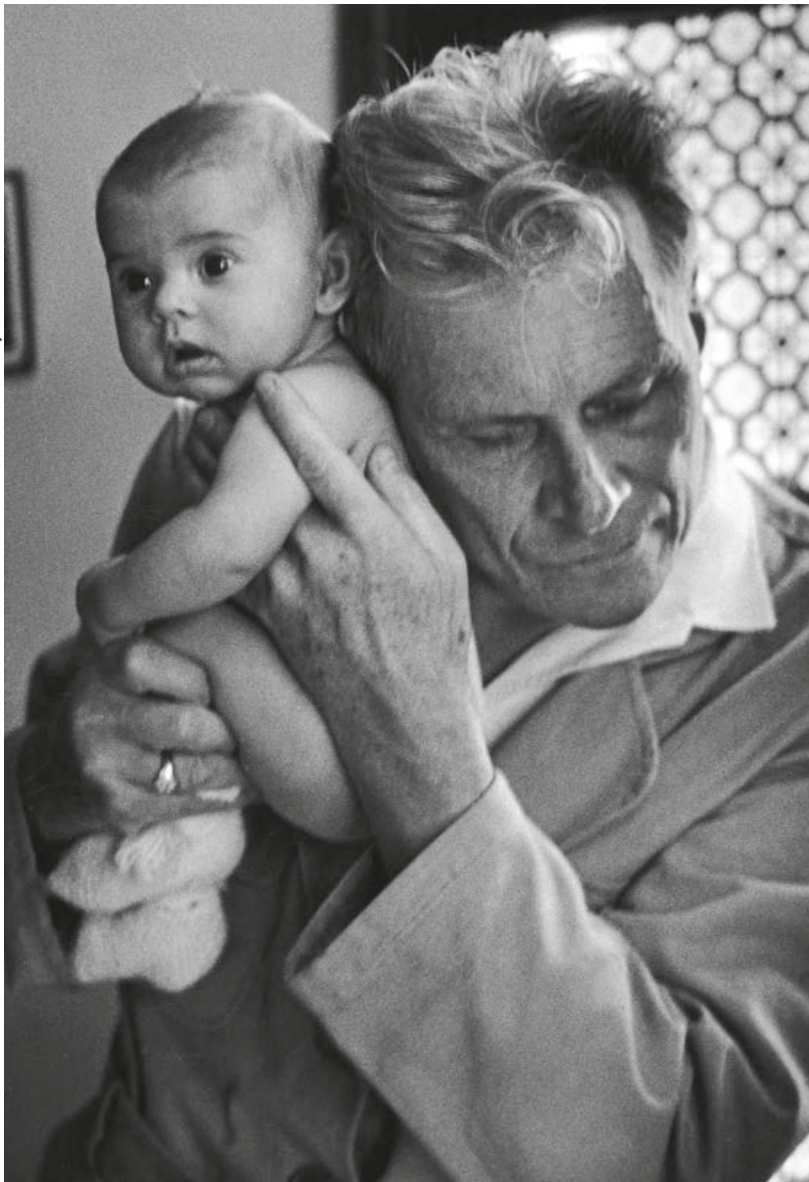


Close-up

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Francesco Botturi

From technological power to the ethic of care, the consistency of a civilization is measured by how it addresses suffering. What place do we give to what has no “solution” and to the cry that emerges?

Pain and technology

Suffering is not something that we can be placed before: suffering exists as it is experienced in the first person. The prevailing attitude toward suffering is, instead, to consider it as much as possible from a distance, supported by a *technological mentality* that tends to transform every situation into a “problem” to be solved rather than facing it as an enigma to be grappled with. The poverty of the interpretative symbols of suffering that characterize contemporary culture does not allow it to be approached with a broad and profound gaze in order to deal with it, that is, in personal terms. Rather, expectations with respect to the power of technology exacerbate the *intolerance for suffering*, which also becomes *resentment*

The trial of desire

against it and, ultimately, resentment toward those who suffer: if suffering should not exist, the sufferer has no reason to exist either. If they are the bearer of a condition that causes them to suffer, it would be better for them not to have been born; and if born, it would be in their best interest to die.

