The Psychoanalysis of Overcoming Suffering

*The Psychoanalysis of Overcoming Suffering: Flourishing Despite Pain* offers a guide to understanding and working with a range of everyday causes of suffering from a psychoanalytic perspective.

The book delineates some of the underappreciated, everyday facets of the troubling and challenging psychological experiences associated with love, work, faith, mental anguish, old age, and psychotherapeutic caregiving. Examining both the suffering of the patient and therapist, Paul Marcus provides pragmatic insights for changing one's way of being to make suffering sufferable.

Written in a rich but accessible style, one that draws from ancient wisdom and spirituality, *The Psychoanalysis of Overcoming Suffering* provides an essential guide for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists and their clients, and will also appeal to anyone who is interested in understanding how we suffer, why we suffer and what we can do about it.

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Recently published titles by Paul Marcus


They Shall Beat Their Swords into Plowshares: Military Strategy, Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living (Marquette University Press, 2014)

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In Search of the Good Life: Emmanuel Levinas, Psychoanalysis and the Art of Living (Karnac, 2010)
The Psychoanalysis of Overcoming Suffering

Flourishing Despite Pain

Paul Marcus
[God says out of the whirlwind] “Where were you when I founded the world. Tell, if you have the understanding.”

[Job responds] “Behold, I am of little worth, what can I answer you? I have put my hand over my mouth.”

(Job 38:4; 40:4, Helaine Helmreich’s translation)
To my first grandchild, Talia Pearl, may the Almighty “cause His Presence to shine upon you.”
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Making suffering sufferable

The purpose of psychoanalysis, said a gloomy Freud, “is to convert hysterical [neurotic] misery into common [normal] unhappiness” (1893, p. 305). Indeed, like so many profound thinkers who have written before him, Freud recognized that to live is to suffer. “For the individual,” he said, “life is hard to bear, just as it is for mankind in general” (1927, p. 16). According to Freud, profound suffering takes place within the everyday contexts of love or work, what he believed were the twin pillars for a sound mind and for living the “good life.” Moreover, Freud insisted in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, whose daughter had overcome a serious illness, that one should be grateful for any reprieve from suffering: “One has to assume happiness when fate does not carry out all its threats simultaneously” (Freud, 1985, p. 440). Not only is suffering an unavoidable constituent aspect of being-in-the-world, but it is also a central potentiating factor to living the “good life.” Without synthesizing or coming to grips with the emotionally painful existential challenges that beset the human condition – like despair, loss, tragedy, anxiety and conflict – it is nearly impossible to grow and develop into an autonomous, integrated and humane person.

For Freud, psychic pain was the necessary precondition for differentiation and individuation and the ability to experience the object as separate and independent. As Aeschylus noted in Agamemnon, “Wisdom comes alone through suffering” (p. 178).1 In a sense, Aeschylus’s insight speaks to the heart of my study, namely, that suffering is not only the mother of all wisdom, but it is also the mother of all flourishing, if only one knows how to make suffering sufferable. Flourishing is a key “positive psychology” term that means living “within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678).

My book is a contribution to a rather large gap in psychoanalytic thinking and practice, namely, developing the rudiments of a psychoanalytically infused psychology of flourishing. As I will elaborate shortly, such a psychoanalytic psychology is rooted in the ancient religious “spirituality” and “wisdom” that flowered during the Axial Age, that “pivotal age” from 800 to 200 BCE when the spiritual foundations of our current society were established
(Jaspers, 2011, pp. 51–60). As sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed out in his discussion of structuration theory, such a psychoanalytically infused Axial vision is always mindful of the “duality of structure” of important existential experiences – their “constraining and enabling,” or painful and enhancing, aspects that must be creatively integrated to potentiate the will and ability to press on, especially when the going gets tough (1984, p. 25).

For many years now, I have been publishing books that deal with what is most important to the average person in terms of everyday existence: in other words, how to live the “good life.”2 By “good life” I mean a life that is characterized by deep and wide love and creative and productive work, one that is also guided by reason and ethics and is aesthetically pleasing. This book further delineates what constitutes the “nuts and bolts” of living a flourishing life, a way of being that blends practicality and passion as it attempts to illuminate some of the underexplored and often deeply distressing aspects of love, work, faith, mental anguish, old age and psychotherapeutic caregiving. Each chapter of this book will delineate some of the underappreciated, everyday facets of these very troubling, or at least challenging, psychological experiences, as well as offer utilitarian, pragmatic insights for changing one’s way of thinking, feeling and acting to make suffering sufferable.

