

Suffering and the Soul: a Therapeutic Approach

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Western culture will be in danger of a decline into a sterilizing provincialism if it despises or neglects the dialogue with other cultures ... [T]he West is forced [note: one might almost say, condemned] to this encounter and confrontation with the cultural values of 'the others' ... One day the West will have to know and to understand the existential situations and the cultural universes of the non-Western peoples; moreover, the West will come to value them as integral with the history of the human spirit and will no longer regard them as immature episodes or as aberrations from an exemplary History of man – a History conceived, of course, only as that of Western man.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) [1]

Since the inception of psychology as a distinct field of study in the modern West, it has been widely regarded as the only valid form of this discipline, supplanting all other accounts of the mind and human behavior. The modern West is unique in having produced the only psychology that consciously severed itself from metaphysics and spiritual principles.

The momentous intellectual revolutions inaugurated by the Renaissance and the European Enlightenment further entrenched

the prejudices of its purely secular and reductionist approach. Yet, across the diverse cultures of the world, we find spiritual traditions that embrace a fully integrated psychology, unswayed by the limitations of the modern scientific method.

It is only by grounding psychology on a foundation of sacred and universal truths found in all traditional civilizations that we can begin to restore a true science of the soul that addresses the entire gamut of human needs and possibilities.

Suffering and the soul have a complex relationship that can be approached therapeutically in several ways:

The Nature of Suffering

Suffering is often viewed as more than just physical or emotional pain. From a soul-centered perspective, suffering can be seen as:

- A path to growth and transformation rather than a pathology to be eliminated
- An invitation to engage with deeper questions of meaning and existence
- A process that emerges from the unconscious, beyond our conscious control



How does the distinction between pain and suffering impact therapeutic approaches and what is the theoretical basis for the suffering soul.



The Suffering Soul was Born in Antiquity in the Writings of Job as well as in Greek Tragedy

Prometheus and Chiron being figures of teachers and healers, along with their propensity to transgress the boundaries between mortals and immortals, renders them vulnerable to unending wounds. Corporal pain brings their immortal bodies closer to the mortal experience, but without death's release from pain.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Prometheus' wound functions as a punishment. But in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus' wound is incurred because he refuses to share his secret knowledge with Zeus, framing his injury as torture. Chiron is injured by Heracles' poisoned arrow because he mediates between beasts and heroes. Heracles resolves both of their wounds: he kills Zeus' eagle, releases Prometheus from his chains, and assumes Chiron's immortality, illustrating the interdependence of transgression and limits.



The Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote a tragedy called "Prometheus Bound" way back in the 5th century BCE. It's a powerful play that dives deep into the Prometheus Titan story, specifically when the rebellious Titan was chained to a rock as punishment from Zeus.

In this ancient masterpiece, Aeschylus depicts Prometheus as a tragic hero one who suffers greatly for his defiance against the gods but remains steadfast in his convictions. The tragedy is that he cannot save himself.

"I knew full well all that I did when I transgressed, and helped men to their misery. But still I did not think that with such tortures I should be wasted on these airy cliffs, this desolate and dreary crag."

- Prometheus, "Prometheus Bound" by Aeschylus

In his play "Prometheus Bound" the play opens with Prometheus being dragged to a remote, desolate location by Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalworking, and two other gods, Kratos (Strength) and Bia (Force). There, they chain the Titan to a rock, leaving him to endure unending torment as decreed by Zeus.

Throughout the play, various characters visit the chained Titan, including the chorus of Oceanids (sea nymphs), Prometheus' brother Oceanus, and Io, a mortal woman cursed by Zeus. Through his interactions with these characters, Prometheus' story unfolds.

Despite his immense suffering, Prometheus remains defiant. He sees his punishment as unjust and stands by his decision to help humanity, even if it means enduring the wrath of Zeus.

The tragic nature is the irony of his bringing so much blessing to humanity yet unable to release himself from his torture.

