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A Good Intertwining to Take Care of the Soul: Depth Psychology, Philosophical Practices, and Spirituality

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A shift has taken place in the common types of pathology and the relationships between them, all broadly linked to the crisis in identity frameworks, which in turn is characterized by a difficulty in recognizing appropriate boundaries (boundaries between self and others, boundaries between self and the world, and the boundaries inbuilt in one's own personality). This has led to the spread of narcissistic, addiction, and eating disorders, panic attacks, or alternatively, in the case of an illusory attempt to remain in control, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias. Even mood disorders appear to be related to excessive expectations regarding performance, within a confused overall framework of overlapping and ill-defined roles. I have placed analysis, formative practices based on philosophy as a way of life and spirituality side by side in what I have designated "Biographical analysis philosophically oriented". However, the theoretical validity of the project still hinges on whether it adequately addresses the unresolved issues posed by psychoanalysis, formative practice, and spiritual accompaniment, once scientific justifications, confutative models of comparison, and forms of religious exclusivism have exhausted their historical function.

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A shift has taken place in the common types of pathology and the relationships between them, all broadly linked to the crisis in identity frameworks, which in turn is characterized by a difficulty in recognizing appropriate limits (limits between self and others, limits between self and the world, and the limits inbuilt in one's own personality). This has led to the spread of narcissistic, addiction, and eating disorders, panic attacks, or alternatively, in the case of an illusory attempt to remain in control, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias. Even mood disorders appear to be related to excessive expectations regarding performance—"the weariness of self" as Ehrenberg (2010) would have it—within a confused overall framework of overlapping and ill-defined roles. Furthermore, defining limits has become a challenging existential issue for everybody, even for those without psychological disorders, insofar it seems that critical life events (deaths, births, transitions, education, training, love life, work-related issues) cannot be faced without therapeutic help and therefore without becoming pathologized to some degree.

All these pathologies and diseases of our civilization have in common a certain fragility of the self's construction. Is this fragility something really new or could we trace it back to a structure of the psyche that remains unchanged but is able to react differently when the external circumstances require a new accommodation?

In psychology and psychoanalysis, it is customary to speak of new diseases but usually the historical dimension is treated as a surface phenomenon, a change in defenses against a social and cultural environment

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that cannot be addressed in ways outdated. I think, on the contrary, that the long-term development of cultural and social history have turned into deep psychological structures, obviously on the basis of a biological plasticity inherited phylogenetically.

The crisis of patriarchy (Cfr, 2013, pp. 43-65) creates a disorientation that strikes at the very roots of thousand-year-old educational constructions—understood here as longstanding institutions—based on cultural models that inform individual sensibility at the deepest level. The resulting shock waves affect sexual and generational identities, ethnic and religious affiliation, and the relationships between job and social status: thus our very mode of experience is altered making the formation of identity problematic. This is at the root of "modern nervousness" as well as being the macroscopic cause, though hidden to most, of the demand for psychological care.

