

# The Sisyphus Complex



*The goal is to protect or restore the patient's health, but is it not a Sisyphus act if we cure him physically and destroy him economically? Is it a triumph when the appendix is removed and bitterness is imbued?*

*by Abraham Heschel*

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WHAT IS HUMAN about a human being? Biologically man is properly classified as a type of mammal, and defined as an animal with a distinguishing attribute. And yet, such definitions prove to be meaningless when you stand with man face to face.

It is reported that after Plato had defined man to be a two-legged animal without feathers, Diogenes plucked a cock and brought it into the Academy . . .

The zoomorphic conception of man enables us to assign his place in the physical universe, yet it fails to account for the infinite dissimilarity between man and the highest animal below him. The gulf between the human and the non-human can only be grasped in human terms. The very question we ask: *What is human about a human being?* is not an animal problem but a human problem. What we seek to ascertain is not the animality but the humanity of man. The common definitions, for all the truths they contain are both an over-simplification and an evasion.

Human being is being *sui generis*. The only adequate way to grasp its meaning is to think of man in human terms. Human is more than a concept of fact; it is a category of value, of the highest of all values available to us.

What is the worth of an individual man? According to a rabbinic dictum, "he who saves one man is regarded as if he saved all men; he who destroys one man is regarded as if he destroyed all men." What would a Life Insurance Company charge for the insurance of the entire human race? Now it is just as staggering to ponder the worth of one human being . . .

In terms of statistics the individual man is an exceedingly insignificant specimen compared with the totality of the human species. So why should the life and dignity of an individual man be regarded as infinitely precious? Because human being is not just being-around, being-here-too, a being to be assessed and classified in terms of quantity. Human being is a disclosure of the divine. The grandeur of human being is revealed in the power of being human.

What is the meaning of human being? In dealing with a particular man I do not come upon a generality but upon an individuality, upon uniqueness, upon a person. I see a face, not only a body, a special situation, not a typical case.

Most conspicuous is the variety and inner richness of the human species. Not only do individuals differ widely; the individual himself is not always the same. Look at a dog. Once a dog always a dog. Yet man may be a sinner today and a saint tomorrow. Perhaps the most amazing aspect about man is what is latent in him.

For one thing man certainly seems to own a boundless, unpredictable capacity for the development of an inner universe. There is more potentiality in his soul than in any other being known to us. Look at the infant and try to imagine the multitude of events it is going to engender. One child called Johann Sebastian Bach was charged with power enough to hold generations of men in his spell. But is there any potentiality to acclaim or any surprise to expect in a calf or a colt? Indeed, the essence of human being is not in what he is, but in what he is able to be.

What constitutes being human, personhood? The ability to be concerned for other human beings. Animals are concerned for their own instinctive needs; the degree of our being human stands in direct proportion to the degree in which we care for others. The word *cure* comes from the word *care*.

The truth of being human is gratitude, the secret of existence is appreciation, its significance is revealed in reciprocity. Mankind will not die for lack of information; it may perish for lack of appreciation.

Being human presupposes the paradox of freedom, the capacity to create events, to transcend the self. Being human is a surprise, a flash of light, a moment in time rather than a thing in space. It has no meaning, no genuine reality, or validity within the context of the categories of space. It cannot be validated or kept alive within scientific empiricism.

THE ULTIMATE SIGNIFICANCE of human being as well as the ultimate meaning of being human may be wishful thinking, a ridiculous conceit in the midst of a world apparently devoid of ultimate meaning, a supreme absurdity.

It is part of the cure to trust in Him who cures.

Supreme meaning is inconceivable without meaning derived from supreme being. Humanity without divinity is a torso. This is reflected in the process of healing.

Without a sense of significant being, a sense of wonder and mystery, a sense of reverence for the sanctity of being alive, the doctor's efforts and prescriptions may prove futile.

I am born a human being; what I have to acquire is being human.

The tragedy is that our way of thinking and living leads to a gradual liquidation of the riches of the inner man. We are losing any understanding of the meaning of being human.

The contemporary man is bored, bitter, blasphemously disgruntled. His scientific goal is to quantify the soul. The human as a category is becoming meaningless, a linguistic aberration.