The divine spark in the figure of Prometheus, which finally because of his eagerness to create, help and be so pro-man and his development, contradicts the interests of the gods and even threatens them and he must be punished. He must bear in mind that he should not develop the person in the direction of supposedly being God. The ability of creation and creativity inherent in man can also lead him to hubris!

The other figure bearing upon our archetype of the tragic calling of the healer is Chiron who represents a complex and developing character. His personal story is difficult and tells of a strange birth. Unlike the rest of the Centaurs, his father is Titan Cronos, the father of the gods, and his mother is the nymph Phalera.

When Phalera gave birth to her baby, she was frightened by its half-horse and half-human shape and abandoned it in the forest. The abandoned and strange immortal boy Chiron was adopted by Apollo, the god of wisdom and the sun god of perfection. Continuing Chiron's peculiarity, his abandonment and adoption by the god Apollo made him a wise and powerful creature.

Later in life, Chiron was accidentally injured by a stray poisoned arrow fired by the Hero Hercules, and he mortally wounded him. The wound in the lower part of the horse and its ability to heal also makes Chiron a god of medicine; he receives the ability to be the inspiration for healers.

It brings the person the ability to become himself to be the wise and wounded caregiver.

Chiron is the one who suffers his wound and volunteers to replace the chained Prometheus and give it its eternity after it has served its punishment for some 30000 generations!

Chiron, the wounded healer who, through the wound, adds to his wisdom, bringing about further development and healing through the personal wound and the depth of the mental interior, which is a place we humans have beyond ego.



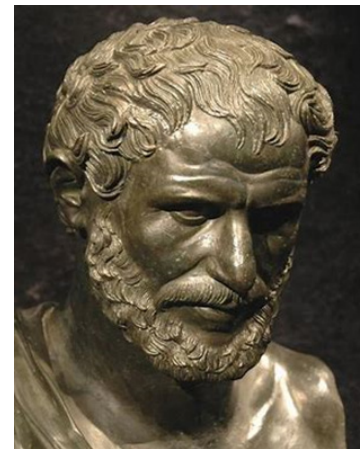
The Sciences of the Soul: The Early Modern Origins of Psychology

Fernando Vidal [2] reveals that psychology existed before the eighteenth century essentially as a “physics of the soul,” and it belonged as much to natural philosophy as to Christian anthropology. It remained so until the eighteenth century, when the “science of the soul” became the “science of the mind.” Vidal demonstrates that this Enlightenment refashioning took place within a Christian framework, and he explores how the preservation of the Christian idea of the soul was essential to the development of the science.

Not only were most psychologists convinced that an empirical science of the soul was compatible with Christian faith; their perception that psychology preserved the soul also helped to elevate its rank as an empirical science. Broad-ranging and impeccably researched, this book will be of wide importance in the history and philosophy of psychology, the history of the human sciences more generally, and in the social and intellectual history of eighteenth-century Europe.

Cultural historians have approached the emergence of psychology not as a branch of scholastic philosophy that gradually became a separate theoretical discipline, but as intrinsic to social and cultural practices from which theories of mind cannot be disentangled (see for example the work of Graham Richards, and of the present reviewer). Medical historians such as Akihito Suzuki [3], meanwhile, have shown us that mainstream medicine and biology largely did not pick up on Locke’s Essay, at least not on essentially ‘psychological’ issues such as madness, until a century or so after its 1689 publication.

Both of these historical approaches, in their own ways, encourage a view of the eighteenth century as a period of relative stasis in the emergence of the formal discipline. Vidal’s book, by contrast, demonstrates at the richness of that century’s radically developing (if also fragmenting) philosophical traditions in which theories of soul and mind, not to mention a burgeoning anthropological discourse, were undergoing continual recombinations in the shadows of natural philosophy.