The decline of the kingdom of the father does not mark the advent of the kingdom of the mother but only a period of maternal regency in the name of the kingdom of the son, a sort of paidocentrism (both in terms of the subordination of the lives of adults to the needs of children, and in terms of adult reactions to potential tyranny on the part of the children). Placed at the very centre of a civilization based on economic accumulation, the child symbolizes the perfect consumer, having the intense gratification related to satisfaction of its whims as its supreme value. The prospect of it becoming an adult in the future and of acquiring increased capacity to consume is one and the same thing! For the adult on the other hand, the child itself is an object to consume, particularly in terms of emotional rewards. Thus the free dimension of the effort required to produce is invested in the affective sphere, which is in turn transformed into consumption. Meanwhile the work ethic—associated with a given type of work defined as the lifetime activity of a producer—has been ousted by the law of performance, disassociated from the content of any particular activity. Performance is measured in terms of profitability, the only recognized criterion for defining status and social prestige. Consumption is the ultimate goal because accumulation requires mass consumption to go hand in hand with mass production, therefore the new order does not teach the self-discipline of a particular occupation (learning and saving in order to accumulate) but unceasing pressure to consume products that will rapidly become obsolete. The admonition "grow up" addressed to children means "become a consumer", but the consumer from a psychodynamic perspective is a child stuck in the oral phase. It is this double bind inherent in the cultural message transmitted that creates child-like adults and adult-like children, both objects of the desire for a general infantilization free of paternal laws and outside of the bounds of maternal containment. However, in my opinion, psychoanalytical thinking and language still reflect a conception of sexuality and sexual and familial relations that is limited to the development of the individual, with the social and cultural world that shapes families and individuals viewed only as the external context. The epistemological atomism characterizing the psychoanalytical approach has key implications for clinical practice. Inevitably, treating the individual as a an isolated being who constructs the relationships that in reality shape him, distorts self-perception, amplifying self-referentiality in both positive and negative terms, and promoting the acritical internalization of historic contextual conditions and not just natural or psychic factors.

I have placed analysis, philosophical practices, and religion side by side in my analysis because any contemporary search for meaning can and must bring these three ways of searching for meaning together into a common coordinated field of action with a common background. This common background becomes apparent when we identify the common source of inspiration for the shared vocation to transcend egotism: the urge to go beyond the self to save the self through a wider and more all-embracing dimension of meaning. This urge and this background enable us to recognize as different articulations of the same thing, equally as much at the

professional as at the personal level, three interconnected but distinct practices: philosophically-oriented biographical analysis, formative practices based on philosophy as a way of life, secular spiritual accompaniment (the Philo school founded by myself and others in Milan in 2006 has the aim of providing all three).

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The Biographical Method

The biographical method fulfils the need to contain and respect many theoretical stances, idea- and value-systems that without such a framework would lose their potential for meaning and become caught up in sterile conflicts. Biographical method does not mean "anything goes" or an indiscriminate mishmash of every kind of idiosyncrasy. It is certainly a philosophy like any other—provided that by philosophy in general we understand the transcendental perspective that requires all definitions to be based on reason. But more so than many other branches of philosophy, it helps the individual to pursue his own development, while experiencing a sense of communion with other and different practitioners. By method we firstly mean that shared consensus is procedure-bound and based on modes of research and communication to which contents are secondary, while the exchange permitted by shared rules of communication transforms confutation into an anamorphic offering. The shape of any object presented to another person is subject to modifications, arising from the availability of alternative observational vertices, which may be integrated as additional constructions or simply discarded. The biographical dimension is key: it places the individual psyche at the interface between society and its cultural forms on the one hand, and biological make-up on the other. In this sense, it takes up the historical legacy of those schools of thought that recognized all ideal contents as being influenced by social history, corporeality and drives, conceptual and symbolic psychic dimensions, and the peculiar characteristics of individuals and families. Recognizing that the biographical dimension cannot be extirpated from communication means constructing an effective context for its possible expression. Biographical aspect here comprehends both autobiographical and mythobiographical aspects, given that the story of any individual is both born of, and incarnates, a weave of earlier stories. The method, in the Greek sense of "way towards" is geared towards transcendence: the three forms of transcendence that characterized ancient philosophy (towards authenticity and truth of discourse, towards others, and towards the world) and four others that we have drawn from analytical and formative practice (inner teaching, transformation of the negative, the link between myth and biography, and the desire for desire). Both analytical dialogue and spiritual exercises are based on this method and tend towards attainment of a transcendent perception of experience. The method is implemented through the practice of the spiritual exercises, which also carry out the function of directing towards the level of transcendence.

Writing of the Ancient Philosophical Schools Hadot affirms:

> In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. II It is a concrete attitude and determinate life-style, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion—which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom. In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly

> living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions (in the words of Friedmann: "Try to get rid of your own passions"). Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation. (Hadot, 1995, p. 56)

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