

Suffering, Challenge and Overcoming. A Christian Perspective on Disability¹

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Abstract : This until now unpublished article reproduces partially the lecture I delivered at St. Paul's College, Kochi, Kerala, India, on August 29, 2016. The text, however, is unpublished and its main focus is disability and suffering. Disability falls under the category of suffering. Attempts of explanation for disability in particular and suffering in general differ sharply: primitive culture are often inclined to think that they are punishments imposed on us by mean and sadistic gods. The common denominator among all peoples and individuals on earth is that no man – no matter his origin in space and in time, as well as his particular cultural background – can spend his whole life without considering the reality of suffering, and, of course, without having himself the experience of suffering, since it is part of life. Victory over disability and particular and suffering in general starts with the victory over oneself, as St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) puts.

Keywords: disability, suffering, overcoming, happiness, love Christianity

I. Suffering as a universal phenomenon

Disability falls under the category of suffering. Since the remotest past, plants and animals in general have been subject to suffering; the only creatures who do not suffer are those deprived of life, such as the rocks.² Good people suffer: Jesus, the best man that has ever lived, is also the one who suffered the most in the earthly world; bad people suffer as well here: Judas, the Apostle who betrayed Jesus, could not stand the pain caused by such a betrayal, fell into despair and committed suicide.

A number of disabled people are winners by their own merit; but others are losers by their own choice, which is particularly the case of those who do not accept their disability as a *challenge* – not in the secondary meaning of “a questioning of its truth or value”, but in the original meaning of “something which requires great effort and determination” from the one who is challenged.³ The non-acceptance of suffering leads to despair; due acceptance of suffering as a challenge leads to spiritual peace, joy, happiness and sometimes to sainthood: “Divine Goodness will remove the moral suffering of those who serve Her with good will”.⁴

It must be remembered that self-esteem, self-confidence, and happiness in general are conquests; they result from relentless struggle against our bad habits and passions. The better the goals, the harder they are to be achieved; “good and beautiful things are difficult to be obtained”, taught Plato in ancient Athens.⁵ Referring to Erich Stegmann ([1912-1984], founder of AMFPA, *Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists of the World*), the New Zealander specialist Marc Alexander considers that

¹ Fathers Sebastian Vattaparambil, Job Kundoni and Anthony Raphael invited me to go to India in order to give some lectures on disability. I owe Father Job in particular the splendid organization of all those lectures in the Indian state of Kerala. Hearty thanks to all of you Keralans I had the pleasure to meet, and whose company I had the privilege to share.

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² See, for instance, Peter Rothe. *Die Erde*, Darmstadt, Primus, 2009, pp. 23-78.

³ Jane Bradbury et alii. *The Collins-Cobuild English Dictionary*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 260.

⁴ Narciso Irala. *Controle cerebral e emocional*, São Paulo, Loyola, 1970, p. 232.

⁵ *Hippias Major*, 286d; 292c-d.

Those who met him always came away with the impression of vitality that surrounded him like a force field. Through some osmotic process he was able to infuse his confidence into those he was dedicated to helping, yet like all true confidence it was hard won.⁶

Visiting hospitals, asylums and institutions for the physically challenged was part of the weekly routine of the Spanish priest Narciso Irala (1896-1988), missionary in China and renowned psychiatrist. According to him,

It's a scary world out there. The world, the flesh, the devil is constantly pulling at us, trying to suck us in. Everywhere we look there is promiscuity, immoral values, etc. It almost makes one swing to an extreme...an extreme where there is no good in the world left and everything becomes a sin. An easy trap to fall into? If the devil can't get us one way, he will try another, won't he?⁷

A true Apostle of Happiness, Irala used to preach patience to those who suffered; he asked them to become "missionaries through patience".⁸ In one of his books, he tells the story of a boy who suffered from tetraplegia. Paralyzed on his bed, almost completely motionless (by that time he still could move his lips and speak), the 12 years old future martyr heard from the already old missionary the following question: "would you like to become a missionary and save many souls?". So the boy said: "How could it be, Priest, since I can not get out of this bed and barely move?". Irala's answer was the following:

Precisely because of this. If you offer your suffering for the benefit of the souls, you can save them better than I do. Because, listen: Jesus Christ preached and accomplished miracles, but just a few converted. However, by suffering and dying, He redeemed the whole world.⁹

Immediately, the boy complained and said: "What a pity that I have lost one year of suffering. Why didn't anybody tell me that before?". Last, but not all least, Irala told that "the more that boy suffered, the happier he became, since he was saving souls", just like Jesus did.¹⁰ Saint Alphonsa from Kerala (1910-1946), who was herself disabled, used to say: "How great is the joy experienced when everything is offered in the Sacred Heart of Jesus!"¹¹

II. The problem of self-victimization

In the Hebraic-Christian view, pain and suffering can be transcended; it is about a transcendence that happens through love. In other words, "Pain without love is suffering of hell. Suffering with love is sacrifice".¹² Non-transcended suffering (i.e., suffering without love) can lead to *self-victimization* (also known as "playing the victim"), a phenomenon much more common than it may seem at first glance. Always connected with the lack of self-esteem, its most common reasons are limited to four in number: to justify abuse of others, to

⁶ *Painters First. Art Celebrating the Conquest of Misfortune*, Kingsley, Leader Books, 1995, p. 14. "The first president of the association – Arnulf Erich Stegmann – was a prominent figure in the development of mouth and foot painting. Born in 1912 in Darmstadt, Germany, Stegmann lost the use of both arms from polio at the age of two. Regardless, his artistic talents were soon recognized and supported by his teachers. He was proficient with a variety of brushes and styles, using only his mouth. He was educated at the School of Higher Education for Book Trade and Graphics in Nuremberg and studied with the artists Erwin von Kormöndy and Hans Gerstacker. He made a living selling his art cards and prints at marketplaces" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Association_of_Mouth_and_Foot_Painting_Artists_of_the_World#A._Erich_Stegmann).

⁷ Apud <https://finerfem.wordpress.com/category/achieving-peace-of-heart-fr-narciso-irala/>.

⁸ Narciso Irala. *Controle cerebral e emocional*, op. cit., p. 234.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ <http://stalphonsa.com/maxims.php>.

¹² Fulton Sheen. *Life is Worth Living*, Mumbai, ST PAULS, 2013, p. 149.

manipulate others, coping strategy or attention seeking – the three of them stemming from the same obsessive need: justify one’s own dishonesty in his relationship with himself and his fellow men, thereby obtaining a favorable judgment about himself.¹³ Among disabled people, self-victimization happens quite often; in many cases, such a behavior is associated with self-sabotage, which, by its turn, is nothing else but a branch of the destructive internal mechanism of self-punishment, which is always based on some kind of culpability – no matter whether it is legitimate (due to an evil done) or not (delirium of self-accusation).¹⁴

Self-sabotaging tends to become an addiction, since it provides secondary gains, whether conscious or not.¹⁵ Among them, illusion of security, attention and, most of all, a fake justification for getting rid of one’s own responsibilities. This helps to explain why so many disabled people just do not want (be this refusal conscious or not) to be fulfilled in their personal, and professional and social life as a whole; being successful means emancipation from others’ tutelage, a process that opposes the *principle of least effort*, “a broad theory that covers diverse fields from evolutionary biology to webpage design. It postulates that animals, people, even well designed machines will naturally choose the path of least resistance or ‘effort’”.¹⁶ Needless to say that it is all about risks, dangers and fears the unknown, let alone the prospect of disappointment, deception and frustration in general: “Why should I take the risk of learning piano? What if I do not succeed in playing it well? Why add further failures and miseries to such a miserable life like mine?” – represses the super-ego, in its eagerness for perfection at any price.¹⁷

III. “Being disable doesn’t mean being unable”

Suffering manifests itself at both the individual and the collective levels. In India, for instance,

