Some Basic Questions

**What is ‘depression’?**

The words ‘depress’ or ‘be depressed’ are verbs, like ‘to press’ or ‘be pressed’, ‘oppress’ or ‘be oppressed’. Psychiatrists speak of ‘depression’ as a noun — a thing — and claim to know what that thing is i.e. a chemical imbalance in the brain. Patients on the other hand, complain of ‘being’ or ‘feeling’ depressed. Someone facing the loss of a loved one, forced to work and support a family on less than a living wage, like someone who has been told they have a terminal illness, or been the victim of a mugging or bombing may also be ‘depressed’.

Is their ‘depression’ a thing — a clinical condition caused by a chemical imbalance in their brain? Or is it an event or situation that weighs and presses on them to the point of oppressing them? Not everyone who feels depressed can point to such an event or situation. But then the event or situation is not the reason why they feel depressed but rather the oppressive questions that it burdens them with. Why? Why now? Why me?

We live in a world in which every second and minute of the day, people all over the world have to endure terrible events and life conditions. You can be sure that plenty of anti-depressants are prescribed in Palestine. The only difference is that *there* the prescribing physicians know full well that their patients are depressed for *good reasons* and they *have a right to be depressed*. They know that the ‘cause’ of their depression is not a chemical imbalance in the brain but an oppressive problem — one that presses down on them heavily and therefore ‘depresses’ them. This is not just true for Palestine, but for cases of so-called ‘depression’ in all countries of the world.

None of us find it comfortable to feel the oppressive weight of unpalatable truths or of a problem that presses down on and depresses us. But as Martin Heidegger pointed out, what oppresses the human being even *more* than the oppressive weight of any particular personal or political situation is precisely the *absence* of any felt oppressiveness – a refusal to feel weighed down or to let things ‘get us down’. What this refusal leaves us with is that profoundly oppressive emptiness – felt for no *apparent* reason – which psychiatrists then designate and treat as ‘clinical depression’.

But such ‘depression’ too, is no clinical condition but an existential one. For if, instead of *not* feeling the weight of an oppression, we would let it weigh down on and ‘de-press’ us — then it would both press us ever *deeper down into ourselves* and *help us* feel *our own deeper selves*. It would also help us to not only feel but *see* more clearly *what it is* that oppresses us.

What psychiatrists designate as a clinical condition — a *state of depression —* arises when we do *not* let ourselves follow this *de-pressive* *process* — refusing to *be depressed* in this way. Today ‘depression’ is regarded as a ‘world health problem’ of epidemic proportions — an absurdity given the oppressive weight of world problems. If there is any ‘cause’ for the depression ‘epidemic’, it is the very refusal to see and feel the de-pressing weight of these problems. For were we to do so, they would confront us with the full weight of all those deeper *questions* which humanity — both politicians and ordinary people – fear to confront. Could we *withstand* a confrontation with the weight of those questions? We could only do so by finding a deeper, firmer *ground* within ourselves.

How to find this ground? Precisely by actively letting things ‘get us down’– letting them *de-press* us to the point where we reach the deeper inner ground of our being. *De-pression* in this sense is *a cure*, helping us find the firmer ground necessary to withstand and confront the deeper *questions* we all face in the world. The real *illness* is to treat these basic questions simply as a personal health *problem* – ‘depression’ – and to seek their ‘solution’ through psychiatric medication.

**What’s my problem and how can it be solved?**

Everybody has personal problems, so what are yours? The biggest problem of all is that seeking solutions to troubling personal or world problems, however complex, can be a way of avoiding the simplest, most basic *life questions.*

Biological medicine and psychiatry are examples of how a vast and complex and commercially profitable edifice of scientific and of technological *solutions* can be applied to solving problems – in this case the ‘problem’ of mental and physical illness — without ever asking the simplest and most basic questions. What is ‘health’? What is ‘illness’?

The difference between a personal problem and a basic life question is that basic questions are not reducible to personal problems – for they are questions felt and lived by all human beings in one way of other, questions of what it means to be human and to live and relate in a humane way.

So next time you feel yourself beset, however intensely, by what you think of as a personal problem – a problem with you – do not ask yourself ‘What’s my problem’, and do not let others draw you into thinking of it as ‘your’ problem. Instead of asking yourself ‘What’s *my* problem here?’ — or 'his' or 'her' problem, 'our' or 'their' problem, or the world’s problem — ask yourself *‘What’s the real question here?’*. The question *may* be a problem with a simple practical solution. On the other hand, it may be a basic question of the sort that every other human being faces in one way or another.

