· 10 ·

Useless Suffering

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translated by Richard Cohen

Phenomenology

Suffering is surely a *given* in consciousness, a certain 'psychological content', like the lived experience of colour, of sound, of contact, or like any sensation. But in this 'content' itself, it is in-spite-of-consciousness, unassumable. It is unassumable and 'unassumability'. 'Unassumability' does not result from the excessive intensity of a sensation, from some sort of quantitative 'too much', surpassing the measure of our sensibility and our means of grasping and holding. It results from an excess, a 'too much' which is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating as suffering the dimensions of meaning which seem to be opened and grafted on to it. For the Kantian 'I think' – which is capable of reuniting and embracing the most heterogeneous and disparate givens into order and meaning under its *a priori* forms – it is as if suffering were not only a *given* refractory to synthesis, but the *way* in which the refusal opposed to the assembling of givens into a meaningful whole is opposed to it: suffering is at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself. It is not only the consciousness of rejection or a symptom of rejection, but this rejection itself: a backwards consciousness, 'operating' not as 'grasp' but as revulsion. It is a modality, or the categorial ambiguity of quality and modality. Taken as an 'experienced' content, the denial and refusal of meaning which is imposed as a sensible quality is the *way* in which the unbearable is precisely not borne by consciousness, the way this not-being-borne is, paradoxically, itself a sensation or a given. This is a quasi-

contradictory structure, but a contradiction which is not formal like that of the dialectical tension between the affirmative and the negative which arises for the intellect; it is a contradiction by way of sensation: the plaintiveness of pain, hurt [*mal*].[1]

Suffering, in its hurt and its in-spite-of-consciousness, is passivity. Here, 'taking cognizance' is no longer, properly speaking, a taking; it is no longer *the performance of an act of consciousness*, but, in its adversity, a submission; and even a submission to the submitting, since the 'content' of which the aching consciousness is conscious is precisely this very adversity of suffering, its hurt. But, here again, this *passivity* – in the sense of a modality – signifies as a *quiddity*, and perhaps as the place where passivity signifies originally, independent of its conceptual opposition to activity. The latter is an abstraction made from its psycho-physical and psycho-physiological conditions; in its pure phenomenology, the passivity of suffering is in no way the reverse side of activity, as an effect would still be correlative to its cause, or as a sensorial receptivity would be correlative to the 'Obstance' of the object which affects and impresses it. The passivity of suffering is more profoundly passive than the receptivity of our senses, which is already the activity of welcome, and straight away becomes perception. In suffering sensibility is a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; it is an ordeal more passive than experience. It is precisely an evil. It is not, to tell the truth, through passivity that evil is described, but through evil that suffering is understood. Suffering is a pure undergoing. It is not a matter of a passivity which would degrade man by striking a blow against his freedom. Pain would limit such freedom to the point of compromising self-consciousness, permitting man the identity of a thing only in the passivity of the submission. The evil which rends the humanity of the suffering person, overwhelms his humanity otherwise than non-freedom overwhelms it: violently and cruelly, more irremissibly than the negation which dominates or paralyzes the act in non-freedom. What counts in the non-freedom or the undergoing of suffering is the concreteness of the *not* looming as a hurt more negative than any apophantic *not*. This negativity of evil is, probably, the source or kernel of all apophantic negation. The *not* of evil is negative right up to non-sense. All evil refers to suffering. It is the *impasse* of life and being, their absurdity, where pain does not come, somehow innocently, 'to colour' consciousness with affectivity. The evil of pain, the harm itself, is the explosion and most profound articulation of absurdity.