Experience has shown that the rainfall in most parts of the country is insufficient approximately one year in five, while one year in the failure is complete enough to threaten famine. These recurrent famines have provided a cruel but effective solution to the Indian problem of overpopulation, a problem to which no gentler answer has been found to date.¹⁸

The point is: suffering – be it personal or social – does not require neither explanations nor justifications. It is the kind of thing that lies beyond our ability to comprehend, and is included in God’s plans toward mankind and His creatures as a whole. God, in turn, has no need of justifying his actions and decisions.¹⁹ All of us, as living beings, are subjected to suffering. Human life is, indeed, a “short warm moment”; but its counterpart, death, is not necessarily “a long cold rest”, as the pop composer Roger Waters, ex-leader of the British rock band Pink Floyd, postulates in his hit song *Free Four*, written in 1971, I suppose. Such a pessimistic view does not take into account God’s promises of endless happiness for those who live in accordance to His precepts; to put it another way, it is possible to be happy after death, provided that, in this life, we love God above all created things and our neighbour as ourselves.²⁰

¹³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victim_playing.

¹⁴ See Norbert Sillamy. *Dictionnaire de la psychologie*, Paris, Larousse, 1965, pp. 38-39.

¹⁵ “Behaviour is said to be self-sabotaging when it creates problems and interferes with long-standing goals. The most common self-sabotaging behaviours are procrastination self-medication with drugs or alcohol, comfort eating, and forms of self-injury such as cutting. These acts may seem helpful in the moment, but they ultimately undermine us, especially when we engage in them repeatedly” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-sabotage>).

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle_of_least_effort.

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Id,_ego_and_super-ego#Super-ego.

¹⁸ Ralph Linton. *The Tree of Culture*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959, p. 469. It must be remembered that India in the 1990s, “despite its population problems and vast poverty, manages to do something neither the USSR of China can manage: feed its own people without importing food” (Geoff Crowther et alii. *India*, Victoria (Australia), Lonely Planet, 1993, p. 24).

¹⁹ See Saint Augustine. *De ordine*, I; and Brian Brock, John Swinton et alii. *Disability in Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012, p. 65 sq.

²⁰ According to Mt 22: 37-39; see also Brian Brock, John Swinton et alii. *Disability in Christian Tradition*, op. cit., p. 184 sq.

Whatever the case, whenever we ask “What does it mean to be human?”, we are inexorably lead toward the “problem of the human”.²¹ “Being disable doesn’t mean being unable”, the saying goes. Certainly, “How easy it is to misunderstanding a person whose humanity exhibits itself in unconventional and ostensibly deficient or dysfunctional ways”.²² The theme of disability leads us to ask who we are, as human beings. By all accounts, we are still far from a definitive answer about the very essence of man. Being the most complex of all living beings, no wonder that the man is the most difficult one to define: “every man is of a different nature”, said the Spanish Jesuit writer and philosopher Baltasar Gracián (1601-1658).²³

Suffering stems from two and only two essential causes: the feeling of loss of something we had (for instance: health, courage, money); or the lack of something we never had, but would like to have (for instance: health, courage, money); the obvious (but rarely followed) rule is this: the less demands we have and the most simple they are, the easier is for us to be happy. We all know that “Physical or mental abnormalities, congenital deformities, traumatic amputations, serious illnesses and disabling consequences, be they temporary or permanent, are as old as humanity itself”.²⁴ In pre-historic times,

It is almost certain that a pre-historical child born with deformities or appearing extremely weak would have been eliminated in some way, either in that she seemed to lack the basic requirements for surviving on her own, or owing to beliefs that linked disability to evil spirits, deities of punishment, or even in view of utilitarian reasons.²⁵

