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Non-Useless Suffering

Je trpljenje res nekoristno?

Abstract: What does it mean to suffer? How are we to understand the sufferings we undergo? Etymologically, to suffer signifies to undergo and endure. Is there a sense, a purpose to our sufferings or does the very passivity, which they etymologically imply, robs them of all inherent meaning? In this paper, I shall argue against this Levinasian interpretation. My claim will be that suffering, exhibits a meaning beyond meaning, one embodied in the unique singularity of our flesh. This uniqueness is, in fact, an interruption. It signifies the suspension of all systems of exchange, all attempts to render good for good and evil for evil. It is in terms of such suspension that suffering – particularly as found in selfless sacrifice – finds its »use«. This »use« involves the possibility of forgiveness.

Key words: suffering, passivity, Levinas, meaning, flesh, sacrifice, forgiveness

Povzetek: Kakšen pomen ima trpljenje? Kako naj razumemo trpljenje, ki ga prestajamo? Etimološko beseda trpljenje pomeni prestajanje in prenašanje. Ima trpljenje smisel in smoter ali pa je že trpnost (pasivnost), ki jo trpljenje etimološko vključuje, nekaj kar ga oropa vsakega inherentnega pomena? V tem članku bom ugovarjal tovrstni Levinasovi interpretaciji. Zagovarjam tezo, da trpljenje nosi pomen onkraj pomena – namreč tisti pomen, ki je utelešen v edinstveni singularnosti našega telesa. Ta edinstvenost dejansko predstavlja neko prekinitev. Označuje suspenz vseh menjalnih sistemov, vseh poskusov vračati dobro za dobro in zlo za zlo. V okvirih takšnega suspenza trpljenje, še zlasti v nesebičnem žrtvovanju, dobi »koristnost«. Takšna »koristnost« prinaša možnost odpuščanja.

Ključne besede: trpljenje, pasivnost, Levinas, pomen, telo, žrtev, odpuščanje

What does it mean to suffer? How are we to understand the sufferings we undergo? Is there a sense, a purpose to them or is the very passivity implied in the word to »suffer«, which etymologically signifies to »undergo« and »endure«, something that robs suffering of all inherent meaning? Levinas, in his article, »Useless Suffering«, argues that »intrinsically«, suffering »is useless: ›for nothing«.« It exhibits »a depth of meaninglessness« that repeals any sense that we could attach

to it (Levinas 1998, 93). He remarks, further, that while »suffering is /.../ a datum in consciousness«, it is, nonetheless, »unassumable«. We cannot synthesize such data into a one-in-many – i.e., a common sense that would apply to them. Suffering is not simply »a symptom of the rejection« of »the synthesis of the Kantian ›I think‹«, it is »this rejection itself«. As such, it is »[t]he denial, the refusal of meaning, thrusting itself forward as a sensible quality« (91). What we experience in suffering is a pure »passivity«, one that »is not the other side of any activity«. Thus, normally, the receptivity (or passivity) of our senses »is already active reception«. The data that we receive are synthesized and are part of the active perceptual process (92). Here, however, what we experience is »the concreteness of the not /.../ a negativity extending as far as to the realm of un-meaning« (92). It is the »un-meaning«, »absurdity« of suffering that makes it intrinsically useless. (93).¹ In this paper, I shall argue against this interpretation. My claim will be that suffering, in its suspension of synthesis, exhibits a meaning beyond meaning, one embodied in the unique singularity of our flesh. This uniqueness is, in fact, an interruption. It signifies the suspension of all systems of exchange, all attempts to render good for good and evil for evil. It is in terms of such suspension that suffering – particularly as found in selfless sacrifice – finds its »use«.

