

# Spirituality in medicine

## ON THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN SPIRITUALITY

The term "spirituality" has a history that is as interesting as it is little known. In Greek literature, two words were used to designate the non-material, non-corporeal or inorganic dimensions of human reality. These terms were *psyché*, which translated into Latin as *anima*, and *pneûma*, which passed into Latin as *spiritus*. In Castilian Spanish, this dichotomy gave rise to the words *alma* (soul) and *espíritu* (spirit). The soul is what animates, what infuses life into a being. In the classical literature, humans, plants and animals had a soul. That led to differentiating three types of soul, known as the vegetative, sensitive and intellectual souls. The first two types of soul are material, whereas the third is characterized as a spiritual being. What is spiritual is opposed to what is material. The material soul has the inherent characteristics of the body, such as volume, thus occupying space, weight and, most importantly, temporal characteristics. The material soul is thus constitutively finite and contingent. The spiritual soul, in contrast, is non-material. The spiritual soul animates the body without possessing bodily characteristics. Consequently, the spiritual soul is ubiquitous, weightless and, by its very nature, outside of time. Hence, it is eternal, since it lacks the finite elements inherent to contingent reality. When this theory of the spiritual soul came into use among creationist thinkers, i.e., Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians, they saw the need to reconcile the eternal existence of the spiritual soul with the fact that it had been created and thus had a temporal origin. This led to the creation of the category of aeviternity, that which is endless and thus eternal, despite having a beginning, making it less eternal than what is strictly eternal in its creation and temporality. Whereas God is eternal, the soul is not eternal, but aeviternal.

The intellectual soul that human beings possess is spiritual, but is referred to as soul insofar as it is related to the body, constituting the vital principle inherent to a reality that is neither plant nor animal, but human. The soul is the animating principle of human beings. Thus defined, it is obvious that the intellectual soul does not identify with the

spirit, despite the fact that it is spiritual. To put it another way, the spirit as the animating principle of the body is one thing and the spirit in its specifically spiritual functions is another. The body has functions that are not exactly spiritual, but vegetative, or plant-like, and sensitive, or comparable to those intrinsically animal. Other functions cannot be matched to the functions of these realities and are thus specifically human. These are the functions denominated "higher" or "intellectual" functions. The term "spiritual functions" is applied to these functions. People have vegetative functions, sensory functions and functions that are traditionally called intellectual functions. The life of the spirit is intrinsic to this last and highest level of human organization. The life of the spirit is inherent to what the Greeks called *lógos*, or reason. As is well known, reason was viewed as the differential factor between the human species and all other living beings. Hence, the classical definition of the human being that goes back to Aristotle is *animal rationale*, or rational animal.<sup>1</sup> Spiritual life is the life of reason.

It doesn't take much thought to see major limitations in this definition. Let us examine two enlightening examples. Aristotle thought that there were only two powers inherent to the psyche, which he called *lógos*, or reason, and *órexis*, appetite. Appetite drives action, so reason without appetite has no operative force. When appetite moves according to the dictates of reason, the result is what is called "rational appetite" which was how will is classically defined. However, appetite may not follow the dictates of reason. As Aristotle says, reason may be "weak" and obedient to the senses. This is the so-called "sensitive appetite." Classical thinkers reserved the term "passion" for the sensitive appetite. Passions are sensitive emotions that divert human beings from their true objective, the path marked by reason. Herein lays the importance of regulating life, so that intelligence can propose appropriate goals and appetite can put them into practice. For Aristotle, the question is not to annul sensitive appetites, but to submit them to rational control. The role of ethics is to educate in the reasonable or prudent management of life so that sensitive appetites are organized

according to the objectives set by intelligence. For example, the aim is not to avoid eating or the sensory pleasure experienced with food, but to submit food or beverage intake to the control of reason. This is what Aristotle means by *phrónesis*, or prudence. One must eat prudently. The same principle applies to everything else.