The same cultural practices that lead to discrimination or even to annihilation of the weak (be he disabled, sick or just undesirable) can emerge in the most diverse historical and geographical contexts. In our more and more pagan, agnostic, materialistic and atheistic 21st century, euthanasia has become a *discrimination against disabled people*, as the journalist Michael Swan highlights in one of his articles. Indeed, “The popular support (for assisted suicide) is rooted in disability discrimination. It’s rooted in the idea that life with a disability is a fate worse than death”, Amy Hasbrouck told *The Catholic Register* during a break at the Euthanasia Symposium 2013 in Toronto”.²⁶ The Australian ethicist Peter Singer (b. 1946) advocates on behalf of *functionalism* (“the belief that what defines human persons is what they can and cannot do”); he even suggested that “no newborn should be considered a person until 30 days after birth and that the attending physician should some kill disabled babies on the spot”.²⁷

In spite of its universality, suffering varies a lot in what concerns its acceptance from one person to another. The ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras defined man as an animal endowed with hands.²⁸ Notwithstanding, the absence of hands or the impossibility of using them does not necessarily prevent a disabled men from being happy; Erich Stegmann (1912-1984), along with many other artists of the *Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists of the World* (AMFPA), are living examples of this phenomenon. On the other hand, good health and a perfect body are not guarantee for happiness; History is also full of such examples. Those are living proofs that happiness does not depend on the quantity of the things we own, not the goals we achieve; on the contrary, the less we want to have and to achieve, the greater are our chances of being happy.

In the view of the German biologist Dietmar Todt, *human beings not only live, but also have full consciousness of this experience of living*. This is one of the reasons why we live in constant *conflict between willing and not being able to accomplish what we want* („Konflikt zwischen Wollen und Nichtkönnen“).²⁹ Such a dichotomy stems from human finitude and Universal History, as already mentioned, provides a large number of examples of it. Let us evaluate one of them. Brian Jones (1942-1969), multi-instrumentalist, founder and original leader of the pop band Rolling Stones, was an extraordinary gifted musician. Young, healthy, rich, idol

²¹ Idem, p. 1.

²² Thomas Reynolds et alii. *Vulnerable Communion: a Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, Grand Rapids (Michigan/USA), Brazos, 2008, p. 15.

²³ *El Crítico*, 4^a ed., Buenos Aires, Espasa-Calpe, 1948, p. 102.

²⁴ Otto Marques da Silva. *A epopéia ignorada. A pessoa deficiente na história do mundo de ontem e de hoje*, São Paulo, SBSC (Sociedade Beneficente São Camilo)/CEDAS (Centro São Camilo de Desenvolvimento em Administração da Saúde)/FASC (Faculdade São Camilo de Administração Hospitalar), 1987, p. 21.

²⁵ Idem, p. 37.

²⁶ <http://noeuthanasia.org.au/component/content/article.html?id=1822:euthanasia-is-discrimination-against-people-with-disabilities>.

²⁷ Scott Klusendorf. <http://www.equip.org/article/peter-singers-bold-defense-of-infanticide>.

²⁸ See Aristotle. *De partibus animalium*, 687a.

²⁹ Dietmar Todt. *Das Leben: zwischen Werden und Vergehen*, Berlin/Darmstadt/Wien, 1989, p. 11.

of millions, he seemed to have everything to reach happiness, at least in this world. But not even that did he achieve. Excess of facilities turned into an obstacle in itself. Brian was never satisfied: he always wanted more and more from everything, until he died at age 27 unsatisfied, unhappy and lonely.³⁰

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), a Spanish knight seriously wounded in the Battle of Pamplona (1521), “had several surgical operations, which must have been very painful in the days before anaesthetics”.³¹ Loyola underwent a spiritual conversion while in convalescence. Suffering, along with the reading of a series of religious books (among them a Catalan edition of the *De Vita Christi*, by Ludolph of Saxony), turned him from an athletic and proud soldier into a lame and humble saint: after convalescence, Loyola walked with a limp for life: a disability that did not prevent him from founding and being the first General Superior of the *Society of Jesus* – and, of course, was no obstacle for his being happy, since unhappiness is incompatible with sainthood. He gave us the living proof of one of his own legends: “The most beautiful victory one can achieve is the victory upon oneself”.

