

Pathologies of the Soul in the Encyclical Letter “Laudato si” Void, Anxiety and Sloth as a Loss of Relation with the World of Life

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak and the pandemic that is still affecting the global world brought to light, among the other existential teachings, how deep is the link between humans and the environment. A further chapter of the ecology of the life should be written according to the “new normality” that is going to orient our lives. In this perspective, it may be interesting to come back to Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato si. On Care of Our Common Home* (2015) whose prophetic words, as well as the valuable anthropological, multidisciplinary insights have been highly underestimated.

The aim of my paper to explore, from a philosophical and psychological perspective, the consequences of the voluntary detachment from the environment. The notion of environment, in Pope Francis’ view, refers to a multifaceted reality that collects the realm of nature, but also the positive conditions of flourishing for all the living entities (humans, animals, plants) rooted in respectful relationships and mutual support. As it will be noticed, any disregard for nature, in Francis’ view, gives rise to serious consequences for the human condition, by fueling the spiritual discomfort of the individual. The experience of void, within this frame, could be read as a major symptom of uprootedness. A concept that Heidegger’s and Binswanger’s thought has already grasped and now, through the lenses of the pandemic times might be better understood also for sketching new therapeutic paths.

Key words: void, anxiety, sloth, psychological discomfort, COVID-19, uprootedness, schizophrenia

SPIRITUAL AND EARTH DISEASES, A LINK

The risks related to the loss of a respectful relation with the environment is the very topic at the heart of *Laudato si – On Care of Our Common Home* (2015), Pope Francis’ second encyclical letter (1). The investigation, anthropological as well as theological, also finely outlines the link between some spiritual-existential pathologies and the Earth’s diseases (pollution, destruction, unbalanced distribution of global wealth). Furthermore, the Pope claims the need of

interdisciplinary approaches (§14), so that a new culture of the relation between the human person and the natural environment could flourish. His invitation may be particularly useful – I argue – to open a dialogue between philosophical anthropology, theology, psychology and psychiatry, throwing light on some diseases in which the loss of the world or a failed relation with the environment generally occur. I especially refer to a cluster of afflictions belonging to the spiritual weakness, whose impact on people is revealing particularly relevant today, in the pandemic ‘new normality’ (2).

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As a point of departure of my paper I’ll give a brief account of Francis’ considerations about the subject matter that I intend to clarify. Starting from the phenomenological evidence that the that «our body itself establishes us in a direct relation with the environment» (§ 155) he points out that any failed relation with the world of life gives rise to a cluster of inner and outer diseases. The more relevant are 1) uprootedness; 2) constant schizophrenia; 3) mental pollution; 4) melancholic dissatisfaction; 5) a harmful sense of dissatisfaction; 6) the numbing of consciousness that can lead to neglect parts of reality.

Let’s briefly quote the passages of the encyclical where those references are given, before discussing the anthropological interest of the Holy father’s diagnosis for both psychiatry and theology.

Pope Francis explores (§149) the consequences of the unstable neighborhood of mega cities, focusing on the «sense of uprootedness which spawns antisocial behavior and violence». This statement’s main idea is theoretically founded on the «interrelation between living space and human behavior» (§150) aimed at a peculiar “kind of beauty”, that’s to say «people’s quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, encounter and mutual assistance» (§ 150). To a «constant schizophrenia» (§118) leads the attitude of men who set themselves up in place of God (§ 117). Being human persons and perceiving, at the same time, themselves as similar to the Creator, gives rise to the disquiet concerning the metaphysical divide between the finite and the infinity that cannot be resolved in any way. In fact, he holds, «one cannot prescind from humanity» (§ 118).

Those who live such a peculiar form of schizophrenia – deeply related, on a cultural ground, to «the culture of relativism» (§ 123) are driven to take advantages from the others. The artificial world also contributes to increase the human afflictions, according to Pope Francis.

The use of digital devices can produce «a sort of mental pollution» that the Holy Father explains as a «mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion» (§47). In the same paragraph, Francis notices that when veritable relations with the other are replaced by «a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate at whim», thus they give rise «to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and nature».