1. Suffering and Theodicy

Historically, the question of suffering is tied to theodicy. In the monotheistic religions, which see God not only as the creator, but also as the ruler of the world, the question becomes that of his tolerance of evil. Hume, in his *Dialogues*, put this in terms of a series of alternatives: »Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?« (Hume 1966, 66) Something, here, has to give. To explain evil, we seem to have to abandon God's power or his goodness or his intelligibility. The last alternative is included since, as Hans Jonas writes, »Only a completely unintelligible God can be said to be absolutely good and absolutely powerful, yet tolerate the world as it is« – the world that is marked by the frequency of suffering (Jonas 1996, 139).

The classic answer to this impasse is to understand suffering in terms of an economy or a system of exchange. Individuals within society live by exchanging goods and services. Legal systems defend the social order by imposing fines and other penalties on those who violate its rules. Here, the exchange is one of penalties for misdeeds. Given the pervasiveness of the economy in our lives, it seems natural to apply this to our relation to God. This thought, in fact, is not limited to the monotheistic creeds. Plato brings it up in a dialogue where Socrates asks a priest about the nature of piety. The priest describes it as a »care of the gods« (Euthyphro 12e). Prayer and sacrifice is what we offer to the gods; in return they

¹ The stress, here, is on its being intrinsically useless. Suffering does have for Levinas a non-intrinsic use in the ethical response it calls forth from others (Levinas 1998, 94).

provide us with their benefits. As Socrates sums up this position, »piety would then be a sort of trading skill between gods and men« – one involving a mutual exchange of benefits (14e). To explain suffering in such a context, one need only extend this exchange to include penalties. God not only returns good for good, but also evil for evil.

As Levinas remarks, such a view »is as old as a certain reading of the Bible. It dominated the consciousness of believers who explained their misfortunes by reference to Sin, or at least to their sins« (1998, 96). This, for example, is the view of Job's »comforters«. Job, they claim, »cheated orphaned children of their rights«. He was »led astray by riches or corrupted by fat bribes« (Jb 36,17-18).² This is why he suffers. God, in fact, saves the wretched »by their very wretchedness, and uses distress to open their eyes« (36,15). Job, however, insists on his innocence. God »knows that I am innocent; if he sifts me«, he asserts, »I will shine like gold« (23,10).³ Since we do see the innocent suffer and the wicked flourish, prosperity and power cannot, he argues, be the sign of goodness (12,6; 21,7-13; 34,1-12). Neither can suffering be a penalty for evil doing. At the end of The Book of Job, God affirms that Job, unlike the comforters, has spoken »truthfully about me« (42,7). But if this is so, what sense can be made of innocent suffering? How can we understand it in terms of an economy?

One way to do so is to acknowledge that debts need not be paid by those who incurred them. A friend can pay off a friend's debt; a father can pay for his son's traffic fine. If we apply this to our commerce with God, we can see suffering as a recompense, a »payment«, by the innocent for the guilty. This seems to be the conception behind Isaiah's depiction of the »suffering servant«, who was »reckoned among transgressors« because of what he endured (Is 53,12). In fact, however, »he was pierced through for our transgressions, tortured for our iniquities«. It is, according to Isaiah, »by his scourging we are healed« (53,5). He pays our debt. In this exchange, »himself bearing the penalty of their guilt«, the servant »bore the sins of many« (53,12-13). Paul, in his Epistles, imports this view to describe the Passion. According to Paul, »God designed [Christ] to be the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death« (Rom 4,25). Insofar as »Christ died for our sins« (1 Cor 15,3), he pays the penalty that God imposed on us. The sentiment here is the same as that of the prophets who saw the misfortunes of Israel as punishments for its sins. What Paul does is combine this view with Isaiah's conception of the suffering servant. Christ, like the servant, pays the debt. He squares our accounts with God, our creditor.

To an impartial observer, this economic view of suffering suffers from two overriding difficulties. The first is that it reifies the relation between God and mankind, making it one of debt and credit.⁴ In this exchange, suffering takes on the rule of

² These translations from Job are taken from The Jerusalem Bible, while all the other Bible citations, if not stated otherwise, come from The New English Bible.

³ The Book of Job 1992, 59. The New English Bible translates this: »when he tests me, I prove to be gold«.