Thus the least one can say about suffering is that in its own

phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless, 'for nothing'. Doubtlessly this basic sense-lessness that the analysis seems to suggest is confirmed by empirical situations of pain, where pain somehow remains undiluted and isolates itself in consciousness, or absorbs the rest of consciousness. It would suffice, for example, to extract from the medical journals certain cases of persistent or obstinate pain, the neuralgias and the intolerable lumbagos resulting from lesions of the peripheral nerves, and the tortures which are experienced by certain patients stricken with malignant tumours.[2] Pain can become the central phenomenon of the diseased state. These are the 'pain-illnesses' where the integration of other psychological states does not bring any relief but where, on the contrary, anxiety and distress add to the cruelty of the hurt. But one can go further – and doubtless thus arrive at the essential facts of pure pain – by evoking the 'pain-illnesses' of beings who are psychically deprived, backward, handicapped, in their relational life and in their relationships to the Other, relationships where suffering, without losing anything of its savage malignancy, no longer covers up the totality of the mental and comes across novel lights within new horizons. These horizons none the less remain closed to the mentally deficient, except that in their 'pure pain' they are projected into them to expose them *to me*, raising the fundamental ethical problem which pain poses 'for nothing': the inevitable and preemptory ethical problem of the medication which is my duty. Is not the evil of suffering – extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude – also the unassumable and thus the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the possibility that wherever a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh happen there is the original call for aid, for curative help, for help from the other[3] ego whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation? It is the original opening toward what is helpful, where the primordial, irreducible, and ethical, anthropological category of the medical comes to impose itself – across a demand for analgesia, more pressing, more urgent in the groan than a demand for consolation or a postponement of death. For pure suffering, which is intrinsically meaningless and condemned to itself without exit, a beyond takes shape in the inter-human.[4] It is starting from such situations – we say in passing – that medicine as technique, and consequently the general technology it presupposes, the technology so easily exposed to the attacks of 'right-thinking' rigour, does not merely originate in the so-called 'will to power'. This bad will is perhaps only the price which must sometimes be paid by the elevated thought of a

civilization called to nourish persons and to lighten their sufferings.

This elevated thought is the honour of a still uncertain and blinking modernity coming at the end of a century of nameless sufferings, but in which the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other person, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human. In this perspective a radical difference develops between *suffering in the Other*, which for *me* is unpardonable and solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*,[5] my own adventure of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only meaning to which suffering is susceptible, in becoming a suffering for the suffering – be it inexorable – of someone else. It is this attention to the Other which, across the cruelties of our century – despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties – can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle – the only one which it is not possible to contest – a principle which can go so far as to command the hopes and practical discipline of vast human groups. This attention and this action are so imperiously and directly incumbent on people – on their selves – that it makes waiting for the saving actions of an all-powerful God impossible without degradation. To be sure, consciousness of this inescapable obligation makes the idea of God more difficult, but it also makes it spiritually closer than confidence in any kind of theodicy.

Theodicy

In the ambiguity of suffering which the above phenomenological essay brings out, its modality also shows the content or sensation that consciousness 'supports'. This adversity-to-all-harmony, as quiddity, enters into conjunction with other 'contents' which it disturbs, to be sure, but where it is given reasons or produces a reason. Already within an isolated consciousness, the pain of suffering can take on the meaning of a pain which merits and hopes for reward, and so lose, it seems, in diverse ways, its modality of uselessness. Is it not meaningful as a means with an end in view, when it tallies with the effort which leads to a work or in the fatigue which results from it? One can discover in it a biological finality: the role of an alarm signal manifesting itself for the preservation of life against the cunning dangers which menace life in illness. 'He that increaseth knowledge increaseth

sorrow', says Ecclesiastes (1:18), where suffering appears at the very least as the price of reason and of spiritual refinement. It would also temper the individual's character. It would be necessary to the teleology of community life, where social unrest awakens a useful attention to the health of the collective body. The social utility of suffering is necessary to the pedagogic function of Power in education, discipline and repression. Is not fear of punishment the beginning of wisdom? Is it not believed that sufferings, submitted to as sanctions, regenerate the enemies of society and man? This political teleology is founded, to be sure, on the value of existence, on the perseverance of society and the individual in being, on their successful health as the supreme and ultimate end.

But the unpleasant and gratuitous non-sense of pain already pierces beneath the reasonable forms which the social 'uses' of suffering assume. These, in any case, do not make the torture which strikes the psychically handicapped and isolates them in their pain any less scandalous. But behind the rational administration of pain in sanctions distributed by human courts, immediately dressing up dubious appearances of repression, the arbitrary and strange failure of justice amidst wars, crimes and the oppression of the weak by the strong, rejoins, in a sort of fatality, the useless sufferings which spring from natural plagues as if effects of an ontological perversion. Beyond the fundamental malignity of suffering itself, revealed in its phenomenology, does not human experience in history attest to a malice and a bad will?