On the anthropological ground, the interrelation with the

digital devices, and «the exciting possibilities offered by these media», can arise a «deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relation», and «a harmful sense of isolation». Whenever the lack of reality is given, something happens to the human person. The limit of the digital space is not the only case taken in consideration by the Holy Father. The encyclical letter also throws light on the phenomenon of the sharp divide between centers of power «located in affluent urban areas» and far removed from the poor «with little direct contact with their problems». This lack of physical contact – Pope Francis underlines (§ 150) – can lead to «a numbing of conscience» of which the consequence relies on «tendentious analthe email exchangeysis which neglect parts of reality». In his examination Pope Francis has indicated two main categories of the environmental diseases.

The first one is connected with the loss of reality (uprootedness; mental pollution; the numbing of consciousness that can lead to neglect parts of reality), the other one is deeply linked with the lack of the taste of life (the melancholic dissatisfaction; the harmful sense of dissatisfaction). Both of them cope with the larger domain of the interactions of the human person with the external world and lie upon the notion of environment as a source of sense and value investigated by philosophy and psychiatry. With no doubt a better understanding of these diseases may allow the human sciences to refine their approach to the human complexity.

What is notable, in the encyclical *Laudatosi*, is the keen connection between some pathologies of the soul and their common origin: the deliberate loss of the good of life. As seen before, Pope Francis outlines at least four situations of voluntary closeness to the environment: are uprootedness and the other discomforts comparable with the symptoms of psychosis? What’s new and relevant, in the encyclical letter *Laudato si* is the idea that being responsible for the created world is not only a matter of faith. When a not proper relation with other humans and the other entities occurs, it works like an affection in the deepest ground of the soul. It gives rise to a wide range of spiritual diseases of which the symptoms do not radically differ from the ones of mental illness.

«Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain proper relationships with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I’m responsible, *ruins my relationship with my own self with the others, with God and with the earth* (Italics are mine). When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself in endangered». (§70)

Pope Francis’ anthropology, within the perspective of the Christian theology, should be taken in account for at least two reasons: 1) it includes a wide number of spiritual pathologies in the debate concerning the human condition; 2) it recalls and updates the phenomenological psychiatry throwing light on the voluntary loss of the world. I’ll briefly move from this point, before discussing why the soul’s diseases are also a problem for theology when the spiritual illness becomes a sin. In other terms this text clarifies the domain which the spiritual disease is supposed to deal with. It also sketches the possibility that the spiritual soul might die: the traditional issue of Christian theology can be also explored through a wider anthropological perspective.

INTIMATE DRYNESS

The detachment from the world of life, which primarily consists of a lack of perception, intentionality, and intention (3) reflects on the principle of being in the world, that’s to say the spiritual component of the animated entities. The intimate dryness which has been so finely sketched by Pope Francis in his encyclical letter cannot be limited to a sort of cognitive or emotional loss. On the contrary, it gets directly to the very center of the human person, to whom it gives life and maintains in the existence: I refer to the spiritual soul. Moving from these premises it is possible to understand why any free decision to take the distance from the world of life might determine severe diseases of the intimate ground of the human being. The spiritual diseases evoked by Pope Francis - the uprootedness, the constant schizophrenia, the mental pollution, the melancholic dissatisfaction, a harmful sense of dissatisfaction, the numbing of consciousness which may lead to neglect parts of reality – do not belong to a general “social condition”. They have to be considered carefully as truly spiritual diseases, whose common trait is given by the progressive loss of life: spiritual as well as organic life. Consider that Pope Francis does not move from a theological point of view: his approach is phenomenological at large. To conclude: whenever someone does not tribute sense and value to the environment, he/she deprives himself/herself of the life’s spiritual energy. The leading consequence of the voluntary dis-connection from the world of life, so crucial in Pope Francis’ encyclical, entails the earthquake of the subject, who becomes unable to perform proper relations to the outer world, to himself/herself, to God.

It implies the inner infirmity of the person. Why is relation so crucial for the human beings? As Pope Francis has clearly outlined in his *Laudato si* any deliberate closure to the sense and value of the environment does not only entail a damage

to the world of life; it damages the essential link which connects the creature to the Creator, to a spiritual, personal source of goodness and life. A human person who assumes to have a dominant role in the universe perceives herself as omnipotent. That’s the root of the original sin evoked in the *Book of Genesis*. The more intimate trait of relation belongs to the intentionality which connects the subject who knows and the object known. Aristotle who investigated the nature of relation called it *pros ti*, “toward something”.

