

THE LAST OBSTACLE TO BEING

Translation by Greta Bianchi / Gordon Leonard Symons

«The value of a man is revealed in the time in which life is confronted with death. [...] Human life is structured in such a way that only by looking death in the face can we understand our authentic strength and the degree of our attachment to life. [...] A life to which it is enough to find itself face to face with death to be scratched and broken, perhaps it is nothing but a fragile glass“.

Yukio Mishima

“The more I think about it, the more I believe that life exists simply to be lived,” wrote J. W. Goethe once. The aim of this contribution is to deepen one of the topics mentioned in my report “*La maestria e l’arte di vivere*” (“The mastery and the art of living”) during the last congress of psycho-synthesis in Ancona “Roberto Assagioli and the Human Potential”.¹ It is one of the most complex, decisive and elusive questions of the experience of life: what is it that holds us back from being ourselves?

“Nobody is himself!”

As human beings, we are all children of the Total Being. And as a participation of the Being, every man is endowed with an innate *willingness to be*.² The thing we want the most, deep in our hearts, is a desire for identity: the experience of fully being. Our different desires and ambitions find their *raison d’être* or ultimate root in a desire for self-identity. However, in the factuality of existence - that is, in the bare and raw existence of every day - we experience being less than what we know we can be. Every day we experience a certain drop or decrease in our self-expression (the possibility of having the experience of “oneself” in a degree that goes from acceptable to full).

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger expressed this condition of human alienation in a lapidary way:

“Everyone is the other, nobody is himself!”³

From a psychosynthetic point of view, how do we interpret this statement? During a conversation with Alberto Alberti, to answer my question about what keeps us from being ourselves, he replied that we are already ourselves and that if we do not end up living the experience, it is because we are actually doing an effort to be different from what we are.⁴ In those moments, therefore, we “abdicate” our authentic presence. In religious psychology, the term abdication indicates the mechanism by which the human being places before himself somebody or something else, which becomes a ‘filter’ to his own direct expression in the world.

A removed benefit

However, the human being does not make efforts without a reason. The psychology of the deep and the analysis of character have taught us that very often everything that one does not want to have in one’s life, but that persists, is set up by the subject himself in order to obtain a “benefit” - most of the time removed (not distinguished) by conscience.⁵ Therefore, even behind the diminishing experience of being oneself, there are benefits that have been removed. Some examples are: avoiding feeling or discovering to be inadequate, diminishing any judgment on our identity, avoiding feeling bad or guilty in doing something, avoiding the responsibilities and costs always involved in the full expression of the self, etc.

These various benefits have already been thoroughly examined in the psychological literature. However, without excluding what has already been said, the introduction - as in an experiment - of a new interpretation of the ‘first origin’ of them could perhaps reveal new possibilities of access to being oneself. Since setting up an unfavorable situation in order to obtain a secondary benefit is in fact a universal mode of functioning of the human being, we could rather interpret these benefits as different ‘forms’, ‘modalities’ ‘or’ variations’ of a single basic substance. Moreover, if a man wants so much to be himself, the final benefit that leads him to not be so must necessarily be something as big as indistinct - to be almost inadmissible. The question thus becomes: which meta-benefit can then turn out to be greater than being ourselves, so big that we prefer to put something - that we are not - in front of us? And where do we look to find this out?

Looking to death to seize life

“There are no wonderful surfaces without a terrible depth,” wrote F. W. Nietzsche. This intuition paves the way, suggesting that we begin to examine the relationship or polarity of being-null. The same technique of Assagioli’s opposites is based on the implicit principle that a truth can be distinguished, seen or perceived through a reflection and an awareness of the opposite

polarity of an investigated phenomenon. In this specific case, on the other side of the pole of being there is the pole of nothingness. As I have already stated elsewhere, the radical indication of what prevents us from being can only be found in non-being.⁶

If this is the case, the indistinct benefit behind being less than what we are would have to do with avoiding a relative responsibility for not being. What does it mean? In our hearts, somehow we know that what we most desire - to be, or rather, to be fully self-conscious - also includes the full awareness of death and its inevitability. Human self-awareness is not just freedom and the possibility of relating to oneself and to life, but is also always awareness of one's own death. The anthropologist Ernest Becker wrote in this regard: "To live fully is to live with the awareness of the roar of terror that underlies everything". And the great philosopher Hegel taught us that self-awareness of man is always and in every instant implicit self-awareness of death: so much that not even for a moment can man really be without it. And yet, in the facticity of existence we all experience daily the 'removal' of this reality from our conscience, without seeing that precisely this removal gives substance to most of our experiences (desires, phobias, imaginations, future planned, projects, inauthenticity, etc.).⁷

"Will it be a horrible chasm?"