To be human we must know what humanity means, how to acquire, how to preserve it. Being human is both a fact and a demand, a condition and an expectation. Our being human is always on trial, full of risk, precarious; man is in danger of forfeiting his humanity.

One of the most frightening prospects we must face is that this earth may be populated by a race of beings which, though belonging to the race of *homo sapiens* according to biology, will be devoid of the qualities by which man is spiritually distinguished from the rest of organic creatures. Just as death is the liquidation of human being, dehumanization is the liquidation of being human.

America's problem number one is not the use of insecticide but the promotion of spiritual homicide, the systematic liquidation of man as a person. Decay sets in inconspicuously, not dramatically. Is it not possible

that we are entering a stage in history out of which we may emerge as morons, as an affluent society of spiritual idiots? Doctors will disappear, veterinarians may take over the practice of medicine.

A baby was born in the hospital, and the father's first chance to see his first-born child was after it was brought home and placed in the crib. His friends saw how he leaned over the crib and an expression of extreme bewilderment was in his face. "Why do you look so bewildered?" "Impossible," he answered, "how can they make such a fine crib for \$29.50?"

We cannot speak about the patient as a person unless we also probe the meaning of the doctor as a person. You can only sense a person if you are a person. Being a person depends upon being alive to the wonder and mystery that surround us, upon the realization that there is no ordinary man. Every man is an extraordinary man.

Technology is growing apace. Soon the doctor may be obsolete. The data about the patient would be collected by camera and dictaphone, arranged by typists, processed into a computer. Diagnosis and treatment would be established by a machine, and who then would need doctors?

The mother of medicine is not human curiosity but human compassion, and it is not good for medicine to be an orphan. Physics may be studied as a pure science, medicine must never be practiced for its own sake.

In contrast to times gone by, the doctor's role has broadened from healing the sick to serving all men, ill and well. However, I will limit myself to the role of the physician as a healer, a supreme test of his role in the life of society.

What manner of man is the doctor? Life abounds in works of achievement, in areas of excellence and beauty, but the physician is a person who has chosen to go to the areas of distress, to pay attention to sickness and affliction, to injury and anguish.

Medicine is more than a profession. Medicine has a soul, and its calling involves not only the application of knowledge and the exercise of skill but also facing a human situation. It is not an occupation for those to whom career is more precious than humanity or for those who value comfort and serenity above service to others. The doctor's mission is prophetic.

Sickness, like sin, indicates frailty, deficiency, scantity in the make-up of man.

Humanity is an unfinished process, and so is religion. The law, the teaching, and the wisdom are here, yet without the outburst of prophetic men coming upon us again and again, religion may become fossilized. Nature has marvelous recuperative power, yet without the aid of the art of medicine the human species might degenerate.

There is a prophetic ingredient in the calling of the doctor. His vocation is to prevent illness, to cure disease, to lessen pain, to avert death. The doctor is a prophet, a watchman, a messenger, assayer, and tester.

The weight of a doctor's burden is heavy and often grave. In other professions mistakes, inadvertency,

blunders may be pardonable, even remedial; the doctor, however, is often like an acrobat, a ropewalker; precision, meticulousness are imperative; one mistake and the patient may be dead.

While medical science is advancing, the doctor-patient relationship seems to be deteriorating. In fairness to physicians, the relationship has changed because medicine has changed. The doctor of old may have had little more to offer the patient than understanding, sympathy, personal affection.

The great advances in medicine have made it necessary for men to specialize if they wish to remain abreast of any particular field of medicine, and this specialization has forced a change in the image of the practitioner. Yet there is no necessary clash between specialization and compassion, between the use of instruments and personal sensitivity.

The failure is due to the loss of awareness of what it means to be a person, of what it means to be human and to the distortion of the concept and image of being a doctor.

**W**HAT MANY OF US FEAR is a collapse of the old and traditional esteem for the character of the doctor, an increasing alienation between the healer and the sick. The doctor is alleged to act like an executive, and the patient is only a consumer. Generalizations are unfair. Such an image may apply to a minority of men in this great profession. Yet attitudes of some may reveal a condition of concern to many.