There is a wide consensus among psychiatrists about the interrelation between the outer world, personal interactions and mental diseases. Since Adolph Meyer’s (4) main theory and Karl Jaspers’ researches about the general adaptive syndrome (5), a main role of the environment has been recognized in the rising of mental illness. An increasing number of scientific investigations show a higher prevalence of schizophrenia and other severe mental diseases in urban settings where the living standards are particularly poor. Just to make an example, an investigation in Vancouver B.C.’s impoverished neighborhood has brought some phenomenological evidences of the link between mental illness and dwelling (6). For a better understanding of how the attitude to reality does not work, we need to come back to the ways human cope with reality. To outline an interrelation between these two domains – the inwardness of the person and the environment – is not enough; to prove the impoverishment of the intimate ground of the human subject without a further passage in the explanation is needed. I suggest to come back to the three approaches to the external world (perception, intentionality, inclination), for noticing that they allow a true acquaintance with life. It seems a very intuitive matter of fact, however it is a crucial passage for our argumentation. The capacity to have a direct experience of the living entities, as Philippa Foot (7) noted – the other persons, animals, plants, environment – depends upon the nature of the human subject who is essentially a living subject. Life, then, is the intersection’s point.

The phenomenological basis of the interconnection with the world of life explains how human beings are receptive of the offline/real/external environment. However, the information belonging to the neuronal domain, do not suffice when we try to explore the voluntary loss of the world, in which Self deliberation plays a major role. Global terrorism is a typical case study (in which the free decision to be part of a subversive group works on the inner ground of the Self, producing a sharp divide from the world of life (8, 9). The inward receptivity of perception is the main argument for exploring the loss of reality in a psychiatric/psychologic

perspective. Throwing light on the voluntary loss of the world means to take in consideration how the moral sense is structured. If we don't assume that a direct relation with the world also provides some basic tools of morality, we could never realize the deliberate detachment from the outer world as a source of spiritual diseases.

The valuable insights provided by phenomenology are furthermore theoretically grounded by systemic thinking, an approach that stresses a special emphasis on the environment, moving from the very idea that «there is no isolated bodies ... nor are there even isolated systems» (10). All the living components of the world of life are involved in an incessant interaction of parts, through the related processes of dissipation/acquisition of components. To this dynamic, as UrbaniUlivi notes, belongs the concept of logical openness introduced in literature by Von Foerster (11) and developed by Minati et al. (12) and Licata (13).

SLOTH, THE SOUL'S DEATH

It is interesting to note that Pope Francis turns the interpretation of melancholy from sadness to soul's illness. The melancholy which depends upon the voluntary detachment from the world of life as a consequence of the un-respectful attitude to the environment, in the *Laudato si* encyclical, could be easily compared to sloth. In other words, the intimate weakness of the soul reveals a main symptom of the failed spiritual fulfilment. We do not forget, otherwise, that the Pope's discourse is always theological, also when it assumes and displays and explore the finest anthropological arguments. The seventh deadly sin of the Christian faith basically entails the disinclination to the good and provides the spiritual weakness. We couldn't understand why the relation with the created world is so crucial for the human being – as Pope Francis has underlined – if we would not take in consideration the role of sloth, the pre-condition of the soul's death.

Sloth translates the Greek word ἀκηδία and Latin *acedia*. A capital sin for the Catholic faith, it is often underestimated and confused, also in the Catholic culture, with the concept of laziness, so that sloth is usually interpreted as the incapacity of doing anything. It is probably this psychological interpretation to make sloth not fully perceived in all its spiritual complexity. Then, what is properly sloth? Philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (14) gives us some accounts of it in various essays. The more proper definition of *accidia* given by Thomas is “*tristitia aggravans*”, a kind of sorrow that prevents souls from operating.