Western humanity has none the less sought for the meaning of this scandal by invoking the proper sense of a metaphysical order, an ethics, which is invisible in the immediate lessons of moral consciousness. This is a kingdom of transcendent ends, willed by a benevolent wisdom, by the absolute goodness of a God who is in some way defined by this super-natural goodness; or a widespread, invisible goodness in Nature and History, where it would command the paths which are, to be sure, painful, but which lead to the Good. Pain is henceforth meaningful, subordinated in one way or another to the metaphysical finality envisaged by faith or by a belief in progress. These beliefs are presupposed by theodicy! Such is the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings here below comprehensible. These will make sense by reference to an original fault or to the congenital finitude of human being. The evil which fills the earth would be explained in a 'plan of the whole'; it

would be called upon to atone for a sin, or it would announce, to the ontologically limited consciousness, compensation or recompense at the end of time. These supra-sensible perspectives are invoked in order to envisage in a suffering which is essentially gratuitous and absurd, and apparently arbitrary, a signification and an order.

Certainly one may ask if theodicy, in the broad and narrow senses of the term, effectively succeeds in making God innocent, or in saving morality in the name of faith, or in making suffering – and this is the true intention of the thought which has recourse to theodicy – bearable. By under-estimating its temptation one could, in any case, misunderstand the profundity of the empire which theodicy exerts over humankind, and the *epoch-making* character – or the *historical* character, as one says today – of its entry into thought. It has been, at least up to the trials of the twentieth century, a component of the self-consciousness of European humanity. It persisted in watered-down form at the core of atheist progressivism, which was confident, none the less, in the efficacy of the Good which is immanent to being, called to visible triumph by the simple play of the natural and historical laws of injustice, war, misery and illness. As providential, Nature and History furnished the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the norms of moral consciousness. They are associated with many essentials of the deism of the age of Enlightenment. But theodicy – ignoring the name that Leibniz gave to it in 1710 – is as old as a certain reading of the Bible. It dominated the consciousness of the believer who explained his misfortunes by reference to the Sin, or at least by reference to his sins. In addition to the Christians' well-established reference to Original Sin, this theodicy is in a certain sense implicit in the Old Testament, where the drama of the Diaspora reflects the sins of Israel. The wicked conduct of ancestors, still non-expiated by the sufferings of exile, would explain to the exiles themselves the duration and the harshness of this exile.

The End of Theodicy

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness – but it is also an event in Sacred History – is that of the destruction of all balance between the explicit and implicit theodicy of Western thought and the forms which suffering and its evil take in the very unfolding of this century. This is the century that in thirty years

has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century which is drawing to a close in the haunting memory of the return of everything signified by these barbaric names: suffering and evil are deliberately imposed, yet no reason sets limits to the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.

Among these events the Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to us the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror. This is perhaps not a subjective feeling. The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. Its possibility puts into question the multi-millenial traditional faith. Did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact? Is it necessary to be surprised, then, that this drama of Sacred History has had among its principal actors a people which, since forever, has been associated with this history, whose collective soul and destiny would be wrongly understood as limited to any sort of nationalism, and whose *gesture*, in certain circumstances, still belongs to Revelation – be it as apocalypse – which 'provokes thought' from philosophers or which impedes them from thinking?[6]

Here I wish to evoke the analysis which the Canadian Jew, the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, of Toronto, has made of this catastrophe of the human and the divine, in his work, and notably in his book *God's Presence in History*:

> The Nazi Genocide of the Jewish people has no precedent within Jewish history. Nor . . . will one find a precedent outside Jewish history. . . . Even actual cases of genocide, however, still differ from the Nazi holocaust in at least two respects. Whole peoples have been killed for 'rational' (however horrifying) ends such as power, territory, wealth. . . . The Nazi murder . . . was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil. Still more incontestably unique than the crime itself is the situation of the victims. The Albigensians died for their faith, believing unto death that God needs martyrs. Negro Christians have been murdered for their race, able to find comfort in a faith not at issue. The more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents [who brought] up Jewish children.[7]

The inhabitants of the Eastern European Jewish communities constituted the majority of the six million tortured and massacred; they represented the human beings least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world, and the million infants killed had the innocence of infants. Theirs is the death of martyrs, a death given in the torturers' unceasing destruction of the dignity which belongs to martyrs. The final act of this destruction is accomplished today in the posthumous denial of the very fact of martyrdom by the would-be 'revisers of history'. This would be pain in its undiluted malignity, suffering for nothing. It renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought which would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead. But does not this end of theodicy, which obtrudes itself in the face of this century's inordinate distress, at the same time in a more general way reveal the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other person, the scandal which would occur by my justifying my neighbour's suffering? So that the very phenomenon of suffering in its uselessness is, in principle the pain of the Other. For an ethical sensibility – confirming itself, in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity – the justification of the neighbour's pain is certainly the source of all immorality. Accusing oneself in suffering is undoubtedly the very turning back of the ego to itself. It is perhaps thus; and the for-the-other – the most upright relation to the Other – is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy. But this intimacy can only be discreet. It could not be given as an example, or be narrated as an edifying discourse. It could not be made a predication without being perverted.