When you see and feel the problem in this way you have understood your ‘personal’ problem in a quite different way. But remember that there are no ultimate *solutions* to basic life questions. Solutions suppress questions. Answers always raise further questions. What is the meaning of life? *Questions* are what give meaning to life. Living without questioning is death. The search for ultimate ‘final solutions’ to life questions always end up by *killing* life.

**How can I overcome my mental, emotional or physical suffering?**

By not treating it as a *problem to be solved* through one or the other medication or method of treatment. By treating it instead as your personal experience and expression of a meaningful life question. A question that is not yours alone but experienced and expressed in different ways by every human being on the planet. A question without which there would be less *meaning* to your life and to that of every other human being on the planet.

To suffer can mean to feel the true weight and depth of a question — or it can mean to superficialise this question – treating it as a problem to be lightly ‘solved’. All methods and medications are an attempt to overcome suffering by *lightening the question* rather than accepting its weight in a way that sheds a deeper light on it.

The first step in overcoming suffering is to stop seeking a solution or healing ‘cure’ for it and affirm it as the expression of a meaningful and shared life question. The second step is simply to *undergo* your suffering. That does not mean stoically enduring it without question. To undergo suffering means to attend to your *awareness* of what you are experiencing without being drawn into identifying with that experience. *Under* all that we experience, whether pleasurable or painful, is our awareness of experiencing it. Your awareness of a thought, emotion or sensation – pleasurable or painful – *is not* that thought, emotion or sensation. Your awareness of suffering lies under that suffering – but it is not suffering. Undergoing suffering means to ‘under-go’ it — to *go* *under* your surface experience of suffering – however painful or intense — to your *awareness* of it, and in this way become aware of the life questions that experience expresses.

**How can I be at one with myself?**

By recognising that ‘oneness’ is *a relation* – and that without *duality* there can be no relation and therefore no true ‘oneness’ with yourself — or with any other being, including God. Duality does not necessarily mean conflict or opposition, just as multiplicity or diversity does not necessarily mean lack of unity or oneness.

It is the attempt to deny the essential duality and multiplicity of our being that leads us to feeling conflicted or fragmented. The outer and the inner human being are like the outer and inner surfaces of a container – distinct but inseparable. Like any other human being you are essentially a *dual being*. No human being can completely ‘actualise themselves’, for the inner human being – the inner you – embraces a boundless multiplicity of inner potentials that you can never fully ‘actualise’ as your ‘self’.

Those same *potentials* however, are something you can nevertheless feel and *know* as an inexhaustible potency or power within you – the power of your inner being and the source of all you are and can become. But to ‘be somebody’ does not mean to realise some ideal mental self-image but to ‘be some-body’ — to fully *be* the body that you are and in that way fully *body* your inner being. The less you are able to stay aware — moment by moment, minute by minute — of your *body as a whole*, the less whole you will feel. Whenever, even for a moment, you cease to feel your *body as a whole*, you will not feel your *self as a whole*. ‘Not feeling oneself’ is not a symptom but the cause of illness and suffering. Conversely, healing means ‘wholing’, once again feeling your body and your self *as a whole* — your inner being, your *soul*.

**How can I be myself in this world?**

By following the gnostic maxim of being ‘in the world but not of it’. This means *refusing the draft*. A glamorous TV commercial about life in the army is one thing. Actually enlisting in the military – or being involuntarily drafted — is quite another, for it demands total identification with the military world and world outlook. Visiting a doctor, psychiatrist or even a therapist to seek solutions to your problems beware: *be-aware*. For here too, your *awareness* is in danger of being involuntarily ‘drafted’ – enlisted into identifying with worlds and world outlooks that transform all the questions you feel in your life into diagnosed medical illnesses or emotional ‘problems’.

Just as TV commercials seek to draw us into identification with the world of brand images, so is ‘the draft’ the source of a tangible draught that feels as if it is drawing our awareness out of ourselves and sucking us into identification with some element of our experiential world. Anything can be the source of such an in-sucking draught — from a news headline or major world event, to a minor conversation topic or train of thought. Being ‘in’ the world – any world — means being susceptible to the draught of the draft. Not being ‘of’ the world means *refusing the draft* — not letting our awareness be drawn *out* and *into* identifications with any element of our experience, inner or outer.

To not be ‘drawn out’ does not mean closing ourselves off from events or other people in order not to get sucked or drawn in by them. Nor does it mean ‘withdrawing’ from the world and engagement with others. The opposite of feeling our awareness *passively* drawn out and sucked in is not to close off but to *open ourselves more fully to the world* and to *actively draw in our awareness of all that we experience* – or *actively intend our awareness to flow into it*. That way we can be ‘in’ the world — and experience it even *more* intensely than before — without being ‘of’ it, without surrendering awareness to its suctional draught and succumbing to The Draft.