The Aristotelian model, despite its undoubted wisdom, was not especially successful, contrary to popular belief. When Aristotle died in 322 b.c., the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium, born in 333 b.c., was 11 years old. Shortly after Aristotle's death, Zeno started a movement that caught on in this area and in several others. Stoicism was a rigorously intellectual movement, according to which God is pure *lógos*, or reason, and earthly beings are higher and more divine in the measure that they partake of *lógos*. Aside from *lógos*, living beings have passions, *pathémata*, that are of strictly negative nature according to the views of Stoicism. In fact, God cannot have passions; God is impassive, or *apathés*. Human beings thus must be wise if they aim to imitate or approach God. Passions do nothing more than cloud the mind and cause it to make mistakes in its search for good. Herein arises the need, not to prudently control appetites, but to annul appetites. This is the famous stoic impassivity, *apátheia*.

## RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

The so-called religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, incorporated Stoic theory into their own ideas and, borrowing elements of Neo-Platonism, developed the theology of the states of spiritual life. There are three states, the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways. In the purgative way, in which the passions are annulled, the mind can more clearly see purely spiritual or divine doctrine, and thus unite with God. The first part of the process was ascetic in nature and the second part was mystical or mysterious. In the mystical part, a human being rose above itself, attaining a kind of union with divinity. This is what Buenaventura expressed using the Latin neologism *sursum actio* or uplifting.

This is what is understood as spiritual life by the three religions of the book, more specifically for our purposes, by the Christian religion. The aim was to annul the emotions, and with the emotions, the body, and rise to unite with God. Silencing all sensitive powers leaves the intelligible power, pure intellect, and was the way one reached God. That intelligence loved God, chose God and united itself to God. This is what is called "love", referring to spiritual or mystical love, which of course had nothing to do with sensitive love. It is important not to forget this. Spiritual love is pure *amor intellectualis*, as it was called by the Jew Spinoza. It proved unsettling when carnal metaphors were used to illustrate that love, as in the *Song of Songs*.

This brief history was reviewed in order to offer a clear idea of what has been understood as spirituality in our

culture, and why it has been understood as such. "Spiritual life" has been understood as the religious life, both during the ascetic phase and especially mysticism. Pure spiritual life is achieved by annulling the passions, i.e., feelings or sensory appetites, so that strictly intellectual life is unhindered by obstacles. Love, so-called pure love, is one of these feelings. When Kant refers to dignity as a feeling in his work, it is clear that he is thinking along these lines.

## SPIRITUAL VALUES

Today spiritual values are obviously excessive. Since the seventeenth century, the advocacy of the body and emotional life has progressively intensified in Western culture. The term "passions" has yielded to less derogatory expressions, like "feelings." In fact, the triad of higher faculties of the human psyche in the classical age (memory, understanding and will) has given way to a triad in which memory has been replaced by feelings, so that knowledge, or the cognitive vector, feelings, or the emotional vector, and inclinations, or the volitional vector, are now at parity. It could even be said that we are somehow reinstating Aristotelian ideas. This indicates a major change in how the life of the spirit, also known as the spiritual life or spirituality, is understood.

Let us analyze this change in depth. Firstly, our contact with reality is not exclusively by way of understanding, but also by way of feelings. Upon perceiving something, the qualities of what is perceived, such as color, are updated by the subject. A blind subject would clearly not update that note of what we call the color of things. The subject would be color-blind. Something similar occurs with emotions. Emotions are the product of the activity of one's psyche when it comes into contact with something or someone. As we have senses, like sight, we also have feelings. The feelings, like the senses, are organs in contact with things. If one perceives objective qualities with the senses, through feelings one reacts to them in one way or another, either appreciating them or not. In addition to perceiving, the human psyche does many other things: remembering, imagining, thinking, desiring, etc. One thing the psyche does is to gauge. Gauging is basically emotional. What perception is to the cognitive order, gauging is to the emotional order. The target of perceptual processes is the qualities of things that we call "facts," whereas the target of the gauging process is what is known as "value." Facts are perceived, while values are gauged. Both are inherent to the human psyche. Every human being gauges and perceives. Moreover, just as color blindness exists, blindness to values exists, the so-called axiological blindness.