In the *Quaestio* 35 of I-II Pars of the *Summa Theologiae*, an

essay especially concerned with the explanation of the capital sin, sloth is said «sorrow about spiritual good in as much as it is a divine good» (art 3, resp.). In order to understand why sloth is a crucial step in the path to dehumanization, I'll briefly summarize Thomas Aquinas' arguments.

Spiritual goods, despite the natural order existing among them, are directed to one spiritual good, which is the Divine good. The special virtue that pertains to the Divine good is charity. The practice of the Divine good leads to the virtue of joy. On the opposite, when sorrow concerns the spiritual good is called sloth. *Acedia* destroys spiritual life which is the effect of charity. Sloth is a mortal sin, Aquinas concludes, because of its very essence: it is a sort of implosion of the spiritual skills effused by the (spiritual) soul. In other words, sloth is a self-destructive condition. Spiritual inactivity, the most relevant symptom of sloth, is basically the disinclination to good. We can understand, at this point of the paper, why it exists so a strict connection with the idea of laziness: spiritual inactivity reflects on physical inactivity.

The death of a spiritual soul, in the light of the Aquinas' philosophy, it is a concrete possibility for the humans, if we concede that it is the formal principle of any activity, in virtue of its being an openness to good. It is properly the experience of good, provided by the relation to the world of life, that enriches or impoverishes a human being. Sloth, for being a disinclination to good, is also the principle of inactivity. When a person consents with the deprivation of good, as it happens with the voluntary detachment from the world of life, it begins the inability to act. I quote a passage of *Quaestio* 54 of II-II Pars of the *Summa Theologiae* that summarizes and clarifies the relation between sloth and the moral weakness (q. 54, a. 2, ad 1). We are now in the condition to answer the question: why is a person affected by sloth unable to act? When Aquinas defines sloth as *tristitia aggravans* he concludes that «it avoids soul to act».

We can conclude that: for being opposite to joy, sloth displays a twofold disinclination, one is directed to the spiritual good and the other to the material goods. At this point of the discussion, we can easily understand in what sense Thomas writes that despair is the sloth's daughter. As an intolerable experience of human vulnerability despair brings to light the incapacity to get to the end of an act. Those who live the condition of despair as well as sloth are basically deprived of the possibility to act correctly (the act is oriented to the end) and this does not allow to achieve the essential experience of good (the good as a positive component of life) according to the inclination to the outer world. At this point

of the investigation, I’ll briefly summarize the most relevant achievements.

Environmental conditions interfering with subjective responses give rise to the incapacity to live a good life as Pope Francis underlines in the *Laudato si* encyclical letter. Sloth displays the refusal of good, made by a human subject who – unable to make the experience of life, as a source of sense and value – revolts himself/herself against the Good for excellence (the Creator) and whatever on the world of life recalls that source of Being (creatures).

DESPAIR

The close connection between the environment and the human condition, so deeply investigated by Pope Francis in his encyclical letter is, nevertheless, a topic that dates the very beginning of civilization. In the biblical *Book of Job* (15) the notion of despair is expressed by the Hebrew term *rogez* in which dis-orientation prevails. The suggestion that the loss of relation to the living world can originate a spiritual impoverishment opens a wide range of perspectives particularly valuable for digging inside the experience of void. A symptom of a wide range of psychosis, the experience of despair could be said the most severe case of dis-connection of the human being from his/her vital environment. As Pope Francis notes in the encyclical *Laudato si* (§ 2) «we have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth» (Gen 2:7); furthermore, dehumanization brings about a change to the earth, so that «violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil» and in all forms of life (*Laudato si*, §2). The Holy Father never quotes the term “despair” or “desperation”, however the lack of care for the common home – the Planet Earth – seems properly to entail such a human condition. I remark *human*, for not being despair experienced by non-human animals.

Not to be in touch with the world of life means to make the experience of despair. It reflects both on the incapacity to feel part of the world (the uprootedness) and the inability to make sense of being in the Earth. This human condition – at the light of the phenomenology and the metaphysics of the human person – entails a painful relation with the space, because of its cognitive-moral-relational implication («the mental pollution and the numbing of consciousness when parts of reality are neglected»). In the Judaic-Christian tradition, despair features a close link with the environment and recalls a chaotic motion in the world of life. This idea lies at the

very heart of the *Book of Job*, where the Hebrew term (*rogez*) connects dis-orientation to the act of wandering around.