Suffering can be psychologically metabolized to become an opportunity for personal growth, development and flourishing. Indeed, the art of living the “good life” requires that one be willing and able to metamorphose one’s suffering into “something more,” “something higher” and “something better” – a psychic achievement that is easier said than done.3 As philosopher Bertrand Russell famously quipped about a universe that he regarded as ethically indifferent and unjust, “The secret of happiness is to face the fact that the world is horrible, horrible, horrible – you must feel it deeply, and not brush it aside. You must feel it right here” – thumping his chest – “and then you can start being happy again” (Mailer, 1998, p. 157). Metamorphosing one’s suffering can involve a wide range of conscious and unconscious relations to the world and strategies, including those of transcendence, resignation and transformation (Erikson, 2006, p. 48).

In simplified ideological terms, a person lodged in a Christian way of being-in-the-world, for example, could draw from his belief in a comforting kingdom not of this world, but of heaven, to help transcend earthly suffering; one who is lodged in a Stoic outlook can regard his “inner world,” his character/virtue building, as what really matters in life, and thus resignation without despair is the best strategy to manage the suffering inflicted on him by what he views as impersonal forces. A person who views suffering from a Marxist angle would be inclined to accept the facticity of his suffering, and would focus on transforming the outside world, such as changing the oppressive class differences, forms of socioeconomic conflict or the stronger overpowering the weaker. From a Freudian perspective, suffering is best dealt with through astute personal compromises between drive satisfaction and
reality considerations, always with an eye toward “higher” forms of sublimation (Erikson, 2006, pp. 48, 72).

In real life, most people engage with suffering in love, work or faith by using a wide range of interdependent, interrelated and interactive psychological resources. Regardless of one’s frame of reference, all agree that while life is steeped in suffering, the “royal road” to making suffering sufferable – to coming out of it enhanced, if not wiser – involves being able to face the tough truths about one’s personal limitations, vulnerabilities and character flaws with an eye to transforming them into their opposite. Using one’s sufferings as a base for life-affirming action requires considerable critical self-understanding (i.e., owning up to one’s contribution to one’s problems in living) and expanded and deepened self-awareness, which almost always feels distressing. As Carl Jung aptly put it, individuals are extremely pain avoidant: “People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (1969, p. 99). Playing off of Jung’s metaphor, my study assumes that sunlight illuminates the outside world, and darkness the inner one.

**Situating psychoanalysis in the Axial Age**

To better contextualize my study, I must discuss how I situate and define psychoanalysis, my angle of vision, as it differs somewhat from how most analysts conceive of it. My view of psychoanalysis is as a contemporary offshoot of the ancient religious “spirituality” and “wisdom” tradition that emerged during the Axial Age, the socially tumultuous period when there was an explosion of spiritual creativity in four regions of the world, each having different socio-intellectual realities and traditions. As German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers first pointed out in his original formulation of the concept, the Axial Age was a “spiritual process” in which “extraordinary events” took place:

In China lived Confucius and Lao Tse, all the trends in Chinese philosophy arose … In India it was the age of the Upanishads and of Buddha; as in China, all philosophical trends, including skepticism and materialism, sophistry and nihilism, were developed. In Iran Zarathustra put forward his challenging conception of the cosmic process as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine prophets arose: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah; Greece produced Homer, the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the tragic poets, Thucydides and Archimedes. All the vast development of which these names are a mere intimation took place in those few centuries, independently and almost simultaneously in China, India and the West.

(Jaspers, 2003, p. 99)
Most importantly, says Jaspers, these philosophers and religious leaders gave birth to our conception of what it meant to be human, both at its best and worst, a vision of humanity that still has a strong interpretive grip on human consciousness, on what Pierre Bourdieu called our “symbolic field” (Lambert, 1999, p. 304). As the eminent sociologist Robert N. Bellah noted, “Neither the Enlightenment nor any of the great ideological movements of the twentieth century have supplanted the axial heritage; often they have enacted it out in parody even as they imagined themselves rejecting it” (2002, p. 273). Even more significantly for this book, not only is “the spiritual life of men … still oriented towards the axial age,” but throughout the world there have been “conscious attempts to restore it, renaissances” (Jaspers, 2003, p. 102). These “great new” Axial-inspired “spiritual creations” are a testament to its formidable influence in today’s world (ibid.). Psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on helping analysands transcend suffering in their lives, can be viewed as just such a “new spiritual creation” that is lodged in the Axial vision.