The world of value is a great unknown.<sup>2</sup> Our society, particularly from the eighteenth century on, clearly opted for what we call "facts," especially positive or scientific facts, in detriment of what we call "values," which by definition

are not facts. However, since it is not possible to live without gauging value, the fact option was accompanied, more unconsciously than purposefully, by very specific values called "instrumental values." These are the values inherent to all technical instruments. The products of technique are characterized by being instruments, i.e., means at the service of something other than themselves. The automobile is used as a means of transport to do different things: go to work, see friends, etc. The same can be said of any other technical tool. A medication has value in the measure that it serves to relieve symptoms or cure a disease. If it did not achieve these ends, we would say that is useless. Therefore, the value of a medication comes from something other than itself, such as health, welfare, life, etc.

It suffices to view things that way to realize that not all values are instrumental. If values are always at the service of ends other than themselves, it is clear that these goals have value *per se*. This is how we identify the so-called "intrinsic values," in conjunction with or in contrast with instrumental values. Intrinsic values stand on their own, not in reference to something else. To confirm this, we have only to think about the absence of that quality of value in the world or in our lives. Think, for instance, of a world without beauty. Undoubtedly, something important, something valuable, would be lost. That judgment is made by thinking only of the quality itself, unrelated to anything else, so it is clear that beauty has value in and of itself, which makes it an intrinsic value. Many other values lie in the same category as beauty: solidarity, justice, love, friendship, peace, health, life, welfare, pleasure, etc.

This distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values is essential because both have very different characteristics. What is most important is that instrumental values can be measured in monetary units, whereas intrinsic values are not. Friendship or dignity cannot be bought or sold. Objects that manifest certain intrinsic values can be bought or sold, for example, a painting, but the beauty of the painting lies in the realm of what economists call intangible. The value itself is not an object of economic evaluation or sale.

Societies, like individuals, can opt for one type of value or another. The set of intrinsic values of a society can be denominated with the word "culture," whereas the stock of instrumental values are more appropriately designated by the name of "civilization." There are periods of great culture and scant civilization, and vice versa. Our epoch, which dates from the eighteenth century, clearly opted for civilization. This is a profound axiological perversion. Intrinsic values are undoubtedly the most important values in the lives of people. Consequently, when instrumental values become the foremost and almost ultimate values of a society, then what is merely a means to an end becomes an end in itself. This is what the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have baptized as

"strategic rationality." Since we cannot live without values, and specifically without core values, strategic rationality converts instrumental values into values that are an end in themselves. The aim is thus to develop technical instruments. When the means become the end, so that everything can be bought and sold, then the intrinsic value being fostered narrows down to practically only one, "welfare." The pursuit of welfare is inherent to our culture. We live in a welfare culture. Our medicine is also a welfare medicine.

Welfare, or well-being, is a value, an intrinsic value. Welfare is the value closest to instrumental values. In fact, in our society welfare has ended up becoming synonymous with the enjoyment of instrumental values. This means that the noun "welfare" has ended up by being coupled with the adjective "material" and welfare is understood to mean essentially the enjoyment of material goods, especially instrumental or technical products. Needless to say, the principal of these products is money, as the quintessential, or pure, instrumental value. Money has no value *per se*, its value derives from the use of money as a mere instrument for the acquisition and exchange of other values. Given that instrumental values are characterized by being measurable in monetary units, as mentioned earlier, it is obvious that this makes money the instrument of instruments. Intrinsic values cannot be reduced to a price, but if any value were to be considered amenable to pricing, it is welfare. Significantly, in the Spanish language there is no differentiation between the temporary sense of "*bienestar*" (as opposed to the word *benessere* in Italian and *well-being* in English) and the permanent sense of "*bienestar*." Everything that is done consists of, or is reduced to welfare, even in English and Italian, which is understood as material well-being.