⁴ See, for example, Num 28,22.

a currency. Money is indifferent to those who employ it: I can pay for my meal, but you can also pay for it. It makes no difference so long as the bill is paid. Suffering, however, is the opposite of this indifference. It is always personal. At the extreme, it nails one to one's flesh, the very flesh that makes a person himself and not someone else. It is as little transferable as one's organic body. Given this, it is inherently incapable of serving as a neutral currency. The second difficulty is that it makes God, the Father, a moral monster. No moral being would treat his son that way. If I am angry at someone for something that he has done, how would it make sense to take my anger out on my son?

2. Flesh

For Levinas and Jonas, the events of the Holocaust spell the end of this economic view of suffering. In Levinas' words, »It renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead« (Levinas 1998, 98; see also Jonas 1996, 133). No sins could justify the atrocities the Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis. The problem, in fact, is not the imbalance. It is the very attempt to understand suffering in terms of an economy. For Derrida, in fact, the whole economic interpretation of God's relation to believers witnesses »the irreducible experience of belief, between credit and faith, the *believing* suspended between the credit [*créance*] of the creditor ([*créancier*] Gläubiger) and the credence ([*croyance*] Glauben) of the believer [*croyant*].« He asks, »How can one *believe* this history of credence or credit?« (Derrida 1995, 115)⁵ If this account is unbelievable, what is the alternative? Is there sense to expiatory suffering that avoids the conception of an exchange? Is there a way to understand Christ as exemplifying the »suffering servant« without turning his Father into a moral monster?

As Levinas correctly observes, suffering is characterized by passivity, exposure, and openness. It exhibits flesh before the syntheses of the ego, before, in fact, any expression of the self's autonomy. How can we understand the flesh that is thus regarded? One answer comes from the fact that flesh is at the basis of one's being oneself rather than another. It expresses what cannot be transferred to the Other. Such non-transferability shows itself in our organic functioning. Heidegger remarked that each of us must die our own death.⁶ No one can do this for another. Death, of course, is the cessation of the functioning of our flesh. Such functioning is inherently non-substitutable. Thus, no one can eat for you, sleep for you, breathe for you, or perform for you any of your bodily functions. Now, as non-transferable, the functioning that makes us unique is *inherently incapable of participating in an economy*. So is the suffering of the flesh that functions. This, as I indicated, is why suffering cannot act as a currency.

⁵ For him, it is, in fact, part of »a history of cruelty and sacrifice« (Derrida 1995, 112).

⁶ »Keiner kann dem Anderen sein Sterben abnehmen.« (Heidegger 1986, 240)

The reason why we hardly ever grasp this non-transferability is that the flesh that is uniquely our own escapes all conceptualization. As unique, its ontological status is not that of being one among many possible instances, each of which is essentially substitutable for another – like, for example, apples in the store. Having many instances of this fruit, we can draw from them a number of common features and express them with common meanings. The flesh that incarnates us, however, is exhibited only in one example. It exists, not as one among many, i.e., as a countable singular, but rather as uniquely one. So regarded, it cannot be defined in Aristotle's sense. We cannot understand it in terms of species and genus. We can only directly sense it.⁷ It is, in fact, inexpressible in the common meanings of our language, which, by definition, apply to more than one object. What, then, is the flesh that suffering exposes, the flesh that incarnates each of us? To borrow a term from Nietzsche, we confront here *universalia ante rem* (universals before the thing). Concepts are *universalia post rem* (universals after the thing); they are universals that we draw *after* we regard similar individuals. The flesh that each of us directly encounters is, however, *before* such individuals.⁸

3. Flesh and Forgiveness

Does this mean that we must embrace Levinas' position that suffering is intrinsically useless? Does suffering's reduction of a person to his flesh, his flesh taken as *before* the syntheses of the ego, leave us with the absurdity, the lack of sense of suffering? Is suffering, so regarded »useless – ›for nothing‹«? If we mean by »for nothing« its »economic« value, the answer is certainly affirmative. As we have seen, the senselessness of flesh is rooted in its uniqueness. It is a function of its non-substitutability, its inability to enter into any system of exchange. In fact, flesh *qua* flesh is the interruption of all systems of exchange – be they the return of goods for goods or the rendering of suffering for misdeeds.⁹