As comparative religion scholar Karen Armstrong noted, all the traditions that evolved during the Axial Age expanded and deepened “the frontiers of human consciousness and discovered a transcendent dimension in the core of their being” (2006, p. xvii). However, and this is most important when we consider psychoanalysis as a modern expression of the Axial vision, these traditions “did not necessarily regard” the transcendent dimension “as supernatural, and most of them refused to discuss it” (ibid., p. 393). This was mainly because the experience of what was felt as “ineffable, indescribable, and incomprehensible” evoked only reverential silence (ibid.), a response that calls to mind philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous statement in the *Tractatus*: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (1961, p. 3).

This being said, in the Axial Age there was a sharp differentiation between the world as it is typically experienced and a world beyond this world, in whatever way that otherworldliness was imagined. As the well-known sociologist S.N. Eisendstadt noted, it is precisely “the emergence, conceptualization, and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders” that distinguish the Axial Age (1986, p. 1). Out of this differentiation, the notion emerged that while “we are in this world, we are not of this world” (Erikson, 2006, p. 5; italics original). Such an orientation, in which one is in and yet not in the world, both inside and outside, affirmed the profound paradoxical thought that authentic inner independence is always entwined with a type of dependence on the world (Jaspers, 2003, p. 116). In this Axial model, human existence can be construed “as a journey,” one “that leads from appearance to reality, bondage to liberation, confusion to insight, and darkness to light” (Erikson, 2006, p. 5). For example, Buddha taught that it is possible to find and create an inner center of gravity, an internal “place apart, separate from the world, and yet wondrously within it” – one “that is impartial, utterly fair, calm, and that fills us with a confidence that, against all
odds, there is value in our lives” (Armstrong, 2006, p. 342). Buddha called this spiritual place nībbaṇa, the Hebrews called it God, and the Hindus called it brahman (ibid.). When recast in psychological terms, existential themes that point to an ultimate reality (e.g., the mind is fundamentally spiritually cast to strive for “something more,” “something higher” and “something better”) resonate with a psychoanalytic outlook as they pertain to the evocative notion of transcendence that is central to the Axial vision.

A psychoanalytically glossed view of transcendence could refer to the sudden intrusion of the unconscious, of otherness in rational thought. Through the analytic dialogue, transcendent truths in the form of life-altering self-understanding and self-knowledge are derived. Put differently, the greater the inner freedom from unconscious bondage and neurosis (the more one becomes an authentic self who is radically open to existence) the greater the potential for helpful transcendence (Jaspers, 2003). Most importantly, as ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes it, such transcendence involves “the movement of the self (or ‘same’) toward the outside (the ‘other,’ or alterity)” (Smith, 2005, p. 1), always with the awareness that it is never possible to fully comprehend the irreducible particularity, the alterity of the self and other. Transcendence is achieved through the inter-human encounter and expanded and deepened sociality, especially through embracing an other-directed, other-regarding, other-serving way of being-in-the-world. Says Levinas, “The subject who says [like the biblical Abraham] ‘Here I am’ testifies to the Infinite” (1985, p. 106), and, “Through the relations with the Other, I am in touch with God” (1989, p. 17).

Similar to psychoanalysis, what mattered most in Axial traditions was not what you consciously believed and verbalized, including with regard to the ineffable transcendent dimension, but rather “how you behaved” (Armstrong, 2006, p. xviii). As psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich pithily noted, “Words can lie. The mode of expression never lies” (1961, p. 145). That is, in the Axial tradition what mattered most was whether your actions in the real world were in accordance with ethical conduct, with “goodness,” the ultimate transformational force (ibid.). For example, “charity and benevolence,” expressions of deep and wide empathy, were highly valued (ibid., p. xix). In addition, one is not able to be happy if one is only self-serving in outlook and behavior (Hdont, 2009).