The philosophical problem, then, which is posed by the useless pain which appears in its fundamental malignancy across the events of the twentieth century, concerns the meaning that religiosity and the human morality of goodness can still retain after the end of theodicy. According to the philosopher we have just quoted, Auschwitz would paradoxically entail a revelation of the very God who nevertheless was silent at Auschwitz: a commandment of faithfulness. To renounce after Auschwitz this God absent from Auschwitz – no longer to assure the continuation of Israel – would amount to finishing the criminal enterprise of National-Socialism, which aimed at the annihilation of Israel and the forgetting of the ethical message of the Bible, which Judaism bears, and whose multi-millennial history is concretely prolonged by Israel's existence as a people. For if God was absent in the extermination camps, the devil was very obviously present in them.

From whence, for Emil Fackenheim comes the obligation for Jews to live and to remain Jews, in order not to be made accomplices of a diabolical project. The Jew, after Auschwitz, is pledged to his faithfulness to Judaism and to the material and even political conditions of its existence.

This final reflection of the Toronto philosopher, formulated in terms which render it relative to the destiny of the Jewish people, can be given a universal signification. From Sarajevo to Cambodia humanity has witnessed a host of cruelties in the course of a century when Europe, in its 'human sciences', seemed to reach the end of its subject, the humanity which, during all these horrors, breathed – already or still – the fumes of the crematory ovens of the 'final solution' where theodicy abruptly appeared impossible. Is humanity, in its indifference, going to abandon the world to useless suffering, leaving it to the political fatality – or the drifting – of the blind forces which inflict misfortune on the weak and conquered, and which spare the conquerors, whom the wicked must join? Or, incapable of adhering to an order – or to a disorder – which it continues to think diabolic, must not humanity now, in a faith more difficult than ever, in a faith without theodicy, continue Sacred History; a history which now demands even more of the resources of the *self* in each one, and appeals to its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other person, to its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering 'for nothing', and which straightaway has a meaning? At the end of the twentieth century and after the useless and unjustifiable pain which is exposed and displayed therein without any shadow of a consoling theodicy, are we not all pledged – like the Jewish people to their faithfulness – to the second term of this alternative?[8] This is a new modality in the faith of today, and also in our moral certainties, a modality quite essential to the modernity which is dawning.

The Inter-human Order

To envisage suffering, as I have just attempted to do, in the inter-human perspective – that is, as meaningful in me, useless in the Other – does not consist in adopting a relative point of view on it, but in restoring it to the dimensions of meaning outside of which the immanent and savage concreteness of evil in a consciousness is but an abstraction. To think suffering in an inter-human perspective does not

amount to seeing it in the coexistence of a multiplicity of consciousnesses, or in a social determinism, accompanied by the simple knowledge that people in society can have of their neighbourliness or of their common destiny. The inter-human perspective can subsist, but can also be lost, in the political order of the City where the Law establishes mutual obligations between citizens. Properly speaking, the inter-human lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another. The inter-human is prior to the reciprocity of this responsibility, which inscribes itself in impersonal laws, and becomes superimposed on the pure altruism of this responsibility inscribed in the ethical position of the self as self. It is prior to every contact which would signify precisely the moment of reciprocity where it can, to be sure, continue, but where it can also attenuate or extinguish altruism and disinterestedness. The order of politics – post-ethical or pre-ethical – which inaugurates the 'social contract' is neither the sufficient condition nor the necessary outcome of ethics. In its ethical position, the self is distinct from the citizen born of the City, and from the individual who precedes all order in his natural egoism, from whom political philosophy, since Hobbes, tries to derive – or succeeds in deriving – the social or political order of the City.

The inter-human lies also in the recourse that people have to one another for help, before the marvellous alterity of the Other has been banalized or dimmed in a simple exchange of courtesies which become established as an 'inter-personal commerce' of customs. We have spoken of this in the first paragraph of this study. These are expressions of a properly ethical meaning, distinct from those which the *self* and *other* acquire in what one calls the state of Nature or civil society. It is in the inter-human perspective of *my* responsibility for the other person, without concern for reciprocity, in my call to help him gratuitously, in the asymmetry of the relation of *one* to the *other*, that we have tried to analyze the phenomenon of useless suffering.