**How can I come to know God?**

The problem with religious adherents, atheists and agnostics is that they all see God as a *being* – and then dispute whether this being actually exists or can be proven to exist. Here they all ignore a deeper question. For any god that is simply *a being* – even a ‘supreme being’ — is merely just *one being among others,* and therefore not ‘God’ – not the ultimate reality behind and within all beings. To find God we must first of all cease to see God as a being at all, but rather understand God as a source of all beings – a source that is not itself a being.

But what sort of God can we imagine that is real but at the same time not an actual being? The question only arises because we identify reality with *actuality* – with actually existing things and beings. We forget that potentialities are just as real as actualities, and that indeed they are the source of all actual things and beings. Potentialities however, have reality only in *awareness*. This is where science prevents us from understanding God. For what modern science fails to recognise is that the most basic scientific ‘fact’ is not the objective existence of an actual universe but our subjective *awareness* of that universe.

Awareness itself however is more than just ‘consciousness’ of the actual, existing reality. It also embraces the entire realm of potential reality. We cannot get to ‘know’ God in the same way that we get to know actual beings of any sort. God, far from being an actual being, is a *knowing awareness of potentiality* that is the source of all beings. The realm of potentiality, unlike the realm of actuality is unbounded. God, as a knowing awareness of potentiality, also dwells within all actual beings — as a knowing awareness of their own unbounded potentialities of being. We cannot ‘know’ God as an actual being. For God *is* a knowing that precedes and dwells within all beings – a knowing awareness of their own unbounded potentialities of being.

Whenever you direct your awareness not to the actualities of your life but to your felt potentialities as a human being you attune yourself to the same knowing awareness of potentiality that is the essence of God. *Gnosis* is a Greek word for knowledge from which is derived the term ‘gnostic’. The established church accused others of what was called the ‘gnostic heresy’ – claiming that is was possible to achieve direct knowledge of God. They missed the point. The true gnostic does not claim the knowledge ‘of’ or ‘about’ God as an actual being. The true gnostic understands that God *is* ‘gnosis’ — a *type of* *knowing that precedes being*, *is the source of all beings, and dwells within each being.*

From a truly *gnostic* point of view both believers and disbelievers alike are ‘agnostics’. That is not because they stay on the fence regarding the reality of God as an actual being but because they are *a-gnostic* in the literal sense — they deny the knowing or *gnosis* that *is* God. This *gnosis* is also an inner knowing present within us all, for it is also the source of our being – of all that we are and can be. Attunement to that wordless inner knowing or *gnosis* within us is our very link with God. We can ‘know God’ only by affirming that knowing, not by worshipping God as a being.

**What are basic questions?**

Basic questions have to do with the deeper nature of our being and of all that we experience as human beings. They have to do with what and who we essentially *are* and with the essential nature of the world we experience and the experiences that constitute our world or ‘personal reality’. Such questions are not the preserve of philosophers, for they are felt and lived by all beings. They are questions that go to the very heart of our being, and that touch its very core. For they *are* that living core.

One basic question that goes to the very core of our being is the nature of death, not least because so many identify death with non-being. But ‘non-being’ itself is not nothingness – the mere absence of any actual thing or being — but that realm of unbounded potentiality that has its own reality within awareness. Out of this realm come countless dimensions of actuality of which our own physical reality and universe is but one. After death our awareness enters these non-physical dimensions of actuality, and yet the inevitable fact of our death remains a constant reminder of our own current life *potentials* – fulfilled and unfulfilled.

The nature and reality of divinity is another basic question, for the divine too, whilst ‘no-thing’, is not nothing. It is not only the ‘darkness’ of non-being or potentiality that is the source of all actualities — all worlds and all beings. It is also the divine *light* of awareness within which all potential beings — and all their individual potentialities of being — are constantly *being actualised*. The unbounded multiplicity of these potentials means that they cannot possibly be brought into the light and actualised within the confines of any one life, any one ‘universe’ or system of reality, physical or non-physical.

The nature of depression too, constitutes a basic question, one not unrelated to the nature of death and divinity. For what we call ‘depression’ is also the felt *pressure* and weight of our own unborn or unactualised life potentials. These are precisely those potentials that the fact of our own physical mortality and death brings home to us — if we are prepared to face it. Yet our life itself is no ‘last chance saloon’, and death — far from being the ultimate horizon of our awareness and of our being — is merely a transition to dimensions of awareness that allow even richer scope for the actualisation of our own boundless potentialities of being.

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