What can now be understood as spirituality must necessarily refer to cultivating intrinsic values. Spirituality does not consist of the enjoyment of instrumental values, but of intrinsic values. Moreover, spirituality refers to only a select few of the intrinsic values. There are different types of intrinsic values. There are intrinsic values that are called material values because matter provides an adequate support for them. The paradigmatic example of a material value is beauty. All that is material is either beautiful or ugly, or less beautiful or more or less ugly. Other values, in contrast, have no more material support than living beings. These are the so-called vital values. These values typically are addressed by the healthcare professions and include life, health and welfare. Still other values are ultimately only manifested in the matter peculiar to human beings. These are called personal values, spiritual values or cultural values. Among them are legal (just-unjust), social (solidarity, insolidarity), logical (true or false), moral (good-bad) and religious values (religious-secular, etc). These values constitute what we call "culture" or the "life of the spirit." They are the values that lend substance to the term "spirituality." Spirituality is about living these values in depth, the highest among them lying in

the domain of intrinsic values and endowing human beings with their true identity.

## SPIRITUALITY AND HUMAN LIFE

Viewing matters in this way illustrates the importance of spirituality in human life, especially in the most critical moments of life, which is when daily concerns become relative and we find ourselves in another dimension that we experience as more profound and authentic. These critical situations are of different types, but generally refer to the loss of something dear to us. The experience of loss is quintessential in human life. We experience the loss of loved ones, for example. One experience of loss of enormous importance to human beings is disease. It is often said that one does not know what health is worth until it is lost. This is certainly true. The experience of illness not only consists of a greater or lesser appreciation for health, but also a re-evaluation of the importance of health. We might have been belaboring this point in detriment of other values that acquire more prominence with loss. For instance, the weakness of the flesh draws attention to the importance of the spirit.

Herein lays the importance of spirituality in medicine. The term "spirituality" still raises hackles among professionals and patients because, even now, spirituality is usually identified with the strictly religious sense that it had in the past. In an increasingly secularized world, the idea of spirituality inspires a strong sense of rejection. This is why it is so difficult to discuss this topic. However, it is also obvious that there is a strictly spiritual dimension in humans that are honed by critical situations in life, as in the case of disease. This explains why, after a period in which the term "spirituality" was avoided, it has re-emerged, although the sense of the term has changed.

Those who have contributed most to the rebirth of the term spirituality in the medical setting are palliative medicine specialists. This is perfectly understandable because these specialists deal with the most critical situation that a human being encounters, the proximity of death. When the end of life approaches, instrumental values become less important, or less valuable, receding away until they are almost imperceptible. Consequently, in the terminal stages of life there is a special sensitivity to the intrinsic values, particularly spiritual values. This is something that is rarely taken into account, and yet is of paramount importance. All human beings have the perception that instrumental values are not important, so that living immersed in these values is an evident sign of superficiality. When these values lose their importance, we realize that we have entered a deeper dimension of human existence. This is what "hitting the bottom" means in our language. Somehow, we change our focus to what is essential, important and of value. This is

what Karl Jaspers called an "extreme situation."<sup>3</sup> It is no accident that one of the extreme situations identified by Jaspers is death, or the approach of death. In this situation, intrinsic values come to the forefront, especially those that were referred to above as "spiritual." Hence, palliative care cannot consist only of ensuring the maximum vital and material welfare of the patient, such as controlling pain, providing emotional support, etc. This would be like falling into the trap of welfare that we described previously. The *total care* described by Cicely Saunders demands more, it requires considering the spiritual needs of patients.<sup>4</sup>

Of all the spiritual values, I would like to refer to one in particular, religious value. There are various reasons for singling out religious value from the rest. The first reason is that religious value is usually ranked highest on the scale of spiritual values. Another reason that we have seen is that, for most of our history, spiritual value and religious value have been confused with each other, to the point where those who cultivate religious values have monopolized the use and meaning of the term "spirituality."