Such empathic capacity is central not only to psychoanalytic technique but also to its ethos, for in everyday life the capacity for wholesome intimacy requires accurate empathic immersion in the inner world of one’s partner. Freud, too, believed that “goodness,” what can be called love without lust, was the lynchpin to the art of living the “good life” (Marcus, 2008, p. 219). As Wallwork (2005, p. 287) noted, Freud quietly encouraged people to live according to the love commandment. “I myself have always advocated the love of mankind,” he wrote to the Nobel Prize-winning French dramatist Romain Rolland (Freud, 1975, Letter 218, p. 374). In his essay “Why War”
Freud also noted that the commandment to love was the best cure for the human proclivity to violence, hatred and war: “There is no need for psychoanalysis to be ashamed to speak of love in this connection, for religion itself uses the same words: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Freud, 1933, p. 212).

In light of the above, Freud can be plausibly regarded as a modern exemplar of the Axial model,10 excluding the explicitly otherworldly transcendent dimension – unless you regard, as I do, psychologically engaging the otherworldliness of the unconscious, especially its infantile aspects, as the master key to transcending the neurotic self, with its inordinate egoism and narcissism. By this I mean that if the Axial tradition is right that the greatest impediment to so-called “enlightenment” is excessive egoism and narcissism, then it is through other-directed, other-regarding and other-serving love and work that a new and better self and interiority can flourish.

Jaspers, too, believed that there was a transcendent aspect in man, a kind of earthly self-spirituality, “to be found within oneself and especially through the value of life and the need for achievement” (Lambert, 1999, pp. 308, 322, 323). This is particularly true in the existentially significant realms of love, work, faith and art: “Only transcendence can make this questionable life good, the world beautiful, and existence itself a fulfillment” (Jaspers, 2003, p. 126). Armstrong also claims that “the transcendent experience that humans seem to require” centrally involves reclaiming the “compassionate vision [to] find a way of expressing it in an innovative, inspiring way – just as the Axial sages did” (2006, pp. xvi, 472). It is precisely this process of “ethicization,” as it has been called, “the interpretation of events or practices in ethical terms,” that is a main feature of Axial Age religions that has positive implications for our era (Muesse, 2007, p. 130).

The claim that Freud can be reasonably conceived as lodged in the Axial tradition becomes more plausible when we note that while not a religious or Zionistic Jew, he was strongly identified with Jewish ethics, history and group destiny, once explaining in a speech to his B’nai B’rith Society in Vienna in honor of his seventieth birthday:

There remained enough other things to make the attraction of Judaism and Jews irresistible – many dark emotional forces, all the more potent for being so hard to grasp in words, as well as the clear consciousness of an inner identity, the intimacy that comes from the same psychic structure.

(Bakan, 1958, p. 305)12

Thus, my claim is that Freud (and his followers) calls to mind one of those Hebrew “wisdom” writers of the Axial Age, those ancient professional teacher-sages depicted in the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, who were committed “to developing a realistic approach to the problems of life,
including the practical skills and the technical arts of civilization” (Gordis, 1951, pp. 16–17). Like the ancient teacher-sages, Freud and his followers are mainly concerned with issues of “ultimate concern” – as Paul Tillich used the term – to describe the summoning nature of faith and religion (1957, p. 10). While human beings have many types of concerns, their “ultimate concerns,” such as the meaning of life, suffering and death, have an irrepressible quality of urgency and ultimacy. That is, whether such issues are cast in cognitive, aesthetic, moral or political terms, they have a distinctly “spiritual” or “religious” feel to them, for they demand committing oneself with the fullness of one’s whole being to bringing about the fulfillments that it promises (ibid., pp. 11, 1). Psychoanalysis summons the analysand to wholeheartedly engage his life, especially in the realms of love and work, with just such existential seriousness as he tries to transform his suffering into “something more,” “something higher” and “something better,” that is, to a practical wisdom that can be artfully used to live the “good life.”

**Defining psychoanalysis**

In light of the above placement of Freud and his followers in the Axial model, psychoanalysis as I conceive it is a form of life, a resource for individuals who can appropriate the life- and identity-defining narrative of psychoanalysis when they seek to understand, endure and possibly conquer the problems that affect, if not assault, the human experiences of love, faith, mental anguish, old age, work and caregiving. Psychoanalysis can be viewed as what Michel Foucault called a “technology of the self”: “an exercise of the self, by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being” (1989, p. 433). As philosopher Pierre Hadot notes about ancient Greek philosophy, psychoanalysis can be understood as a “spiritual exercise,” a tool for living life skillfully, more fully and wisely (1997, p. 83). Erikson may have had this in mind when he wrote that “free association” was a “western form of meditation” (Hoare, 2001, p. 88), while Symington explicitly states that “psychoanalysis has a spiritual function,” such that “purifying motivation” becomes “the organizing center of his activities” (1993, p. 47).