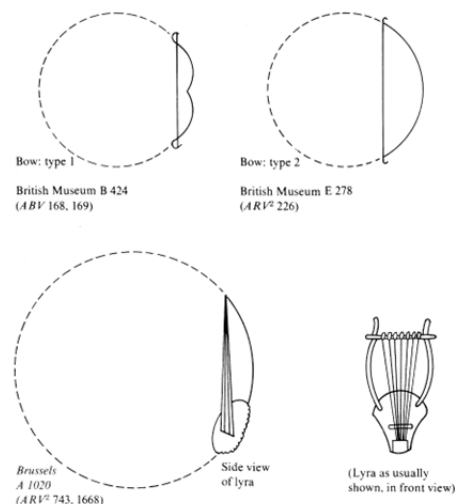


Harmony of the Soul

Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, had a fascinating concept of **harmonia** (harmony). He used the analogy of a bow and a lyre to explain this idea. According to Heraclitus, harmonia is the unity of opposites, where seemingly contradictory elements come together to form a cohesive whole.

Luke Parker [4] claims that Heraclitus’ idea of harmonia extends to his broader philosophy, where he sees the world as a dynamic interplay of opposites, constantly in flux yet unified by this hidden harmony.

Heraclitus’ statements on harmonia and B 50 draw attention to features of their own syntax in order to use the structure of language to model the claims they make about the structure of reality. Understanding the texts in this light helps us appreciate how deeply Heraclitus draws on the analogy between language and logos. In addition, we can see that the texts mobilize Heraclitus’ insight into linguistic structure and meaning. In doing so they offer the fitting-together of language as exemplary of harmonia, and our access to its meaning as both an example and an instance of “listening to the logos.”



In fragment 51, Heraclitus states that people do not understand how things that are in opposition can actually be in agreement. He illustrates this with the bow and the lyre, where the tension in the strings creates harmony [1]. This concept is not just about musical harmony but also about the underlying unity in the natural world, where opposing forces are interconnected and interdependent [2].

Conceptualizing Suffering and Pain

The human experience of dis-ease is the “Universal Currencies” of the Illness ...

In revisioning health care and healing spaces the inner world and soul of the practitioner participates in the therapeutic encounter and therefore we must examine what suffering does to the soul.

Pain	Suffering
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First Arrow• Inevitable• Sensation• Impermanence (Sickness, old age, death) is inherent in human condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Second Arrow• Optional• Pain + resistance• Attachment to the outcome (Avoidance/Clinging)

Distinguishing Between Pain and Suffering in the Soul

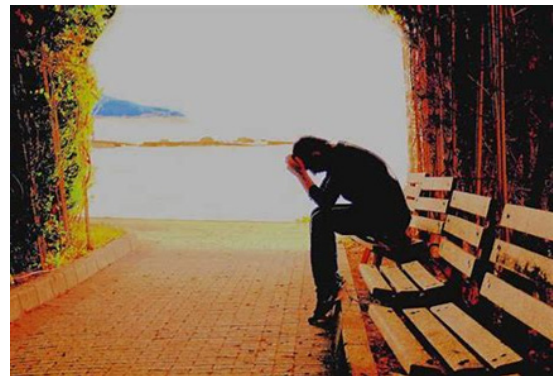
Central to the Buddhist teachings on suffering is the distinction between pain and suffering. While pain refers to the physical or emotional discomfort we experience in response to stimuli, suffering arises from our interpretation and resistance to that pain. This distinction is elegantly illustrated in the metaphor of the two arrows the first arrow being the unavoidable pain of existence, and the second arrow representing the mental anguish we inflict upon ourselves through our reactions to that pain.

This distinction between pain and suffering has significant implications for therapeutic approaches:

Understanding Pain vs Suffering

Pain is generally viewed as a physical or emotional sensation, while suffering involves a broader psychological and existential response. This distinction shapes how therapists conceptualize and address a client's experience:

- Pain is seen as inevitable and often temporary, while suffering is considered optional and prolonged
- Pain is a specific experience, while suffering involves a more global state of distress



Therapeutic Focus

Acceptance-Based Approaches allow us to appropriate tools:

- Patients are encouraged to accept pain as an inevitable part of life while working to reduce unnecessary suffering.
- Mindfulness techniques can help patients observe pain without amplifying it into suffering through rumination or catastrophizing.