Every affliction, on the other hand, contains the *reverberation of the universal experience of suffering*: this pain of mine raises a question of meaning that is common to the pains of today, of all time, of everyone. Precisely in this extension and depth, every single pain is part of the universal question of human suffering. This is why the lack of a culture capable of posing the problem of the meaning/meaninglessness of suffering is decisive for the life of a civilization. We must ask ourselves: In what conditions of life and experience does one find a civilization whose culture no longer knows how to integrate suffering into the whole of human experience and which no longer desires to elaborate the question of what role suffering plays in the fate of human desire?

This history of the West has been given two great visions of human suffering, the *tragic Greek* one and the *Judeo-Christian* one. In the Greek vision, “nature” is an antagonism between life and death: all of reality is characterized by a radical antithesis in which destruction is inseparable from generation and cruelty from happiness as an inevitable cosmic law, in the presence of which seeking consolation is vain, and whose unfathomable enigma it is wise to bear.

The Judeo-Christian vision, on the other hand, knows anguish and rebellion, but not tragedy, because man can always appeal to the hope offered by the God who is stronger than necessity, chance, and death. The human being is placed in a relationship of trust, howev-

er difficult, in a God who remains an ally even through the greatest trials. Christianity thus surprisingly fills these trials with the very presence of God, who no longer stands outside human suffering, but shares them from within. Suffering is transcended, becoming a place of sharing and reconciliation of the human. Christianity inaugurates an attitude of sensible acceptance and industrious sharing of pain and suffering.

In the face of these great horizons of suffering, the *spiritual condition of contemporary man* appears impoverished and lost. As a historical child of the Christian tradition, he retains its ideal of a reconciled existence, but he is now deprived of trust in his God, of the experience of his fatherhood and the gift of fraternity that flows from it. This is why he expands his trust in technical power without, however, being able to escape the predicament of a Sisyphus who, as he tries to free himself of his burden, experiences the inexorability of a suffering that pushes him back toward the fatalism and pessimism of old, but now deprived of their tragic tension and ability to convey cosmic wisdom. Thus, neither pagan nor Christian, contemporary man oscillates painfully between technological power and existential anguish, between the expectation of care and accompaniment and the celebration of the macabre freedom to end meaningless lives because the suffering is incurable.

Affliction and compassion

Is it possible to find the way back to a *humanism of suffering*? In contemporary medical ethics, there is a growing awareness of the broader scope of “curative” care, as opposed to strictly “therapeutic” care. It is clear that a greater scope for caring is already at play in therapy.

The reflexive expression of “taking care” is revealing of the fact that caring for others always brings one’s self into play, that is, the carer cannot fail to recognize that he or she shares the problem of the “proper functioning” of human life as such with the person being cared for. An attitude of welcoming is therefore not a dimension added to competence, but is inherent to caring. Recognition of this commonality gives rise to an attitude of sharing, or better still, of *com-passion*: communal involvement in the condition of need, which cannot be objectified, but can only be shared by offering the sufferer a certificate of existence and value, of a good that is still possible.



Chelles, France, 1953. The physician Albert Nast (1884–1957) did not abandon his social and medical work despite being struck by total blindness in 1931.

Beyond that boundary

“The possession of a life that has no end”: if the human heart is made for this, then everything that happens, death itself, as the great Dutch historian Huizinga has already observed, is an event within and necessary to the definition of life. For the definition of life, all phenomena in which it coexists are necessary: death is a phenomenon of life, because death happens to a living person. It is paradoxical, but death happens to a living person. Therefore death enters into the definition of life. [...] However, if the heart is made for this, everything that happens is for happiness, and whoever looks at you without the desire for your happiness is an enemy, even if it is your mother. [...] For us—this is our good fortune or grace—a man has come who has no longer allowed us to think of ourselves and other men as a fleeting nothing, a fleeting breath or sigh; a man has come who has forced us to think that the most dramatic and imposing thing in life is this problem: that everything is made for happiness but man cannot find it in anything. Happiness is something that lies beyond the horizon that the human road sees, but the path is made necessary—before that, it is made rational; it is rational and, therefore, necessary—beyond that boundary. What man is made for is a promise that looms on the horizon and beyond it; it is something that is felt and not seen [...]. It is felt and not seen! Any affective, social, political relationship that forgets what man is, what any man, any son of a woman, is, any relationship that forgets this is the outcome of the scoundrelism that dominates the world of culture today and makes us all sick. No, many are not sick, because they have not yet suffered the first consequences. If all things are made for happiness, this represents the substantial and concise problem of our life, more than any calculation, more than any construction, more than any invention, more than anything of great longevity, and one denies nature—one denies nature!—if one denies the mystery of the answer.