ANXIETY

Spiritual discomforts that arise from the lack of reality or the failed relation with the world of life, especially anxiety and the experience of void, are investigated by existential philosophy. Heidegger and Binswanger’s thought may be valuably integrated the phenomenological insights that Pope Francis included into the theological frame of his *Laudato si*. In Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (16), the emotional condition of anxiety (*Angst*) is defined as one of the fundamental moods (*Grundbefindlichkeit*) that discloses the worldhood (*Weltlichkeit*) of the world. Differently from fear (*Furcht*), anxiety is completely undetermined: it is a condition that makes the world meaningless and «plays a pivotal role in the relationship of Dasein (the existing individual, the Being there) with time and world» (5). What threatens the Dasein is nowhere. However, it does not mean that “nowhere” can be assimilated to “nothing”. As Heidegger underlines, this absence of meaning does not signify the lack of the world: on the contrary, what comes to surface in angst is the world in itself or in its worldhood.

Why is anxiety so crucial for the constitution of the human being? In Heidegger’s perspective it discloses two radical experiences, 1) one related to the world in which the Dasein is situated; 2) the other refers to the ontological structure of the Dasein itself. The objects which fill the world lose their importance, but this meaningfulness brings to light what is absolutely prime for the human condition. Anxiety takes the Dasein out of the possibility of having a veritable comprehension of itself moving from the world. It follows that 2) at the very ground of the Dasein lies the possibility to be free, through which the human being can choose and possess himself. Anxiety, in other words, detaches the Dasein from the world providing it with the discomfort of non-feeling-at-home.

As Heidegger assumes, the Dasein is disorientated, lost in a world that is no more understandable nor familiar.

In Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the space plays a crucial role: the human subject, in fact, is said a Dasein, because of his Being-in-the-world, in-der-Welt-Sein. Neither primarily something that can be measured, nor simply an extension, space is properly a horizon that discloses the truly experience of the world to the human beings. Between 1933 to 1935 – Heidegger explored the link existing between world and spirit

in the *Die Selbstbehauptung der Deutschen Universität and Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1966) (17). Heidegger called into question whether an animal is *Weltharm* – poor of world – and whether a thing is *Weltlos* – without world.

It depends, he concluded, on the way they deal with the world: as a living subject, an animal seems to be more roughly implicated with the very essence of the world, a meaningful context. An animal, in fact, cannot be in any way compared to a human being, because of the critical capacity human attitude towards the *Welt*. A human individual is capable to make questions and to rise always new problems. The very notion of spirit (*Geist*), in Heidegger’s perspective, deals with the attitude of making sense of the world. The human condition is the one of a Being-in-the-World in a way that totally differs from the animal’s life. The world is, we could say, with Derrida interpreting Heidegger (18), the space of spirit.

Phenomenological psychiatry – since the major investigations of German psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger at the beginning of the 20th century – moved further the traditional parameters of clinical psychiatry, by considering psychosis in the general frame of the human condition or being-in-the-world. As Ghaemi notes, Binswanger «interpreted Heidegger’s concept of the existing individual (Dasein) as Being-in-the-World, in the sense of seeking out the existential structure of individuals’ lives» (19). Mental diseases, in Binswanger’s view, deal with maladaptive responses to the original *in-der-Welt-Sein* of human beings.

This perspective refers both to Heidegger and Husserl. Precisely, from the author of *Being and Time* Binswanger gained the idea that mental suffering can be fully understood only if patient is seen as a human being in relation with the experimental world. From Husserl, the founder of the existential analysis Binswanger picked up the essential role of intentionality in the making of human existence. A person, he concluded, can be said mentally ill when she/him does not feel the distance between her proper self and the world. Psychic disturbances arise when someone feels nothing more than a thing among other things, having lost the transcendence with the otherness. Therefore, mental illness is, for Binswanger, expressed by the modification of fundamental structures and structural bonds of the being-in-the-world, the very existential *a priori*.