The crises in the doctor-patient relationship is part of the ominous, unhealthy, livid condition of human relations in our entire society, a spiritual malaria, a disease of which high-powered commercialism and intellectual vulgarity are only premonitory symptoms. Let me offer an example of intellectual vulgarity.

What do I see when I see a man? According to the philosophy of a dog, to quote Bradley, what smells is; what does not smell is not real and does not exist. According to the philosophy of logical positivism, what is verifiable is meaningful; what is not verifiable is meaningless. The term "person" is a misnomer, unverifiable, indefinable, vague, mystical, and therefore both meaningless and worthless. Since we must think in terms which are both clear and exact, man must be regarded as a collection of tubes and cells, of pipes and wires. This is a scientific fact, accessible to our instruments.

Strictly speaking, what is a patient? A human machine in need of repair; all else is accidental. Or, as has been suggested, man could best be defined as an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing.

As a patient, what do I see when I see a doctor? Since I am essentially a machine, I see the doctor as a plumber, whose task is to repair a tube in my system. What does the doctor encounter when he examines a patient? He sees a case, a urinary case, an intestinal case, but not a person. This, then, would be philosophy.

The world is a factory, man is a gadget, and the doctor is a plumber, all else is irrelevant.

Now, while such a philosophy of medicine may seem plausible, it is being refuted by the grandeur and agony of man. And no one sees so much agony as doctors.

To accept such a philosophy would be to perpetrate euthanasia on the spirit of medicine itself. The mechanics of medicine must not be mistaken for the very essence of medicine which is an art, not only a science.

The human organism can accept an artificial leg or a transplanted kidney. But will a patient retain his identity if his brain is removed and a mechanized brain is put in instead? Will medicine retain its identity if reduced to engineering?

The doctor-patient relationship comes to pass in the dimension of personhood as it does in the dimensions of time and space. There is no escape.

It is not true that diagnosis or treatment of a patient come about in a way completely unaffected by religious and philosophical commitments. The doctor's commitments are as much a part of it as scientific knowledge and skill. His attitudes are either sensitive or cruel, human or inhuman; there is no middle course. Indifference is callousness.

The doctor is not simply a dispenser of drugs, a computer that speaks. In treating a patient he is morally involved. What transpires between them is more than a commercial transaction, more than a professional relationship between a specimen of the human species and a member of the A.M.A.; it is a profoundly human association, involving concern, trust, responsibility. The doctor is commander-in-chief in the battle for survival.

Disease has been defined by Spencer as a state which prevents an organism from relating itself to the conditions of its environment. A doctor who lacks the ability to relate himself to a patient must be regarded as being in a condition of disease.

The doctor enters a covenant with the patient, he penetrates his life, affecting his mode of living, often deciding his fate. The doctor's role is one of royal authority, while the patient's mood is one of anxiety and helplessness. The patient is literally a sufferer, while the doctor is the incarnation of his hope. The patient must not be defined as a client who contracts a physician for service; he is a human being entrusted to the care of a physician.

The physician is the trustee holding the patient's health in trust. In return, the patient's earnest is reliance, commitment. In other relationships trust may be replaceable by shrewdness or caution, in the doctor-patient relationship trust is the essence; distrust may spell disaster.

**T**HE WORK OF A TEACHER is being judged by a host of students. The books of a scholar are critically examined by reviews published in magazines. Yet the work of the practicing physician is never subject to public evaluation. The patient's reliance upon his doctor is often due to blind faith.

In our democratic society where every individual insists upon being independent, and authoritarianism is abhorrent, the doctor is the only person whose authority is accepted and even cherished and on whose judgment we depend. The doctor is not alone in his effort to conquer disease. The patient is a partner, not a bystander.

Disease is an assault, and healing is war. The doctor as an autocrat would be like a general without an army. The patient is both battlefield and soldier. Chemistry supplies the weapons, but who will decide whether the enemy is defeated by strategy or valor?

The patient is a person. A person is not a combination of body and soul as one.

Health is profoundly related to one's way of thinking, to one's sense of values, and physical well-being, the chemistry of the body is not independent of the condition of the inner man. The survival of the patient does not depend of the pharmacist alone.