Narrative and Cognitive Approaches

Therapists help patients reframe their narratives around pain:

- Exploring how interpretations of pain lead to suffering
- Identifying and challenging beliefs that transform pain into prolonged suffering

Recognizing suffering as distinct from pain encourages a more holistic approach:

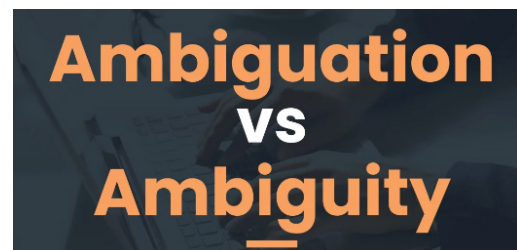
- Addressing not just physical symptoms, but psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of distress
- Incorporating interventions that target meaning-making and existential concerns alongside pain management

Spiritual and Existential Dimensions

The pain/suffering distinction opens up exploration of deeper existential issues:

- We need to address spiritual pain and suffering that may accompany physical symptoms
- Existential approaches must therefore be employed to help clients find meaning in their pain experiences. What does this look like?

By recognizing the nuanced relationship between pain and suffering, we can offer more targeted, comprehensive, and empowering interventions that address both the immediate sensations of pain and the broader psychological and existential challenges clients face.



A Theoretical Framework

Aristotle's perspective is particularly relevant here

- Aristotle defined the soul as the "first actuality" of a living body
- He saw most aspects of the soul as inseparable from the body
- Imagination and reason posed challenges to this view of inseparability

This perspective aligns with Stoic philosophy, which emphasizes cultivating inner tranquility rather than chasing external pleasures.

Simone de Beauvoir, Immanuel Kant, and Aristotle all grappled with the complex relationships between happiness, morality, and the human condition. Their perspectives reveal the ambiguity inherent in our understanding of happiness and its role in ethics.

Kant's Ambiguous Concept of Happiness

Kant struggled to reconcile happiness with his ethical system due to his generally subjective view of happiness. This led to some inconsistencies in his approach:

- He saw happiness as too passive to provide moral motivation
- Yet he recognized that people seek happiness as their ultimate end
- He attempted to incorporate happiness into ethics in various ways

Kant's concept of happiness was ambiguous, with at least two different versions appearing in his work. He suggested a Stoic-like concept of happiness as inner peace resulting from doing one's duty which highlights his struggle to define happiness consistently within his ethical framework.

De Beauvoir on Ambiguity and Meaning

Simone de Beauvoir approached the question of happiness and ethics through the lens of existentialism. She emphasized the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition that:

- Humans are both conscious subjects and physical objects in the world
- We exist in the present moment, between a past that no longer exists and an uncertain future
- We must create meaning for ourselves in the face of this ambiguity

For de Beauvoir, ethics emerges from how we respond to this ambiguous existence which bears on the nature of soul work in that we cannot eliminate ambiguity but must embrace it and that authentic living involves accepting our freedom and responsibility.

These affect the relationship between Soul and Body since the relationship between happiness, ethics, and human existence remains profoundly ambiguous. Philosophers have grappled with questions such as:

- Is happiness subjective or objective?
- How does happiness relate to moral behavior?
- Can we achieve lasting contentment in an uncertain world?

While definitive answers remain elusive, engaging with these questions can lead to a richer understanding of the human

experience and our ethical obligations. As de Beauvoir suggests, embracing ambiguity may be key to living an authentic and meaningful life.



Jung and the Soul

Carl Jung developed a complex and nuanced understanding of the soul that was central to his psychological theories. He saw the Soul as a bridge and interface between the inner world and outer reality. It was a mediator between consciousness and the unconscious. This mediating function allowed the soul to facilitate psychological growth and individuation.

The Soul and Imagination

For Jung, the soul was closely tied to imagination and creativity much as its images emerge through dreams, art, and active imagination and dialogue with the unconscious.