(L. Giussani, *Avvenimento di libertà* [The event of freedom] pp. 166–67)

Suffering and desire

The ethical sensibility of caring is a great thing; however, it is not yet a measure of the breadth and depth of human suffering, which is not content to be accompanied because it is inhabited by an even deeper question, that of Job and then of Christ: *lema*, “why”? (“My God, why have you forsaken me,” Psalm 21.) Suffering is so enveloping that it is a place of singular self-consciousness; it is also an experience of the invasion of a power that penetrates and dominates consciousness and will: in suffering, nothing seems to be in my possession any longer. The essence of suffering has to do with this dispossession, which disrupts human discourse (Simone Weil). This is why the language of suffering is ultimately that of the cry.

In this sense, *suffering is greater and other than pain*, if by pain we mean suffering, whether physical or psychic, light or severe, but definable in its causal links and its effects; even animals feel pain, but cannot properly suffer. Suffering is the *properly human dimension of affliction* because it is *the memory of the incompleteness of desire*, which is rekindled by everything that opposes it. Man suffers insofar as he desires and at the same time does not measure up to his desire; suffering is—according to the word’s etymology—finding oneself bearing the weight of this disproportion. This is why death remains the unsurpassable provocation of life, because it seems to definitively disprove the fulfillment of desire and casts a veil of suffering over the whole of existence.

The question that suffering brings with it is thus transferred to the desire that dwells in man’s heart, confronting him with a peremptory alternative: Is existence the denial of desire or is it a putting it to the test? Is existence like a game without a solution, a meaninglessness achieving nothing, or is it a path that is put to the test? Thus the experience of suffering makes clear that the concrete situation of human existence lies in the dramatic opposition between a *meaningless game* and a *testing of meaning*; between illusion and proof, proof of the doubt that



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all experience is the object of an empty desire, “vanity of vanities,” smoke dispersed by the wind.

But, if suffering testifies to the disproportionality of our desire for a fulfilled life, and if an empty outcome does not account for our desire and suffering, then only one final possibility remains: perhaps a *gift* that responds to a desire that is too great for us. This is a reasonable hypothesis if we remember that everything that is most precious in existence comes not from our own doing, but instead comes to meet us: life itself, its fundamental gifts, the care given by those who welcome us, the friendship of those who accompany us, the love of those who love us. Perhaps only a gift can fulfill the promise that life itself is. This is the *religious hypothesis*, that at the fount of life is a good and personal power that is pleased to provide an origin and a meaning to human living.

Passio Christi passio hominis

But if this is so, why the trial of suffering? Why a gift continually embedded with suffering? The creator and redeemer God of the first Hebrew testament offers frequent messages about the trials that He Himself causes and which He Himself succors; but one would never have supposed that those were forewarnings of the extraordinary announcement that such trials would become the trials of God Himself. What is extraordinary about Christianity—come to think of it—is not that God takes care of man and provides for his happiness,

but that the trial of suffering becomes part of the path to happiness in an economy of salvation embodied in the Son in which nothing is wasted, not even the ocean of human suffering. The abyss of the Son’s suffering, the Son annihilated in powerlessness, is also the point at which total suffering coincides with total reliance on and total obedience to the gift of total life; that is, the risen life in which even the wounds of suffering remain, bearing witness to an eternal meaning that has made suffering its own. Therefore—henceforth—suffering is stripped of the curse of doubt and despair and becomes the place of trial where the purest obedience can be exercised, and in which the ultimate gift of fulfillment is granted. Suffering and death, places of distance from God, are revealed as privileged places of His nearness and communion. ■

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