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Notes

1 The French term '*mal*' means both 'hurt' and 'evil', and both words have been used to translate it.

2 See the article by Dr Escoffier-Lambiotte in *Le Monde*, 4 April 1981, entitled 'Le premier centre français de traitement de la douleur a été inauguré à l'hôpital Cochin' ['The First French Center for the Treatment of Pain has been Opened at the Cochin Hospital'].

3 With regard to this point we refer to Philippe Nemo's fine book, *Job et l'excess du Mal* [*Job and the Excess of Evil*] (Paris, Grasset, 1977): the very resistance of suffering to synthesis and order is interpreted as the rupture of pure immanence where, essentially, the psychism is enclosed, and as the event of transcendence, and even as an interpellation of God. Cf., also, our analysis of this book, 'Transcendance et mal' ['Transcendence and Evil'], reprinted in *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, J. Vrin, 1982, pp. 189–207.

4 There is a talmudic dialogue or apologue (tractate Berakhot of the *Babylonian Talmud*, 5b) which reflects the conception of the radical hurt of suffering, its intrinsic and uncompensated despair, its confinement and its recourse to the other person, to medication *exterior* to the immanent structure of hurt.

Rav Hiya bar Abba falls ill and Rav Yohanan comes to visit him. He asks him: 'Are your sufferings fitted to you?' 'Neither them nor the compensations they promise.' 'Give me your hand', the visitor of the ill man then says. And the visitor lifts the ill man from his couch. But then Rav Yohanan himself falls ill and is visited by Rav Hanina. Same question: 'Are your sufferings fitted to you?' Same response: 'Neither them nor the compensations they promise.' 'Give me your hand', says Rav Hanina, and he lifts Rav Yohanan from his couch. Question: Could not Rav Yohanan lift himself by himself? Answer: The prisoner could not break free from his confinement by himself.

5 This suffering *in me* would be so radically mine that it could not become subject to a predication. It is as suffering *in me* and not as suffering in general, that *welcome* suffering, attested in the spiritual tradition of humanity, can signify a true idea: the expiatory suffering of the just suffering for others, the suffering that illuminates, the suffering that is sought after by Dostoevsky's characters. I think also of the Jewish religious tradition which is familiar to me, of the 'I am love-sick' of the *Song of Songs*, of the suffering about which certain talmudic texts speak and which they name 'Yessourine shel Ahava', sufferings through love, which is joined to the theme of expiation for others. This suffering is often described at the limit of 'its usefulness'. Cf. note 3, where, in the test of the just, suffering is also what 'does not fit me' – 'Neither it, nor the "recompense" attached to it'.

6 Maurice Blanchot, who is known for his lucid and critical attention to literature and events, notes somewhere: 'How philosophize, how write in the memory of Auschwitz, of those who have said to us sometimes in notes buried near the crematories: "Know what has happened", "do not forget", and, at the same time, "You will never know"?' I think that all the dead of the Gulag and all the other places of torture in our political century are present when one speaks of Auschwitz. [Blanchot's words appear in his article 'Our Clandestine Companion', translated by David Allison, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard Cohen, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986, p. 50: translator's addition.]

7 Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections after Auschwitz*, New York, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 69–70. This work has been translated into French by M. Delmotte and B. Dupuy (Lagrasse, Veridier, 1980.): translator's note.

8 We said above that theodicy in the broad sense of the term is justified by a certain reading of the Bible. It is evident that another reading of it is possible, and that in a certain sense nothing of the spiritual experience of human history is foreign to the Scriptures. We are thinking here in particular of the book of Job which attests at once to Job's faithfulness to God (2:10) and to ethics (27:5 and 6), despite his sufferings without reason, and his opposition to the theodicy of his friends. He refuses theodicy right to the end and, in the last chapters of the text (42:7), is preferred to those who, hurrying to the safety of Heaven, would make God innocent before the suffering of the just. It is a little like the reading Kant makes of this book in his quite extraordinary short treatise of 1791, *Uber das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee* ['On the Failure of all the Philosophical Attempts at a Theodicy'], where he demonstrates the theoretical weakness of the arguments in favour of theodicy. Here is the conclusion of his way of interpreting what 'this ancient book expresses allegorically': 'In this state of mind Job has proven that he did not found his morality on faith, but his faith on morality; in which case faith, however weak it may be, is nonetheless one of a pure and authentic kind, a kind which does not found a religion of solicited favours, but a well conducted life (*'welche eine Religion nicht der Gunstbewerbung, sondern des guten Lebenswandels grundet'*).