Soul Loss and Retrieval

Jung incorporated shamanic concepts of soul loss into his theories:

- Trauma or disconnection from one's depths could lead to "loss of soul"
- This manifested as depression, loss of meaning, or fragmentation
- Soul retrieval involved reconnecting with neglected aspects of the psyche thus healing often required reintegrating lost soul fragments.
- Yet it also depended on human consciousness for expression

This living, autonomous quality of the soul was central to Jung's approach. By viewing the soul as a dynamic, mediating force within the psyche, Jung developed a rich framework for understanding human psychology and fostering growth.



Suffering is a Path, not a Pathology

Tony Humpheys [5] writes that in order to truly and fully understand human suffering we need to respond to it symbolically, rather than literally. Literal interpretations do little to resolve human suffering and typically block the emergence of more creative possibilities to resolving it.

Pain is physiological and, most often, though not always, pathological, whereas suffering is psycho-spiritual, for it inevitably attempts to draw attention to a life unlived, to buried hurts and hidden vulnerabilities and to the presence of powerful protective forces against further emotional and social lessening of one's presence. Suffering can also be spiritual because it invites us to engage with those questions that ultimately define who we are.

When physical pain is present it needs to be alleviated whenever possible, for pain can erode the person's aliveness and energy. Medication is a very powerful force for relieving pain. Sometimes when suffering is alleviated, pain can disappear. There is no greater suffering than psychological and spiritual despair, such that individuals in such dire distress may physically cut themselves to gain relief from that overwhelmingly sad emotional state.

Responses to suffering are formed at an unconscious level and because the language of the unconscious is symbolical the only universal language as pointed out above we need to approach both psychological and spiritual suffering with the tools of metaphor and symbol.

The Wrong Trajectory

Rather than understanding suffering through symbol and metaphor, there has been a relentless search for physical causes or signs of suffering that are taken literally, and which have limited our access to the depth, creativity and spirituality of our nature. This is evident in most modern psychotherapy, in cognitive-behavioural modification, neurolinguistic programming and pharmacology all useful approaches, but by themselves superficial and unintentionally devaluing of our deepest being.

Depression is a suffering that many individuals experience. Symbolically, depression is about what has been "pressed down" of our true nature and the fear or terror of allowing what is buried to come to consciousness. Depression is created by the deep emotional self, the soul, to draw attention to the blocks to expression that exist and, at the same time, attract a substitute attention to one's presence, without some attention, the self, necessarily plunges into despair and, metaphorically, wants to 'disappear' from the profound suffering of invisibility.



Wholeness

The physician's attitude to dis-ease is founded upon wholeness being the birthright of every human being and that while the soul may have been obscured, it cannot be destroyed. His or her task is to guide this process of enabling the patient to make contact once again with the enduring nature of his own soul and so to be restored from within.

The great advantage is that instead of the patient always struggling to go forward, much as Sisyphus was condemned forever to roll his boulder uphill, it becomes possible to rest in the mind, as Buddhists like to say, and see what emerges. This is no regression to the helplessness of babyhood but a reconnection with what is sometimes called the perennial wisdom.

When we directly engage the soul we find ourselves in an expansion of reality Andrew Powell calls spiritual object relations [6].

The psychoanalysis of object-relations has demonstrated that human beings are born object-seeking, behavior that continues throughout life. Consider then the possibility that in life, we are simply continuing to feel and act on what we know already as souls, the joy of union with another. In spirit, the union is, naturally enough, with the supreme soul, the Godhead.

This approach calls into question Freud's claim that our search for the Almighty arises merely from a neurotic projection designed to shield us from the fear of death and oblivion. Being open to soul means the existential loneliness that arises in a lifetime is because of the painful separation from the supreme source from which we came. The therapeutic task is to help bring the mind, through a process of active imagination and reflection, to a heightened awareness of that relationship and to take strength from it.

Wholeness and healing call for those negative passions to be owned. Dig deep, and love and hate stand together in all of us. The paradox is resolved not by suppressing the shadow but by recognizing it for what it is, part of the Self, and learning how to contain it so as not to hurt others.