The aim of a spiritual exercise is to foster a deep modification of an individual’s way of “seeing and being,” a decisive change in how one lives one’s practical, everyday life. Most importantly, the objective of a spiritual exercise is “a total transformation of one’s vision, life-style, and behavior” in the service of increased personal freedom and peace of mind (Hadot, 1997, pp. 83, 103, 14), and, I would add, a less self-centric outlook and behavior. According to this view, as Levinas described “Jewish Humanism” at its best, psychoanalysis is “a difficult wisdom concerned with truths that correlate to virtues” (1989, p. 275). While psychoanalysis shuns moralizing, as Nina Coltart noted, it “may be defined as a moral activity,” one in which symptoms are “disabling painful moral puzzles” (Phillips, 1994, pp. 138, 139).
Psychoanalysis is a harrowing, deconstructive, demythologizing and defamiliarizing process for acquiring greater self-awareness and self-understanding, especially of one's destructive unconscious emotional activity, one that transforms moral consciousness by expanding and deepening one's capacity to love. As Axial sages viewed it, self-understanding leads to self-mastery, which leads to self-transcendence. In fact, Freud described psychoanalytic treatment as the “scientific cure by love” (McGuire, 1974, pp. 12–13). In this sense, psychoanalysis is animated by both the “love of wisdom” and the “wisdom of love,” by Greek and Hebrew values, and is a powerful tool for the art of living a “good life,” as one construes and fashions it.13

Why another book on suffering?

There have been hundreds of books written on the subject of suffering from a wide range of perspectives. Some are lodged in lofty philosophical or religious points of view, while others are more “up front and personal,” like “survival” accounts or grief memoirs. There are also many psychologically based self-help books that are geared toward helping people “cope” with their painful circumstances (Rice, 2014, p. 14). All of these books, and the points of view they represent, have some value to the average person amidst very trying times in their lives when they feel “a sense of forsakenness” (Jaspers, 2003, p. 20).14 My book draws from all of these perspectives as it mines some of the best insights that those before me have graced us with about both the nature of suffering and how best to respond to it. However, what is novel about this study is that I use a psychoanalytic angle to unravel some of the forms of suffering associated with common human experiences.

Psychoanalysis is particularly adept at conceptualizing and working with an individual’s painful emotions, for they are regarded as both the enabling and constraining forces that potentiate and impede positive change. Moreover, I focus on suffering that is mainly self-inflicted and neurotic, the bailiwick of psychoanalytic theory and treatment, as opposed to psychologically coping with a natural disaster or a genocidal attack (these forms of “externally” imposed suffering are also “internally” filtered and responded to in better and worse ways). As Carl Jung noted in his essay “Psychotherapists or the Clergy,” “Psychoneurosis must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning” (1932, p. 497).

As an analyst embedded in a Freudian outlook – man as pleasure seeking in an erotically tinged universe; the self fashioned by its defenses against instincts; treatment as “the taming of the beast within” through reason and love – my focus is on the role of sexuality and aggression in problems in living (Roth, 1998, p. 327).15 It is well known that the particular manner in which we interpret our painful circumstances will greatly influence not only how we experience our ordeal but also how we respond to it as we lean into the future. Needless to say, this is a deeply personalized matter that includes the
role of unacknowledged sexual and aggressive wishes and the conflicts they generate. Indeed, what Harold Bloom said about literature and understanding suffering also applies to psychoanalytic thinking: “What matters in literature in the end is surely the idiosyncratic, the individual, the flavor or the color of a particular human suffering” (Bloom, 1986, p. 138).

Having been practicing psychoanalysis and psychotherapy for over thirty years, as well as having been a court-appointed forensic evaluator in Family and Supreme Courts, I have been privileged to helpfully engage with a wide range of people who were intensely struggling with problems in living. Most importantly, I have noticed that there are people who are more and less skillful at facing their suffering and transforming the brute psychic pain into “something more,” “something higher” and “something better,” a basis for practical wisdom in the service of living the “good life.”