To be in the world, according to Binswanger, is the experience that throws light on the structure of human subjectivity as transcendence. A psychotic generally does not perceive

himself/herself as a complete, separate, individual Self, as a subject, as someone that is different from an It, a thing, an object. As Laing underlines «such a person is not unable to experience himself “together with” others or “at home” in the world» (20). Being out of the world, in mental diseases, is the consequence of a pathological condition that does not follow a decision. Binswanger in his *Daseinanalyse* (1953) (21) argued that a psychotic lives an inadequate being in the world. It depends on the incapacity of perceiving herself/himself like a subject whovoid takes a distance from the objects. Broadly speaking in mental diseases becomes evident the transformation of fundamental structure of the human being (22, 23), the relation with space, time and with the factuality of the existence: they are in the world but they cannot use of the world. It limits their understanding and their willing, functions without which cannot be given any proper experience of reality and of the Self.

From this viewpoint, it is incorrect to say that psychotics live out of the world; more properly people with mental disease find, in the alienated condition, the only way to be in the world. Precisely they inhabit the world as they were objects, they are in the world as mere presences. Binswanger’s use of the phenomenological method – as Ghaemi argues – is the trait that makes his work still «useful to contemporary psychiatry» although «contemporary mainstream psychiatry distanced from existential psychiatry (Husserl, Jaspers. Szasz, Laing)» (19).

LOSS OF REALITY

At this point of the investigation the concept of “loss of reality” should be better explained. From a phenomenological point of view, and especially for Binswanger, this kind of deprivation of the concrete basically means a sort of detachment from the world of life. As Firman and Gila underlines (2010) (24), anxiety, nothingness, anguish, angst, and dread, are the consequences of a fracture of the existential link between the human person and the world-of-life.

Giving the fact that individual identity is primarily expressed by the relation with the other things and with the others individuals, it therefore comes that any difficulty to relate with the outer space displays the condition for an emotional, cognitive and relational earthquake of the self. The phenomenological approach to life considers a cogent argument for the existence of the outer world the original acquaintance with the world of life. According to the grounding principles of Husserl’s philosophy (25) and aware of the intimate link between subject and object of

experience, Binswanger assumed that the constitutive links of the natural experience do not properly work in psychosis (26). This intuition focuses on the main consequence of the loss of the world: the empirical experience does not correctly feed the barycenter of the human person (the pure Ego or transcendental Ego) anymore. The human subject becomes unable to perceive the sense and the value of the outer space.

What is basically failed, the Swiss psychiatrist argued in his essay about the *Three Forms of Failed Daseins*, is the natural experience, that's to say the ordinary experience of the world ruled by the pure Ego. The transcendental Ego to which Binswanger refers assuming aspects of Husserl's philosophy, is not totally comparable with the idealistic entity theorized by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (27). In some respect, the transcendental Ego is the condition for having and doing the experience, in other regards it is the *organon* of the phenomenological knowledge with which something essential of things can be grasped (28). Nevertheless, the loss of being, at the very heart of the pathological experience of void (29) or derealization, could be interpreted as a clash between the self and the objects, which cannot be manipulated. Binswanger gained this insight from Heidegger, as Ghaemi argues:

«When, for some reason, the objects fail to perform the use Dasein makes of them, due to some “obstacle,” they become unavailable, and then Dasein becomes aware of their independent existence outside of Dasein. Then Dasein faces them in the traditional subject-object relationship» (19).

CONCLUSION

The increasing rate of psychological and psychic pathologies diagnosed in the COVID-19 pandemic era (30, 31, 32) calls for a deeper analysis of the relation between humans and the environment. Philosophy can fill the gap by focusing the existential link with the world of life, through the lens of a systemic approach (8,10) in which the intimate discomforts of the persons are interpreted as emergent properties of multiple processes of interrelations among humans, living entities, the natural environment, the social environment and so on. Within this theoretical frame, we should recognize that Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato si* traced the right interdisciplinary path for understanding how crucial is the detachment from the world of life in order to diagnose and to treat a cluster of multifaced disturbances belonging to the intimate ground of the individual, such as depression, anxiety, despair, sloth, so deeply rooted in the story of the

humankind. This paper sought to sketch a wider perspective in which those pathologies of the soul may be included.

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