The doctor must find out the pressure of the blood and the composition of the urine, but the process of recovery also depends on the pressure of the soul and the composition of the mind. Diet, physical exercise are important, but so are the capacity to praise, the power to revere, self-discipline and the taste of self-transcendence, qualities of being human.

Sickness, while primarily a problem of pathology, is a crisis of the total person, not only a physical disorder. There is a spiritual dimension to sickness. At a moment in which one's very living is called into question, the secretions of character, commitments of the heart, the modes of answering the ultimate question, of what it means to be alive, are of supreme importance.

How to be sick gracefully? The process of healing is war, and the first casualty when war comes is moral pretentiousness. Peevishness, resentfulness, suspicion are not restrained by constipation. How to grow spiritually in distress?

Sickness ought to make us humble. In a world where recklessness and presumption are the style of living, and callousness dominating relationships between man and man, sickness is a reminder of our own neediness and extremity, an opportunity for the cynic to come upon the greatness of compassion.

Life is mystery, the reflection of God's presence in His self-imposed absence. Jacob on his sickbed bowed his head (Genesis 47:31) in acknowledging the invisible presentness of the Lord. God's presence is at the patient's bed. His chief commandment is "Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The doctor is God's partner in the struggle between life and death. *Religion is medicine in the form of a prayer; medicine is prayer in the form of a deed.* From the perspective of the love of God, the work of medicine and the work of religion are one. The body is a sanctuary, the doctor is a priest.

Medicine is a sacred art. Its work is holy. Yet the holy disappears when reverence is disused. Reverence for the doctor is a prerequisite for the sanity of all men. Yet we only revere a human being who knows to revere other human beings.

It is a grievous mistake to keep a wall of separation

between medicine and religion. There is a division of labor but a unity of spirit. The act of healing is the highest form of *imitatio Dei*. To minister to the sick is to minister to God. Religion is not the assistant of medicine but the secret of one's passion for medicine.

No honor is adequate and no reward is too high for those who have chosen to live in the areas of distress, at the sickbeds, in the clinics. Not all rewards are benign. Some are like narcotics, poisonous, habit-forming.

In our acquisitive society the ambition to get rich is generally regarded as a most respectable trait. I am not going to make a judgment on that. However, there are some callings where such an ambition is a dangerous impediment. Among these I would include ministers, teachers, lawyers and physicians.

Acquisitiveness is an insidious disease; among its effects are hardening of the arteries of love and understanding, perversion of one's sense of values. It poisons every vocation in our society including those in which sensitivity to suffering humanity or dedication to the exercise of law and justice should be paramount.

The mortal danger faced by all of us is to succumb to the common virus of commercialism—the temptation to make a lot of money.

The motivation to dedicate one's life to the great calling of medicine has its source in the depth of the person. Yet a great calling, whether teaching, healing, or writing is a jealous mistress; she requires complete devotion, supreme appreciation. Medicine, teaching, the ministry are not sinecures, nor are patients, students, parishioners, shares to be traded at the stock-exchange.

May I suggest a therapy for the virus of commercialism: *a personal decision to establish a maximum level of income.* Luxuries are expensive, but making money is even more expensive. We pay for it dearly. Making money may cost us values that no money can buy.

The flesh is weak, temptations are strong. But the sign of intelligence is the capacity to delay the satisfaction of desire and above all to exercise preference, to make an option, when the integrity of one's vocation is in danger of being corrupted.

The doctor must realize the supreme nobility of his vocation, to cultivate a taste for the pleasures of the soul. There is no more thrilling adventure than to alleviate pain, no greater pleasure than to restore health. Perhaps no more beautiful life has ever been conceived than a life devoted to healing the sick.

Striving for personal success is a legitimate and wholesome ingredient of the person. The danger begins when personal success becomes a way of thinking, the supreme standard of all values. Success as the object of supreme and exclusive concern is both pernicious and demonic. Such passion knows no limit. According to my own medical theory, more people die of success than of cancer.

The goal is to protect or to restore the patient's health. But is it not a Sisyphus act if we cure him physically and destroy him economically? Is it a triumph when the appendix is removed and bitterness is imbued?



I SPEAK OF THE HELPLESS and the poor languishing in the wards, in the clinics and dispensaries, of private hospitals who refuse to admit a human being in agony, unless cash is offered in advance.