**Forms of suffering**

While I will not engage in any detail with the philosophically and psychologically murky issue of defining the difference between pain and suffering, given that my book is mainly about suffering and not pain, I will provide what I regard as a rudimentary and serviceable way of thinking about what distinguishes one from the other. Indian American author Deepak Chopra has succinctly described a central difference between pain and suffering:

Pain is not the same as suffering. Left to itself, the body discharges pain spontaneously, letting go of it the moment that the underlying cause is healed. Suffering is pain that we hold on to. It comes from the mind’s mysterious instinct to believe that pain is good, or that it cannot be escaped, or that the person deserves it.

(2004, pp. 65–66)

Another related way of distinguishing pain from suffering is to view it as the average person literally speaks about it in everyday life: pain tends to be described as a physical happening, like toothache or backache, while suffering tends to be situated in the emotional realm, like when a love relationship abruptly ends or one gets fired and can’t find another job. It is worth noting that pain can morph into suffering, such as when debilitating chronic physical pain becomes the basis for feeling hopeless; and suffering can morph into pain, like when one has successfully mourned a loved one and then their birthday is remembered, which leads to an upsurge of searing feelings. While all of these distinctions are debatable, the reader understands that I am mainly interested in the suffering associated with some existentially compelling aspects of life that are not easily remedied by traditional “pain management,” such as via prescription medication, physical rehabilitation or going to a medical doctor.
As noted earlier, I have chosen to explore the suffering in love, work, faith, mental anguish and old age. In the last chapter, I take up the suffering of the psychoanalyst as he practices the “impossible profession,” as Freud called it. Analysts have to suffer with their own compassion overload, frustration and sense of radical ineffectiveness as they attempt to help their suffering patients get their lives “on track.” As Erikson said, “people and peoples would rather die than change ... they would rather murder than take chances with their identity” (Hoare, 2001, p. 69). While there are many compelling topics to write about that involve suffering, the ones I have chosen include what, in my experience, really matters to most people. For example, adult love relations are a fabulously fertile breeding ground for the later development of a wide range of forms of suffering. As Freud wrote in Civilization and its Discontents, “We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never as helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love” (1930, p. 82).

To loathe one's work, or to experience it as barely tolerable, is a kind of personal horror that calls to mind a bad marriage or failed relationship with a significant other in which one feels utterly trapped. Camus recognized this when he noted that if work does not have soul, life can be stifled and deadened. To feel the agony of being abandoned or rejected by God, especially in one's hour of need, has been immortalized in the pained words of Jesus on the Cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). To experience extreme mental anguish, like ongoing anxiety or depression, is to feel a form of mental unhinging that is aptly described as the horror of existence. Who can't relate to some degree to the pained words of Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen, who said in an interview, “I speak of a clinical depression that is the background of your entire life, a background of anguish and anxiety, a sense that nothing goes well, that pleasure is unavailable and all your strategies collapse” (Lynskey, 2012)?

The process of getting older, especially when one reaches so-called old age, is notoriously challenging for most people, for it can be mainly experienced as disintegration, disillusionment, and a variety of other assaults on one's narcissism, such as the sharp awareness of one's finitude and mortality. Typically in old age there is also suffering related to the death of a loved one, such as a significant other, combined with the sense that the loss is irreplaceable, leaving one feeling utterly adrift and forlorn.

What I hope to make clear throughout this book is that all of these forms of suffering should not be lumped together, for they have their unique phenomenologies and psychodynamics, and are to a large extent context-dependent and setting-specific. Moreover, when taken as a totality of circumstances, these forms of suffering also provide the psychological context and conditions of possibilities for individuals to transform their suffering into “something more,” “something higher” and “something better.” What British psychiatrist R.D. Laing said about insanity, about feeling like one is “going crazy,” also applies
to the other forms of suffering I will discuss: “Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death” (1967, p. 133).

Notes

1 The Axial Greeks were often focused on the notion of tragic circumstances, that is, circumstances in which there appear to be no reasonable and acceptable way of resolving the serious problem in living. In fact, one of the main Axial Greek insights into tragedy, says Martha Nussbaum, was “there is a kind of knowing that works by suffering because suffering is the appropriate acknowledgment of the way human life ... is” (Zaretsky, 2013, pp. 115–116).


3 Philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger has argued that limit breaking is the most powerful motive in human existence: “Only the beyond ultimately concerns us. The sense of a permanent power of transcendence over all limits – of openness to the infinite – is inseparable from the experience of consciousness” (2007, p. 13). This being said, as the Axial sages have noted, what matters most is whether the limit breaking takes a life-affirming or life-denying form, that is, whether it is animated by ethical considerations. Of course, what is judged as “ethical” is perspectival – and therein lies the rub.