Samuel Bendeck Sotillos writes [7]:

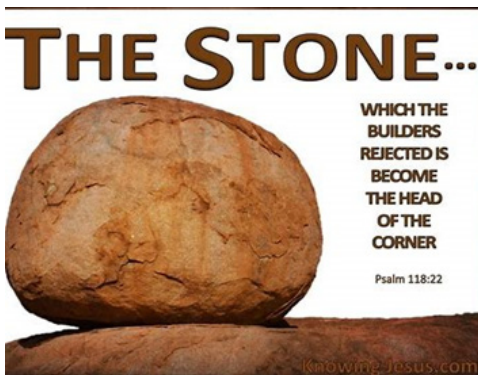
Relationships, as informed by metaphysics, comprise both horizontal and vertical dimensions, yet the horizontal is always subordinate to the vertical, that is to say, "the relationship between

man and the world is premised on the primary relationship between God and man” [8].

An effective and fully integrated psychology requires both dimensions. relationships encompass an indefinite number of states of consciousness and levels of reality a sacred unity both within the created order and of what lies beyond it, as the Lakota saying discloses: Mitakuye oyasin “all my relatives” or “we are all related.” [9].

The Hindu tradition has as what is known as satsang, or an association with truth or reality, which consists of being in the company of saints and sages; however, it also signifies our ultimate encounter with the Self or the Supreme Identity.

This is never truly the human confronting the human, but the Divine encountering the Divine; it only appears as the former from a relative point of view. However, from the aspect of Ultimate Reality or the Absolute there is none other than the Divine Itself.



In other words, the pure Subject as the Self realizes the object within itself and its inherent oneness. If psychology returns to its origin in metaphysics, sacred science and spiritual principles, it can again become worthy of being called a science of the soul. The following verse frames the predicament in which contemporary psychology finds itself: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” (Psalm 118:22).

This is the primacy of the Spirit that psychology needs in order to return to its origins in *divinis*.

Without metaphysics no psychology can be a true psychology or a science of the soul. This confirms something that Schuon has discerned: “*There is no science of the soul without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies at its disposal [10].*”

It is only metaphysics that allows for spiritually complete diagnosis, treatment and cure of “the diseases which affect the soul, indicate their treatment, and point out their remedies” [11] anything less would not be a postcolonial or, rather, a perennial psychology without which the modern West will never recover what it has long forgotten. As the old paradigm falls apart what

is needed to restore a science of the soul is to urgently turn to the universal and timeless wisdom that has reliably guided all humanity, for millennia, in its quest for true knowledge of who we really are.

Therapeutic Approaches

Several therapeutic approaches aim to work with suffering on a soul level:

Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Mindfulness practices encourage:

- Turning toward unpleasant sensations rather than avoiding them
- Increasing emotional and bodily awareness
- Responding thoughtfully rather than reacting automatically

Symbolic and Metaphorical Interpretation

Rather than taking suffering literally, therapists may:

- Use metaphor and symbol to access deeper meanings
- Explore dreams and the unconscious for healing direction
- View depression as representing what has been “pressed down” in one’s true nature.

Soul-Centered Perspective

A soul-centered approach involves:

- Viewing suffering as potentially developmentally useful
- Considering depression as a “dark night of the soul” with transformative potential
- Exploring how suffering reveals aspects of character and resilience

Mindfulness-based soul care model emphasizes:

- Attunement to painful emotions
- Building trust through deep listening and validation
- Self-care and compassion for both client and therapist

Benefits of a Soul-Centered Approach

Taking a soul-centered perspective on suffering can:

- Help find meaning in difficult experiences
- Reveal capacities for courage and resilience
- Lead to increased empathy, compassion and appreciation for life
- Support the process of individuation and personality development

While suffering is a fundamental part of the human experience, therapeutic approaches that engage with it on a soul level can help transform it into an opportunity for growth, meaning-making, and deeper self-understanding.

By viewing suffering through a symbolic and developmental lens, rather than as mere pathology, both healers and patients can approach it with greater compassion and insight.

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