This inability to participate in an economy does not, however, imply that suffering is »useless«. *Its use is, in fact, in its interruption of the economy.* This can be put in terms of the Passion of Christ. His suffering and death on the Cross is senseless when regarded in terms of the economy. This is not simply because it has no »use« within it. It is because it exists as a denial of this economy. In fact, to claim to see God on the Cross – God in the form of suffering flesh – is to claim to regard him as outside of this economy. It is to assert that he is present as the in-

⁷ »But when we come to the concrete thing, e.g. /.../ one of the individual circles /.../ of these there is no definition, but they are known by the aid of intuitive thinking or of perception; and when they pass out of this complete realization [of being perceived] it is not clear whether they exist or not.« (*Metaphysics* 1036a; 1941, 799)

⁸ See Nietzsche 1967, 102–3. For Nietzsche, such *universalia ante rem* are expressed »by music as the immediate language of the will« (103). For us, what they point to is the flesh that makes every living being unique.

⁹ Shakespeare indicates this inability of flesh to figure in legal exchanges through the remarks of Portia to Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*. See Act IV, scene 1, lines 290–31.

terruption of this economy – the interruption of the very system of exchange by which Paul attempts to interpret Christ's sacrifice. The concrete expression of such an interruption is the forgiveness that Christ expresses. Regarding his crucifiers, he says, »Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing« (Lk 23,34). Forgiveness is an abandonment of the economy that exchanges evil for evil. It is outside of the system of credit and creditor that is associated with belief. A similar abandonment occurs at the end of Job, when God, having affirmed Job's words, has Job pray that his friends be forgiven for not speaking truthfully about God (Jb 42,7-9). Their error was to think of God in terms of the economy – the very economy that Job denied.

Where do we get the basis for such forgiveness? How is it possible for humans, who are enmeshed in and live from a system of exchanges with one another, to transcend the economy? An answer can be found in Abraham's pleading for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Again and again, he intercedes for them. He gets God to »pardon the place« if there are, first, »fifty good men in the city«, then, »forty-five«, then, »forty«, then, »thirty«, then, »twenty«, and, finally, if »ten can be found there« (Gn 18,23-33). What is striking in this pleading is Abraham's remark, »May I presume to speak to the Lord, dust and ashes that I am« (18,27-28). How is this a basis for his pleading for the city's pardon? According to Genesis, the city's sins merited its destruction. The economy of misdeed and penalty was clear. Such an economy, however, is interrupted by flesh – the very flesh that Abraham references in speaking of himself as »dust and ashes«.

This indicates that the basis for forgiveness is our flesh – the very flesh that God assumes in the Incarnation. Anselm of Canterbury, in his book, *Why God Became Man*, writes that »it is not right to cancel sin without compensation or punishment« (Bk I, ch. 12). God, having assumed flesh, takes this on for us. His suffering is sufficient to compensate for our sins.¹⁰ The alternate view, which I am suggesting, is that God becomes man in order to interrupt this economy. His purpose is to present ourselves to ourselves apart from it.

4. Creation and Forgiveness

This presentation of ourselves as distinct from the world's economy is implicit in the creation story of Genesis. In this account, God creates the world not from some pre-existing matter, but rather *ab novo*. If we accept this, then neither God nor his action are bound by the world – since both are prior to it. Insofar Genesis asserts three times that we are created in the image of God, this, in some measure, also holds for us (Gn 1,26-27). The question this raises has long vexed theology. How are we to understand the transcendence implicit our being created in »the image and likeness« of God? Does it imply that we, like God, are somehow

¹⁰ This, for Anselm, does not mean that he suffers enough but only that he does enough to pay our debt. The alternative would have Christ going through unimaginable horrors during his passion.

immaterial – that we display an immunity to being determined by the world? The facts of mortality – and, more generally, of embodiment – argue against this. We share with other living creatures the pleasures and vicissitudes of flesh. Like them, we are enmeshed in the economy of the world. The very notion of metabolism (in German, *Stoffwechsel* – or exchange of material) implies such an economy. We breathe and exchange carbon dioxide for oxygen. Like the other animals, we live from the world, both conditioning and being conditioned by it. What, then, is our claim to be the image of God? In what sense do we share God's priority to the world and its economy?