The nightmare of medical bills, the high arrogance and callousness of the technicians, splitting fees, vested interests in promoting pharmaceutical products, suspicion that the physician is suggesting more surgery than absolutely necessary, all converge to malign the medical profession. Man is often sick, and medicine is indispensable for survival. But medicine today is believed to be afflicted with a *Sisyphus complex* and is itself in need of therapy.

Socialized medicine may be a dangerous thing. But what shall we think of socialized sickness, of socialized despair of the aged?

It is both sterile and dangerous to be involved in defensive and obsolete thinking. We must be open to the situation and seek to make available to all men the blessings that the genius of medicine has discovered.

It is not enough to battle socialism. What is needed is fresh creative thinking, openness to the situation.

We must not be enslaved to conceptual clichés, not remain in the rut of outworn ideas, do what other people do, simply justifying our present economic practice.

The minimum requirement of preserving our being human is a sense of embarrassment, an awareness of the incongruity of challenge and response, of the magnitude of the task we face and the pitiful inadequacy of our own performance. In the face of the immense misery of the human species, one realizes the shortcomings of our accomplishments.

The sense of embarrassment impedes our conceit and at the same time spurs us on to greater efforts. The marvelous achievements of medicine must not make us blind to the problems that continue to arise as a result of the socio-economic revolution. It is terribly embarrassing to know that some individual doctors seem to think that it is highly improper for a patient to get sick during weekends. (Night calls are as fashionable as horse and buggy.) The patient is haunted with fear, but some doctors are in a hurry, and above all impatient. They have something in common with God; they cannot be easily reached, not even at the golf-course.

A subject that requires most careful, dispassionate study is medical care for the aged. The expense of modern methods of therapy is high and often beyond the financial means of many citizens. The economics of medicine is a field about which I have no competence to speak. Yet it is certainly the obligation of the medical profession to see to it that every patient receives the care he needs.

Economics is part of the situation of the whole person and must not be ignored in facing the patient as a person.

Doctors occupy a privileged position in society and it is their duty to rise above the standards of society and to herald a new ethical vision. The word "doctor"

means "teacher." We are in the midst of many revolutions. Above all, man's sense of the meaning of his being must change. This problem must become the doctor's concern.

Many of us, doctors and patients alike, are expecting the A.M.A. to serve as a major moral force in the life of our society. Whatever affects the health of man, the care for the aged, the prevention of illness, the use of nuclear weapons, are within the scope of the A.M.A.

Physical vigor alone does not constitute total health. Nor is longevity the only purpose of living. Quality of living is as important as quantity of living. The achievement of personhood, being human, is as important for health as all the medical inventions put together.

For the doctor to carry out his part, he must be concerned with his own personhood. In addition to his efforts in enhancing his scientific knowledge and skill, his daily concern must be with enhancing his own qualities of living.

You might say that this is a task to be left to religion. Let the minister do it. No. I would not let him do it alone. Maintaining and conserving total health involves quality, and it is the doctor's duty to do it.

I feel humble in the presence of physicians. The least of them has to his credit the merit of soothing pain, of preventing grief and tears. All I can do is to labor in the mineworks where God and man are intermingled and to use the power of ideas to raise the mind, to unfreeze the heart. What I say in words, physicians proclaim in deeds.

To save human life is to do the work of God. There is nothing greater. The glory of God is reflected in the majesty of medicine. It is for this reason that we must strive for this majesty to remain immaculate, without fault, without blemish.

Moral sensitivity is neither inherent as grist in our bones, nor does it float in the air as an idea; it is radiant energy, waves of a divine light. Our moral substance depends upon the process of emission and absorption, upon the witnessing or receiving, upon the outpouring of the goodness done by human beings.

Eclipse of sensitivity is the mark of our age. Callousness expands at the rate of nuclear energy, while moral sensitivity subsides.

The calling and conduct of the doctor is care for others, and the meeting of doctor and patient is an occasion for being human. The doctor is a major source of moral energy affecting the spiritual texture and substance of the entire society.

Character is shaped by experiences of quality, particularly by what we come upon in times of anxiety.

A patient is a person in crisis and anxiety, and few experiences have such a decisive impact upon our ability to understand the meaning of being human as the way in which the doctor relates himself to us at such times.