But what is and what does this death of which the human being is self-conscious look like? In the man this death takes shape in a particular way: it includes and transcends the simple physical fear of death which is innate in the forms of life with a simple conscience. In the human being, the innate driver of biological death is instead exponentially enhanced by the language dimension (memory, imagination, social context, education, etc.). The language is, in fact, the fabric of which the 'context' or 'horizon' is made, in which the world and things appear (emerge) for the man. And it is only and solely in the horizon of language that the presence of nothingness exists. Victor Hugo, in *The Last Day of a Man Sentenced to Death*, gives voice to the terror of nothingness in the way the man imagines it in the depths of his being; this is the death we are talking about:

"I have the impression that, as soon as my eyes close [...] it will perhaps be a horrendous, deep abyss, whose walls will be plastered with darkness, or where I will fall non-stop, seeing shapes moving in the shadows. [...] At times there will be pools and streams of an unknown and tepid liquid; everything will be black. When my eyes [...] will face upwards, they will see only a sky of shadows [...] and in the distance, in the background, large arcs of smoke blacker than darkness. [...] And this will be for all eternity »."⁸

Man is not then terrorized by death as such, but by death as an archetype of nothingness: the non-existence, the ending in nothingness and - above all - being for-

gotten. Again Ernest Becker observed: "What man really fears is not so much the extinction, but the extinction with insignificance".⁹ We are therefore talking about a social phenomenon, rather than a merely individual one. It is through the eyes of the other that we exist - namely, that we draw the 'right to exist' - and in the conscience of the other we build our 'strategies of immortality': the attempt to be remembered through the family, the job, a piece of art, etc.

The common man manages the anguish of nothingness by temporarily restraining it with imaginary defenses. He constantly seeks social security, selling his freedom of being at the price of an admiration gaze (to exist in the consciousness) of the other. In conclusion: the ultimate benefit of being less "ourselves" is that, in doing so, we will confuse at the same time the imminent presence of finiteness, death and nothingness from our current consciousness. In other words, the latest of the inauthenticity, present in the moments when we do not feel ourselves, is that in those moments we are not really committed to "being king", but rather we are looking for a way to "survive".

Immortality strategies

This new interpretation allows us to better understand the nature of the abdication. Why do we put the other before ourselves and our self-expression? I become another when I do not include mortality in my consciousness; therefore, I become another as a strategy of immortality. To be that other, in a certain sense, means not to die: "In the same way he entered me, I enter into you - and I continue to exist".

This is the point to examine in order to see the source that nourishes those "efforts" of not being ourselves that Alberti mentioned: in order to obtain this final benefit, we are forced to trade the presence, the being, the authenticity. In other words, in ordinary existence, immortality (not being fully oneself, but existing in someone else's consciousness/memory) is a "more valuable coin" of the real presence (being oneself, but knowing to be dying).

The unconscious act of diminishing the experience of being is then the attempt to build a strategy of im-

mortality: the illusion of saving oneself from disappearance with insignificance, from death as a window to nothingness and from non-existence in an absolute sense. It therefore remains true that we want to be ourselves, but it is equally true that even the simplest form of life wants to exist and that it would do anything, even not to be, to exist.

An alternative conception of neurosis

So far we have examined the benefit behind not being ourselves, but this “way of functioning” of man has an equally great cost: the less we are ourselves, the more the neurosis grows. This leads us to resume and contextualize an essential intuition: an ontological distinction (different from psychological) of “neurosis”. While in classical psychoanalysis neurosis is conceived as a result of the relationship between a castrating super-ego and the pressures of the id, from which a certain incapability to face reality derives, Paul Tillich, professor of theology in Harvard, conceived the neurosis - understood from Maslow on as the process of ‘human decline’ - in this way:

«The neurosis is the way of avoiding the Non-Being [the Nothingness] by avoiding Being “.¹⁰

The way out of the neurosis in the ontological sense is then to affirm the Being incorporating the Non-Being. Realizing this corresponds to the transition from Being to Being there, where that “there” indicates the awareness of the dimension of limits, finiteness and death typical of the full presence of the human being.

Be responsible for your own death

“All great and beautiful work has come of first gazing without shrinking into the darkness”, wrote a famous English poet. We are not asked to eliminate the darkness - death - but to look into it without backing away. It is not its existence in itself, but our incessant attempt to remove it, to resist it, which makes it become decisive and substantial in all human acts. “What you resist, persists” said Carl G. Jung. In the measure in which we resist and reject that “there”, that mortal limit, paradoxically, we are not free to be there.

In the interrelation of the phenomena of human conscience, every phenomenon is a “function” of another of a higher order: the full joy of living is a function of involvement and participation in life; satisfaction is a function of total commitment to something; happiness is a function of the acceptance of what is; faith is a function of the absolute will to be despite nothingness. Finally, self-expression is a function of responsibility: any decrease or decline in expression is in fact a call to the responsibility of bringing to ourselves what we want to express.

