assagioli, as well as many mystics, caution that our afflictions need not be interpreted as signs of illness, but rather can be manifestations of our growing spiritualization. In suffering, we need not see despair and defeat, but rather the affirmation of human courage and faith. The authentic life is one lived in "fear and trembling." Huxley (1944) writes:

The saint is one who knows that every moment of our human life is a moment of crisis; for at every moment we are called upon to make an all-important decision—to choose between the way that leads to death and spiritual darkness and the way that leads toward light and love; between interests exclusively temporal and the eternal order; between our personal will...and the will of God. (p.43)

But courage and faith alone are not enough to achieve selfhood and liberation in the unitive state. Many of the losses we suffer are a necessary part of the developmental process. It is the attitude with which we meet the inevitable suffering in our lives that determines whether the outcome is

progressive or regressive. Ultimately, that response must be one of openness and acceptance. In other words, the courage that sustains us through the pains and rigors of the process and the faith in the Absolute toward which the process is directed are rooted ultimately in the love which enables us to be fully open and present to living as process.

Those human beings who have attained higher levels in Dabrowski's developmental scheme or who have progressed in their Transpersonal psychosynthesis, in Assagioli's terms, were no strangers to suffering and sorrow. However, in these examples of transcendence, we are impressed again and again with the transforming power of love to conquer even the deepest despair. Through the cycle of death to self and then being born anew, one is brought at last to union with the Absolute. Such union is expressed in the universal compassion and dedicated self-sacrifice of those who attain Dabrowski's Level V. In their achievement is a message of hope for all of us: listen closely and attentively. Amid the shouting and lamenting of the suffering within us is a calm, still voice with a special invitation—

May All be One.

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The Reality of the Self

Annemarie Roeper

Human beings have an enormous desire to be understood and recognized as legitimate members of their environment. They need to feel that their unique "Self" is acceptable and to understand that they are entitled to this acceptance. Many struggle to be heard, but seldom feel this to be the case. They carry with themselves a feeling of discomfort that arises from not being understood. Why are they not understood? This is caused, among other things, by the structures with which they are surrounded. The structures which surround the child for many years are the educational institutions.

Definition:

In conventional educational literature one finds little, if any reference to the "Self" of the child, because the emphasis is on teaching rather than personal growth. There is not even a word for this inner unit as an existing concept in the educational community.

Literature, philosophies, religion, and psychiatry have been preoccupied with the "Self" or the "Soul" through the ages. Psychoanalysis and other branches of psychiatry...have tried to define the essence of human beings in many different ways. Religion uses the word "Soul." What, then, is this "Self"? I would say that in the last analysis it is a mystery. Neither we ourselves, nor those around us, will ever understand it in its entirety, but the fact is that it exists, and it is a reality. There is something in each of us which reacts as a whole, something that is a unit in itself and follows its own course of development. It's what each of us considers the "I." It's what feels and thinks, experiences and reacts within us. It is the "I of the beholder." Everything that comes our way filters through it and becomes changed by it. Several people witnessing the same event will each come away with a different experience or different images and different memories. And yet, they shared the same outward experience. They see it from their own point of view, through their own feeling of "I," of "Self." This is why we so often question, "What is reality?" for we each have our own. Yet each is an indisputable, experienced reality, a reality of feeling, not necessarily a reality of fact. This often makes the reality of facts hard to determine. The reality of feelings is a fact in itself. It depends on the unique individual "Self" and its state and development of the moment.