

## The Two Kinds of Depression According to St. Paul

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One current classification of depression divides the syndrome into psychotic and non-psychotic varieties. It is interesting that a similar classification developed over a thousand years ago out of some words of St. Paul. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Ch. 7, v. 10, Paul wrote: "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of the world worketh death." The word *sorrow* used in English translations of the Bible stood for the *tristitia* of Latin versions (Greek *λυπη*); connoting sadness, sorrow, despondency, depression. Paul's distinction between the two kinds of *tristitia*, the one "from God" and the other "of the world", led mediaeval theologians to enlarge on differences between the two kinds of depression.

An early exegetist, the pre-Nicene father Origen, discussed the death of Judas Iscariot in the light of Paul's concepts. Origen held that, although Judas's sin was not too great for forgiveness, his remorse was excessive (!) and the Devil was therefore able to direct him away from the beneficent depression that makes for penitence and toward the depression that leads to death. Other mediaeval writers, e.g. Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh of St. Victor, also referred to the maleficent type of despair as the work of the Devil.

However, it was the perceptive psychologist John Cassian who began to give the discussion a modern psychiatric cast. His guide to the monastic life, *De Institutis Coenobiorum*, written around the year A.D. 420, included a discussion of how a monk could distinguish the two kinds of depression. The second kind, Cassian said, is rancorous, ineffective, and irrational. His ideas were repeated two centuries later by Isidore of Seville, who contrasted the "disturbed irrational" second type with the beneficent "temperate and rational" first type. Similar comments were made by Bede a century after

Isidore. Thus, from the fifth to the eighth centuries, leaders of Christian thought recognized a distinction between rational and irrational depression. Some writers of that period included among the manifestations of irrational depression a desire to "un-be". In *The Vices and Virtues*, Alcuin stated that the despairing one "hateth himself and desireth his owne death". This malignant kind of depression was equated with loss of the hope of salvation. (To-day a different notion of the loss that is assumed to cause depression obtains.)

Another mediaeval belief that is particularly interesting to-day was that the irrational depression might be unconscious. Ambrose of Milan, Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory the Great, Alcuin, Raymond de Pennaforte, and others stated that *luxuria* and some other vices were caused by unconscious despair.

According to the mediaeval theologians, those persons who had the beneficent type of depression not only had the mediaeval version of insight, i.e., they recognized and acknowledged their sins, but they also had the hope, if not the conviction, of relief. (As all the authorities from the earliest up to Thomas Aquinas emphasized, penitence implied at least a measure of hope. According to this reasoning, those who, like Judas, committed suicide were really impenitent and hence possessed by the Devil.) To-day, psychiatry teaches that depressed patients who have or develop insight and hope have a good prognosis.

It is evident that many early mediaeval philosophers adhered to a classification of depressions that resembled the modern division into psychotic and non-psychotic varieties: it is therefore interesting to seek this concept in medical works of the same period. The writings of Isidore, the encyclopaedic *Etymologia*, summarized most of the written knowledge, including the medical, of the time. This

knowledge comprised medical items derived from Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Celsus, Galen, Soranus of Ephesus, and Caelius Aurelianus, both as such and as they were discussed by Tertullian, Lactantius, Cassiodorus, St. Augustine, and St. Ambrose of Milan. Isidore's medical ideas concurred with the prevailing view that all diseases were due solely to a disturbance in the balance of the humours. Although Isidore discussed melancholia in detail in his *Etymologia*, he nowhere related any aspect of this condition to what he had maintained about the feeling of depression.

It is also surprising that although mediaeval writers considered despair in connection with the death of Judas, and mentioned the desire to "un-be" as a manifestation of despair, they evidently did not consider suicide an important concomitant of the mental state. Writers from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas discussed the morality of suicide but never mentioned despair as its cause. (However, they did refer to a desire to punish oneself in connection with suicide). On the other hand, the relation between suicide and despair was clearly recognized by laymen. Mediaeval pictorial or sculptured representations of despair usually portrayed a figure stabbing him- or herself; sometimes despair was personified by Judas with a halter around his neck. The writings of a later period, exemplified by Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586) and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), did recognize suicide as a manifestation of despair.

It is evident that many mediaeval philosophers subscribed to a decidedly modern classification of depression, i.e., that which recognizes rational and irrational depressions, the latter of which might be unconscious. Well-informed laymen held similar views, and like the theologians based them on 2 Corinthians 7: 10. For example, Chaucer wrote in the *Persones Tale*:

"Thanne cometh the synne of wordly sorwe, swich is cleped *tristicia*, that sleeth man, as seith seint Paul. For certes, swich sorwe work-

eth to the deeth of the soule and of the body also; for thereof comth that a man is anoyed of his owene lif. Wherefore swich sorwe shorteth ful ofte the lif of man, er that his time be come by way of kynde."

However, it is widely held that Chaucer is not really responsible for the contents of the *Persones Tale*; his work is believed to be a translation of a summary of the writings of an unknown Frenchman.

The mediaeval belief that depression might be either rational or irrational was created to meet a theological need and not to illuminate medical findings. The lack of a link between clinical observation and the concept of depression developed by mediaeval Christian philosophers kept the concept from being absorbed into medicine. This amalgamation could not take place until the distinction between psychosis and non-psychosis became clarified. Not until 1563, when Johannes Wier published his *On the Delusion of Demons*, was a basic aspect of psychosis, the delusion, recognized as psychiatric symptom. Although the Renaissance and post-Renaissance medical writers referred to disordered (i.e. "depraved") thinking in mental diseases, the presence or absence of delusions did not become the basis of a medical classification until several centuries later.

One question remains: Was St. Paul's view of depression original or was it derived? It is clear that Paul quoted or paraphrased many Greek poets and philosophers. However, the substance of Paul's words has not yet been identified in ancient Greek writings.

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