It is not possible to undertake an analysis of the purpose of religious experience in clarifying the phenomenology of religion here.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, it can certainly be said that since ancient times, in the case of Western culture, since its origin in Greece, religion has been understood as a specific value, different from others that are apparently very close to it, such as moral value. The confusion between religion and morality is very frequent in the communications media, given that the Mediterranean religions, the so-called religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are terribly moralistic. In any case, religion and ethics are different things that should not be confused, despite the fact that they can and should be examined in relation to each other. Religious sentiment is expressed in Greek by several words, the main one being *eusébeia*. In contrast, moral virtue par excellence is *dikaíosyne*, or justice. The Romans translated the first of these terms as *pietas* and the second as *iustitia*. Justice is the general moral virtue because, as Aristotle says, the other virtues either are just or they are not virtues. Justice is the virtue that governs the relations between equals. The exchange of goods must be on conditions of equal value, because any other exchange would be unfair. Justice is thus the virtue that governs what can be called horizontal relations. There are, however, other actions relating to those who are not our equals, but our superiors. Here the relation is not horizontal but vertical. Among our superiors are not only gods, but also parents and ancestors. Parents, for example, have given us life, a debt that cannot be repaid, so it is impossible to apply the principle of justice. No parents establish relations with their children according to the criterion of justice. If they were to do so, we would say that they were not good parents. Consequently, we owe our superiors specific obligations, which in classical culture are called duties of piety. Piety is understood here in the sense of respect and, above all, gratitude or appreciation.

The duties we owe our parents are due to the gods with even more reason. Precisely because the gifts we receive from the gods exceed what is required by justice, they are considered gifts, or blessings according to Christian theology. In the face of these gifts, only an attitude of gratitude will do, which is the proper attitude of the religious spirit. One can have and cultivate a religious spirit without believing in the existence of a personal being called God. Gratitude, or thankfulness, is then directed toward the source or origin of these gifts, whatever it is, even if we do not know from whence they come. It doesn't matter what source we attribute them to. Religious sentiment is not the exclusive domain of people who believe in God or belong to an institutional church. Moreover, it is paradoxical that many people who believe themselves to be religious because they belong to an institution that is labeled as such may not have a true religious experience because they confuse it with something different, such as what is actually moral. The experience of duty is specific to ethics, whereas the experience of receiving a gift or blessing is specific to religion. These experiences not only differ from each other, but oppose each other. If everything were a gift, there would be no room for the merit of deserving it, and if we deserved everything due to justice, gifts could not exist. The confusion between religious experience and moral experience is one of the great tragedies of our cultural and spiritual life.

Naturally, palliative care deals with and is concerned with addressing the spiritual needs of patients. However, it must be very clear what can and should be understood as spiritual care. Spiritual care should not be confused with religious care. The world of spiritual values is much broader. Religiosity must be understood as what it is, the experience of receiving a gift or blessing, and a reciprocal attitude of gratitude for the gifts received without deserving them. In principle, this experience has nothing to do with ethics. Moreover, confusing one with the other usually has unfortunate consequences at any time in human life, but especially at the end of life. The studies by Allport of the differences between "intrinsic religiosity" and "extrinsic religiosity" are well known.<sup>6</sup> Intrinsic religiosity is confident, full of gratitude; it is an internal religiosity experienced with a sincere and grateful heart. In contrast, extrinsic religiosity is external, ritual, and entirely based on compliance with rules and regulations, fear and punishment. It is what can be called moralism, and is the greatest enemy today of true religiosity. It is well known, since the studies by Salvador Urraca, that intrinsic religiosity protects against the anguish, anxiety and fear of death, while extrinsic religiosity increases these feelings.<sup>7</sup>

## SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

Spiritual life is not just experiences; it is also action, training, learning and habit. The spiritual life is cultivated.

Support and a supportive relationship also exist. We have said that spiritual needs are exacerbated in critical situations. This is a paradox because these are the situation in which we feel weakest, most depressed and powerless. This explains why support is often required and is known as spiritual support. Religions have traditionally monopolized such support. There are "spiritual directors" and in the course of existential crises, religions have established their particular "rites of passage," known as "sacraments" in the Christian tradition,<sup>8</sup> which are traditionally viewed, especially some of them, as "spiritual support."