IV. Disability must be faced squarely, without political correctness

Disability in particular and suffering in general must be faced squarely, not with political correctness, which is nothing more than an euphemism for being coward and masking the truth. In this view, Miloš Zeman (since 2013 president of the Czech Republic (a country that suffered the burden of Communism for decades) uses to say that politic correctness is nothing more than politic cowardice: „*Es gibt einen Ausdruck, der „politische Korrektheit“ genannt wird und ich halte ihn für einen bloßen Euphemismus für politische Feigheit*“.³² In the field of disability, politic correctness promotes reverse discrimination; it disseminates confusion and fallacies instead of solutions and truth.³³ What is the point in treating disability as “mere detail”, when we all know it is no detail at all?

Instead of discussing words – overvaluing these denominations rather than those –, it is high time to tackle the core of the problem, which depends much less on abstractions and concepts than on concrete attitudes and positive values.³⁴ It is high time to put aside “misused, outdated, or negative terminology” *vis-à-vis* the disabled and the disability. Let us eliminate once and for all “disrespectful slang and words that imply victimization is appropriate: [the disabled] is not a victim, unfortunate, crippled, sufferer, stricken by, retarded, spastic, or incapacitated”.³⁵ Problems arise when one makes this an obsession, losing the principal focus, which is not one of terminology, but one of reality; and reality, as we know, is always beyond words. Discussing mere words will always lead us to a wrong way, leaving us at the surface of the things represented by them and preventing us to reach their core. *Emphasis must be laid on the person, not on their condition.* Once we have eliminated derogatory, inappropriate and hurtful conceptions, and treated disabled people as equals and with due

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_Jones.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignatius_of_Loyola#Religious_conversion_and_religious_life.

³² http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/political_correctness.html

³³ “Reverse discrimination is a term used to describe actions or efforts that have been made to reverse the negative effects of discrimination against a particular group. The label of reverse discrimination can be quite misleading, and, depending on the perspective of the person using it, can be a significantly loaded term. From time to time you may hear the term used alongside a similarly unfamiliar idea, such 'reverse racism,' which probably just makes things even more confusing instead of clearing them up. Reverse discrimination isn't intended to describe a role reversal between oppressors and oppressed, but is simply a term used to describe the various actions that have been taken to level the playing field by giving historically marginalized groups a fair opportunity” (<http://study.com/academy/lesson/reverse-discrimination-definition-examples-cases.html>).

³⁴ Concrete attitudes and positive values are the basis of assistive technology. In Brazil, a great exponent of assistive technology is the Systems Analyst José Antonio dos Santos Borges (b. 1956), the inventor of cybernetic devices like the Dosvox (for the blind), the Motrix and the Micro-Fênix, (for the motor disabled in general), *which have opened windows into a new life for thousands of disabled people*, as Indian Journalist Shevlin Sebastian has recently stated (“Nothing is Easy”, in *Kochi Expresso*, Kochi, 03/10/2016; and <http://intervox.nce.ufrj.br/~antonio2/>).

³⁵ <http://www.cerebralpalsy.org/information/disability/etiquette>.

respect and worthiness as human beings within the society as a whole, the vocabulary concerning disability will no longer be a problem. It is nonsense the politically correct practice of avoiding the word “normal” for fear of offending someone; what is the point of saying “Paul is not-disabled”? Political correct expressions such as “person with disability” is a contradiction in itself, since disability, most of the times, indicates the lack or loss of something essential one should have. In other words, given that the disabled is a person *without* that something, when we say “a person with disability”, we inevitably and contradictorily describe a person *with* this “being *without*”. Such a contradiction is not restrict to the English language; more and more it becomes a universal phenomenon: “*Person mit Behinderung*” (German), “*persona con discapacidad*” (Castilian), “*persona con disabilità*” (Italian); “*personne avec handicap*” (French), “*persona amb discapacitat*” (Catalan), “*personer med funktionshinder*” (Swedish)...