The doctor is not only a healer of disease, he is also a source of emanation of the spirit of concern and compassion. The doctor may be a saint without knowing it and without pretending to be one.

# BOOKS

Martin Turnell

I.

NOVELISTS like François Mauriac, Graham Greene and Jean Cayrol are fond of asserting that they are Catholics who write novels and not Catholic novelists, or are merely novelists who happen to have written books in which some of the characters are Catholics. The distinction is symptomatic of our time. It would have been unthinkable in a Catholic community where a writer was simply a writer who might treat religious or secular subjects. It was only with the fragmentation of Christendom, and the division of the community into a large number of warring factions, that labels and distinctions of this kind became possible. Even today we find it a little difficult to think of Chaucer either as a Catholic poet or as a Catholic who wrote poetry.

One of the reasons why the writers whom I have mentioned are reluctant to describe themselves, or to be described, as Catholic novelists is plain. They are afraid of being mistaken for the authors of works of edification or, worse still, propaganda. They are therefore at pains to stress their solidarity with the secular world and to play down the religious element in their books. They vie with the non-Catholic writer, or the writer who is not a Catholic, in the boldness with which they describe the seamy side of life and dwell with delight on the rawest details of the sexual connexion. This explains in part the violence, the love of extremes, which are characteristic of Catholic imaginative writers from Barbey d'Aureville and Huysmans to Mauriac and Greene.

Their attitude seems to me to be mistaken. No one wants a Catholic to spend his time turning out pious stories for the edification of the faithful or to spoil the view with too many fig leaves. Nobody cares if the 'churchy' do get an occasional shock and tell their bishops. There is, however, a considerable difference between the imaginative writer and the scientist or the technician. The writer, if he really is a writer, is bound to put himself into his books and would not be worth reading unless he did so. Now we do expect a man's religion to be the centre of his writing, the unifying principle which places all experience in perspective. This is precisely what we are not given. What is most striking about contemporary Catholic writers is the inferiority of their religious to their artistic experience. The disparity between the two means that religion fails to provide a proper discipline, that the depth of their artistic experience is not balanced by a corresponding depth of religious experience. This leads to overcompensation by violence. Neither Mauriac nor Greene can be said to 'see life steadily and see it whole'. One of

the most pronounced features of their work and their view of life is a sense of unbalance. Religion does not produce order: it is the disruptive element. It takes on the colour of the society in which the writer is living and becomes a symptom of the bankruptcy of our much vaunted Christian culture.

Something of the same sort is true of the Catholic critic or, to use the contemporary euphemism, the Catholic who writes criticism. His position is even more precarious than that of the novelist. He is suspected, he comes to suspect himself, of praising those writers who are either Catholics or describe a view of life which is acceptable to a Catholic, and damning the great writer whose views are inimical. This can have the effect of driving him in the opposite direction: he condemns any work which smacks of religion and praises the work of the secularist simply to show that he is unbiased, that he can see the weaknesses of his own side and the virtues of the other. It is clearly an approach which prevents sound judgment.

T. S. Eliot once described the function of criticism as "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." The literary critic is first and foremost the expert reader whose job it is to teach other people to read, but it goes much further than that. "Criticism," said Middleton Murry, "is a particular art of literature." The old distinction between criticism and creation is largely outdated. The critic is a teacher of reading certainly, but he is also an artist. His aim like that of any artist is to express himself though he does so through other writers. This brings us to the difference between the true critic and the scholar, the academic or the literary journalist. The genuine critic is the writer-critic or the artist-critic: the man who is concerned not with establishing the texts of his author, producing a piece of academic research or cutting a caper in the Sunday journals, but with expressing himself in the widest and fullest sense of the term.

We can go on to say that the critic should be a man of powerful personality and ripe wisdom. There can be no distinction between the man and the writer, between the person who holds certain beliefs or opinions, who has had certain experiences, and the literary critic. The whole of his personality, the whole of his experience as a man must be behind the individual essay or even the individual judgment.

What I wish to do in this paper is to try to unravel the part played by religion in literary criticism, or rather to consider the part that it ought to play and the different parts that it has in fact played in the work of a number of practitioners.