Today spiritual support cannot be understood this way by most people, nor can it be confined by such limits. What spiritual support seeks to achieve does not come *ex opere operato* but *ex opere operantis*. A person offering support can also provide the opposite of support, even without being clearly aware of doing so. It is not easy to offer support, particularly spiritual support. Freud, developing a suggestion by Ferenczi, established a principle that has proven unfailingly true.<sup>9</sup> According to this principle, no one can help another solve a problem that that person has not already resolved for herself.<sup>10</sup> "An abnormal man, no matter how estimable his knowledge, can never view the analysis of the images of his mental life without distortion, since his own abnormalities impede it."<sup>11</sup> Under the guise of offering support, much damage can be done. The ignorance and lack of expertise in the field of spiritual care is so great that the intended support is often harmful. This explains why there is so much interest lately in clarifying the meaning of spiritual support in settings in which the issue is a concern. Palliative care is designed to provide support in terminal situations. Palliative care specialists started where it was easiest to do so, by providing technical support through good management of instrumental values (analgesics and other products to control symptoms) and, within the realm of intrinsic values, with the least controversial of these values, welfare. This is no small thing. Achieving that goal has served to make us aware that *total care* and *total support* demand more, they demand the proper management of spiritual values,<sup>12</sup> which is now much more difficult.<sup>13</sup> Why? It is difficult because we must first be clear about what we are talking about when we refer to this type of values. Before one can help others with such values, which are the most deeply held, highest and sensitive values of human existence, we ourselves have to be clear about these values. In principle, no assumptions can be made.

## CONCLUSION

The term "spirituality" has traditionally been the heritage of the great institutional religions, in our part of the world, Christianity. This is not by chance, but because religiosity has always been viewed as the core element or nucleus of spiritual life. In my opinion, religiosity is still viewed this way, although the meaning of the term has

changed. In fact, understanding of religiosity and, therefore, of spirituality is becoming increasingly common, although in a different sense that is outside major institutional religions. This is not surprising, given that religiosity is not identified by how it has been experienced within the confines of institutional religions. The so-called pagan world also cultivated religiosity. It did so in a way very similar to what many secular or secularized movements now espouse. If we search for what we call religiosity in Greco-Roman classical literature, we see that is expressed by the terms *eusébeia* in Greek and *pietas* in Latin. Religiosity is an attitude of gratitude, reverence and respect for the source of the gifts one receives without having earned them. Specifically, for this reason, for being undeserved, these are pure gifts, presents or blessings that should awaken in one's heart the most elevated and noblest attitude one can have, that of gratitude. The ancients were very clear that two different, even conflicting, attitudes govern human life. One of these attitudes is *dikaíosýne*, *iustitia*, which regulates horizontal relations between equals. The other is *eusébeia*, or *pietas*, which governs our relations with superiors, i.e., with all those who have given us gifts that we cannot compensate or return, in accordance with the principle of commutative justice. All those who have given us such gifts are in that situation, such as parents, elders, family members, gods, or beings that we cannot identify but to which we are grateful. Our modern culture has a surface-level sensitivity for all matters related to justice, but has developed to a lesser extent the feeling of piety and gratitude to those who give us gifts that can only be fairly categorized as undeserved, gifts that cannot be repaid once granted. This may be one of the major drawbacks of our civilization.

Ethics is the discipline that deals with horizontal human relationships, those based on the principle of justice (*dikaíosýne*, *iustitia*). The dimension of *eusébeia* or *pietas* is not inherent to ethics but to religiosity. In the twentieth century, many thinkers have thought about this topic. The case of Karl Jaspers should be mentioned, given his condition as a physician, psychiatrist and philosopher. In 1947, he presented a series of conferences at the University of Basel, titled *Der philosophische Glaube*, or Philosophical Faith. The conferences were later published as a book. In 1962, he

published a more extensive book on the same topic, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, Philosophical Faith in the Light of Revelation. For Jaspers, philosophical faith is life lived in the depths of "existence," when "extreme situations" cause us hit bottom and open up to a new dimension, to an "existence" that motivates us to live with the horizon of what Jaspers calls "the all-encompassing," thus opening the way to transcendence. "As regards existence, I know that it was given to me as transcendence."<sup>14</sup> To this he added: "Faith is the act of existence in which one becomes aware of the transcendence of reality."<sup>15</sup>

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