Extremists of political correctness reach the point of thinking, saying and sometimes postulating that a simple sweetish vocabulary will turn wicked hearts and wicked minds less self-centered and cruel, that is to say, “wicked”. First things first: priority must be given to inner feelings and values, rather than to mere words and to the use of kid gloves, in order to avoid hurting delicate sensibilities.³⁶ It all boils down to promoting, keeping and following the so-called *Golden Rule* in each and all human society, if we really want to avoid and ban the hideous and criminal facts and cultural practices described in passages like this:

Persons with disabilities are more likely to be victims of violence or rape, according to a 2004 British study, and less likely to obtain police intervention, legal protection or preventive care. Women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. A survey in Orissa, India, found that virtually all of the women and girls with disabilities were beaten at home, 25 per cent of women with intellectual disabilities had been raped and 6 per cent of women with disabilities had been forcibly sterilized. Research indicates that violence against children with disabilities occurs at annual rates at least 1.7 times greater than for their peers without disabilities.³⁷

As for the Golden Rule, it never hurts to remember that

The Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity is a moral maxim or principle of altruism found in many human cultures and religions, suggesting it may be related to a fundamental human nature. The maxim may appear as either a positive or negative injunction governing conduct: One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself (positive or directive form). One should *not* treat others in ways that one would *not* like to be treated (negative or prohibitive form). What you wish upon others, you wish upon yourself (empathic or responsive form). The Golden Rule differs from the maxim of reciprocity captured in *do ut des* - I give so that you will give in return - and is rather a unilateral moral commitment to the well-being of the other without the expectation of anything in return. The concept occurs in some form in nearly every religion and ethical tradition. It can also be explained from the perspectives of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and economics. Psychologically, it involves a person empathizing with others. Philosophically, it involves a person perceiving their neighbour also as “I” or “self”. Sociologically, ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ is applicable between individuals, between groups, and also between individuals and groups. In economics, Richard Swift, referring to ideas from David Graeber, suggests that ‘without some kind of reciprocity society would no longer be able to exist’.³⁸

Neither one extreme nor the other, teaches the popular wisdom: disability’s terminology must continue to evolve, as well as definitions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), for instance, there are two main types of disabilities: “*activity limitations*, which are difficulties an individual may have in executing a task or action; and *participation restrictions*, which are restrictions imposed upon an individual’s involvement in an activity”.³⁹

³⁶ See Claude Hamonet. *Les personnes en situation de handicap*, Paris, PUF, 2012, p. 97 et passim.

³⁷ <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/>.

³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule.

³⁹ <http://www.cerebralpalsy.org/information/disability/etiquette>.

V. Solidarity can also be considered a universal phenomenon

As well as suffering and disability, solidarity can also be considered a universal phenomenon, observed even among animals.⁴⁰ It is true that being alive is the only necessary condition for becoming disabled; yet it is equally true that being alive is the only necessary condition for becoming solidary with the disabled. Disability is a kind of challenge, and it is the responsibility of all of us to accept among us those who are challenged, since they are not less human than anybody else.⁴¹

Given that God never puts us to a test beyond our own strengths, it becomes clear that suffering will always involve an essential subjective component; considering all those facts and circumstances, it seems appropriate to the author, nearing the end of this article, to adapt a sentence written by Fulton Sheen on the first page of his autobiography: as regards suffering or not suffering because of being disabled, “it all depends on how you look at it”.⁴²

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⁴⁰ See, for instance, Jean-Pierre Changeux. *Du vrai, du beau, du bien: une nouvelle approche neuronale*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2010.

⁴¹ See Emmanuel Hirsch & Elisabeth Zuckman. *La personne polyhandicapée: éthique et engagements au quotidien*, Paris, Eres, 2015, p. 135.

⁴² Fulton Sheen. *Treasure in Clay. The Autobiography of Fulton Sheen*, Nova Iorque, Image Books, 1982, p. 1.

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