4 As Muesse points out, the notion of “selfhood” first appeared during the Axial Age: the “self” was regarded “as a separate individual with agency and moral responsibility,” engaged in the project of “personal transformation,” including thinking differently about “ultimate reality” (2007, pp. 118, 119).

5 Scholars have noted other aspects of Axial vision that I believe are in sync with psychoanalysis as a disruptive discourse and self-fashioning resource. The Axial Age has been described as “an age of criticism,” “second order thinking,” a period of increased “reflexivity,” “historicity” and “agentiality” (Casanova, 2012, pp. 209, 203). Neville Symington, an ex-Catholic priest and member of the Middle Group of British Psychoanalysis, describes psychoanalysis as “a mature natural religion” (accessible to reason without drawing from revelation) and “a spiritual method relevant to the modern world,” one that he claims calls to mind aspects of the Axial Age (1993, pp. 137, 192; 2012, p. 408).

6 According to Symington, the collective message of the Axial masters was: “cultivate the good, attend to what is inner, and have compassion for your fellow man and woman” (1993, p. 105). A lot easier said than done, as the Axial masters emphasized.

7 For example, it says in the Upanishads, “the Spirit supreme is immeasurable, inapprehensible, beyond conception, never born, beyond reasoning, beyond thought. His vastness is the vastness of space” (Mascaro, 1965, p. 101).

8 The notion of the “transcendent” is much debated and hard to pin down. For example, the Christian “believer” Gabriel Marcel was committed to what he called the “authentic, vertical transcendent,” that is, “the transcendence, holiness, and sanctity of Christ and the martyrs.” The “non-believer” Albert Camus was committed to what has been called “horizontal transcendence” as manifested by charity, humanity and solidarity (these valuative attachments were of great concern to Marcel and most “believers”). Thus, for Marcel, transcendence is rooted in divinity, while for Camus it is rooted in history (Heffernan, 2017, pp. 17, 20, 16).

Armstrong situates Freud (and Newton and Einstein) in what she calls the “second Axial Age.” Taking her lead from Jaspers, who referred to “our age of science and technology…a kind of second beginning” (2003, p. 103), Armstrong describes the Western genius for science, which radically changed the world, beginning in the sixteenth century when its scientific revolution initiated a new Axial Age (2006, p. 424). This being said, I maintain that the Freudian version of the human condition, its view of psychopathology or problems in living, and its treatment modality are all in sync with the Axial vision.

For a clarifying discussion of the ambiguous notion of transcendence in the Axial Age, see Dalferth (2012).

Freud appears to be alluding to what feels “unsayable” to him, “hard to grasp in words” as he puts it. Wittgenstein notes a connection between the “unspeakable and mystical”: “There are, indeed,” says Wittgenstein, “things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Hadot, 2009, p. 81).

The “art of living” is a phrase that deserves some clarification. Foucault aptly defines the term as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves … and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (1990, pp. 10–11). Foucault may well have been influenced by Epictetus, who viewed philosophy as the Stoic “art of life.” In Epictetus’s view (though not Foucault’s), philosophy is what a person requires “to become properly themselves [as they are lovers of truth], to fulfill their natures, to achieve the happiness that is everyone’s natural goal” (Long, 2002, pp. 97, 111). Epictetus was following the lead of Socrates, who viewed philosophy a “whole way of life,” one that is lived “correctly and well,” not as an intellectual, theoretical pursuit. In this view, philosophy was a “guide, and unifying component of a good life” lived “on the basis of philosophical reasoning,” and characterized by the pursuit of virtue, wisdom and happiness (Cooper, 2012, pp. 24, 33, 31, 36). Finally, for the Axial-inspired spiritual aspirant, the “art of living” was a high religious art that was characterized by “doing God’s work” (however the divine/transcendent was conceptualized), such that the “good life” was one that was infused with inner beauty, truth and goodness.

As the Axial-inspired analyst Michael Eigen points out, “Texts can be like living organisms, at times, more real than life … [a] book takes you to places you value, opens possibilities, and supports the unfolding of your own sensibility” (2012, p. xii).

As French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted, as we are fundamentally bodily beings (i.e., embodied), sexuality is an intrinsic dimension of human existence: “it is always present like an atmosphere” and “spreads forth like an odour or like a sound” (Cooper, 2015, p. 124).

References


References