Since self-expression represents its dynamic aspect (an expression means in fact investing one’s identity in history), even being oneself is a function of responsibility. Thus, if to be ourselves we have to associate a single, ultimate responsibility, this could be nothing other than responsibility for one’s own non-being. This means that in all those moments and circumstances in which we experience a decrease in presence, we are abdicating the responsibility of our own mortality: we have ‘moved’ it and made it a matter that concerns someone else, which must be taken care by others or that concerns an unknown ‘tomorrow’. The “human decline” we experience is therefore a sign or a call to be responsible for our own death - not as a concern for the future, but as an element of the horizon in which my present happens (emerges) to me.

The anticipation of death as a technology for choosing life

However, death is not only what limits us most from being ourselves; it is also the removed polarity that, if recovered in awareness, has the power to intensify life and existence to the fullest. The inclusion of the “negative pole” of self-awareness is an opportunity for strengthening the “positive pole” of existence. We will never be able to be fully there without committing ourselves simultaneously to this: it is only by assuming responsibility for our death that we will be able to take total responsibility for our lives. The anticipation of one’s own mortality is therefore the most powerful ‘transformation technology’ in order to have access to being ourselves: by it, we cut off most of our inauthenticity.

We are always afraid of fully accepting nothingness, but when we accept it, it becomes the penultimate word. The last is being there: to be despite nothingness. This does not mean winning death or developing a more refined strategy of immortality; it stands for the commitment to be there, until the moment I am not there anymore. However, a condition is required: we need to find the way to transfer death (or better: the way in which it happens to us) from the context of injustice to the context of “as if” we had chosen it. Moreover, the moment the human consciousness becomes self-aware of its own existential end, from the core of its most intimate dimension a huge “compensation will” of transpersonal nature manifests itself.¹¹ When the consciousness finds itself to anticipate an end with no way out, the intelligent energy of life (Self) reacts through the only possible answer: the intensification of the will to be there, as André Gide depicts in this passage of his story:

«[...] I took a few tottering steps. I was horribly upset. I was shaking. I was frightened; I was angry. For up till then I had thought that, step by step, recovery would come and that I had nothing to do but to wait for it. This brutal incident had thrown me back. Strange thing: the first hemorrhage had not affected me; I remembered it had left me almost calm. Where did my fear come from, my horror now? Alas! I had begun to love life. I returned to my steps, bent down, found the clot, took a straw and, raising the lump, put it in my handkerchief. I looked at him. It was ugly, almost black in colour, a slimy and horrible thing. I thought of the Bachir’s beautiful, brilliant blood. And suddenly I was seized with a desire, a craving, something more furious, more imperious than all I had felt before: to live! I want to live. I want to live. I clenched my teeth, my fists, I concentrated my whole being, hopelessly, with desolation in this endeavor towards life ».¹²

References:

- 1) Ventola, Mauro, “La maestria del vivere. La vita come opera d’arte”, National Congress “Roberto Assagioli e il Potenziale Umano”, Portonovo – Ancona, Hotel Seebay, 27-28 april 2019.
- 2) Onfray, Michel, *Nietzsche e la costruzione del Superuomo*, Adriano Salani Editore, Milano 2010.
- 3) Heidegger, Martin, *Essere e Tempo*, Longanesi, Milano 2010.
- 4) To the question on how to be oneself, Alberti replied: «By recognizing that you already are: stop thinking that you are not. Avoid or stop making the effort to be different from who you are, and you will find yourself – like some kind of magic – within, next to yourself ».
(Ventola, Mauro, *Conversazioni per il Futuro – Vol. 1, L’UOMO* Edizioni, Firenze 2018)
- 5) Reich, Wilhelm, *Analisi del carattere*, SugarCo, Milano 1994.
- 6) Ventola, Mauro, *Il coraggio di volere*, Istituto di Psicopsintesi, Firenze 2019.
- 7) Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1973.
- 8) Hugo, Victor, *L’ultimo giorno di un condannato a morte*, Newton Compton, Roma 1993.
- 9) Becker, Ernest, *Escape from Evil*, Free Press, New York 1975.
- 10) Tillich, Paul, *Il coraggio di esistere*, Astrolabio, Roma 1968.
- 11) The principle of compensation is traditionally interpreted in the light of (oriented to) the lower unconscious (Adler, Horney, etc.). However, in my opinion, there is a different interpretation: addressing it to the higher unconscious, it turns out to be the way in which the intelligence of life responds to the self-perception of its own existential finiteness, through the intensification of the willingness to live.
- 12) Gide, André, *L’immoralista – La porta stretta*, Garzanti, Milano 2008.