An answer can be found in returning to the story of Job. At the beginning of this book, God makes a wager with Satan (the »adversary« or »accusing« angel). God praises Job as »a man of blameless and upright life« (Jb 1,8). Satan, in reply, asserts that Job's goodness is motivated by the benefits he receives in turn. He says, »Has not Job good reason to be God-fearing? Have you not hedged him round on every side with your protection, him and his family and all his possessions. Whatever he does you have blessed, and his herds have increased beyond measure.« If, however, God withdraws such benefits, »then he will curse you to your face« (1,9-11). The wager, then, is that Job's goodness is simply a function of the economy. His goodness is dependent on the benefits he receives. Insofar as his relation to God is a relation to such benefits, it is simply transactional. God accepts this wager and tells Satan, »All that he has is in your hands« (1,12). Satan, accordingly, destroys Job's wealth and family, leaving only his wife alive. Job, however, does not curse God. Rather, he proclaims, »The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the Name of the Lord« (1,21). Satan next induces God to let him ruin Job's health. He says to God, »But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and see if he will not curse you to your face« (2,5). Still, however, Job retains his integrity. He does not curse God, he does not return evil for evil. Reduced to his suffering flesh, he is placed outside of the economy. The flesh that incarnates him can offer nothing to the economy. It is »useless – for nothing.« Job, however, claims, »if He sifts me, I will shine«. What shines through is the very basis for his forgiveness. The interruption of the economy, exhibited by his flesh, is also a manifestation of his transcendence as God's image.

Such transcendence does not deny, but rather is based upon the embodiment that enmeshes us in the world. The economy that reaches to the physicality of our flesh – our need for food, clothing and shelter – exceeds the sense that structures the economy's exchange. It exhibits that which transcends it. This transcendence appears in Mathew's account of those who will be admitted into Christ's kingdom when he comes in his »glory«. They are those who fed him when he was hungry, who gave him drink when he was thirsty, who clothed him when he was naked, who made him welcome when he was a stranger and visited him when he was in prison. When asked by the elect, »When did we do this?« Christ replies that it was when they did it »to one of the very least« – that is, to the hungry, the naked, the rejected of society (Mt 25,33-40, in my translation). The objects of their attentions were precisely those who had nothing to offer the exchange eco-

nomy – those who were »useless – for nothing«. Christ's presence as such is his presence as prior to the world. He exhibits his identity with God the creator in his giving himself as not being able to be given in terms of this economy – i.e., in identifying himself with the powerless, the helpless and the vulnerable.

If we accept this, then the Incarnation appears as a *kenosis*, an emptying out. In Paul's words, God, in incarnating himself, »made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave« (Phil 2,7). The completion of this self-emptying is Christ's appearance on the Cross. At the end of his earthly life, he appears as the wretched creature who cries out, »My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?« (Mt 27,46). In Christ's very nakedness and exposure, in his having absolutely nothing to offer the earthly economy, Christians are supposed to see God.¹¹ What they view, in fact, is his reduction to suffering flesh. This is the flesh that is uniquely singular – the flesh that is not one-among-many, but uniquely one. Christ here exhibits the singularity that all monotheistic religions claim for God. This is the singularity that we all share as God's likeness. It is the singularity that, in its interruption of every economy, opens the way for forgiveness.

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¹¹ To take the assertion of desertion literally, they are supposed to see God in Christ's being abandoned by God. The vision, in other words, is that of God's self-abandonment; it is one of his complete self-emptying or *kenosis*.