

The dark night of the soul: what does this phrase mean in philosophy?

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Paul Brunton details with great precision in several of his notes the meaning of this peculiar concept of "dark night". The expression itself corresponds to the title of a poem by the 16th century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. A simple internet search will show us quite a few articles dealing with this concept, and although most are faithful to St. John's original meaning, ultimately, everyone makes their own interpretations.

As a preamble before PB's notes, here is the brief summary found to date on Wikipedia:

The Dark Night of the Soul (La noche oscura del alma) is a phase of passive purification of the spirit in the mystical development, as described by the 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet St. John of the Cross in his treatise Dark Night (Noche Oscura), a commentary on his poem with the same name. It follows after the second phase, the illumination in which God's presence is felt, but this presence is not yet stable. The author himself did not give any title to his poem, which together with this commentary and the Ascent of Mount Carmel (Subida del Monte Carmelo) forms a treatise on the active and passive purification of the senses and the spirit, leading to mystical union.[1]

In modern times, the phrase "dark night of the soul" is used to describe a crisis of faith or a difficult, painful period in one's life.

The poem: Dating and subject

The poem of St. John of the Cross, in eight stanzas of five lines each, narrates the journey of the soul to the mystical union with God. The time or place of composition are not certain. It is likely that the poem was written between 1577 and 1579. It has been proposed that the poem was composed while John was imprisoned in Toledo, although the few explicit statements in this regard are unconvincing and second-hand.[2]

The journey is called "dark night" in part because darkness represents the fact that the destination "God" is unknowable, as in the 14th-century mystical classic The Cloud of Unknowing; both pieces are derived from the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the 6th century. Further, the path per se is unknowable. The "dark night" does not refer to the difficulties of life in general,[3] although the phrase has been taken to refer to such trials.

Below are PB's notes with his particular vision of the concept adjusted to his own philosophy:

Note: We have tried to maintain a certain order in the exposition of the notes, but even so the reader will observe that the same concepts and ideas appear both in notes exposed more at the beginning and towards the end, and also with very similar descriptions. PB wrote most of them in different periods independently, which may explain this reiterative conception. Be that as it may, in the selection presented here we have preferred, despite the repetitions, to present the notes as they were originally written and let each one reflect its own uniqueness.

The Short Path is a cheerful Path, a Path of happiness. Just before this begins, the aspirant may experience the Dark Night of the Soul. He feels utterly helpless, has no feeling of spiritual Reality. It is a melancholy time—no feeling of spirituality or longing for it. He is neither worldly nor spiritual. He feels alone and abandoned and separated by a wall from his Guru. He feels God has forgotten him. This dark night may last a short time or long years. He is unable to read spiritual things, or think about them. There is no desire for ordinary things either. He feels sad and disappointed and may even try suicide. In this unhappiness even those who love him cannot bring him comfort. In both hemispheres, Western and Eastern, there is a saying: the night is darkest just before dawn. He is on the lowest point. After that, the Short Path brings back the Joy—just like clouds moving away from the Sun. >

>The best advice is, first, that it will not last forever; he must have patience. Second, he must have hope. Then he reaches a better level than ever before. The Dark Night of the Soul does not come to every seeker. It is like a shadow thrown by the Sun. When the Sun appears in the subconscious, the shadows arise. But it is the beginning of a great inner change. It is not a wasted time; there is a great deal of work going on—but in the subconscious—to root out the ego. It is being done by the Overself. It is a sign of Grace, but the aspirant nevertheless feels unhappy.

The true quest leads for a time through the dark lonely forest of inner poverty, where the man has nothing to boast of, is nothing to be proud of, and experiences nothing to compensate for the worldly life which he has sacrificed. It is indeed a dark night of the soul.

When the dark night comes, its effect stuns him. His eager aspirations fade away into despondency and his spiritual exercises fall into disuse. Nothing that happens around him seems to matter, and everything seems so aimless, futile, or trivial. He has to force himself to go on living outwardly as usual. His will is listless and his emotion leaden. He feels inwardly dead, hardly aware of anything except his own state. The experiences and surroundings that each day brings him are passed through as in a dream.

He feels distant, bloodless, aloof, unemotional. The world appears as if in a dream, seems unreal on awakening. He is unable to take it seriously, to be moved by its sights with any feeling let alone with passion's force. He is indifferent to its drama. Life in it is a weary round. The description of these feelings corresponds to the Dark Night of the Soul.

If in some ways he learns to lessen egoism and practise humility, in other ways he gains a larger easier assurance. If he is now willing, to a certain extent, to be deflated, he feels he is standing nonchalantly and calmly on firmer ground than before. Perhaps this is all a play, not to be taken too seriously, for the real trial, the worst test, the last great agony, will come later—either through the terrible loneliness of the Dark Night of the Soul, or the painful crucifixion of the ego before Ascension, Liberation, and Fulfilment.

Upon those who really do aspire to the very highest there descends the dread phenomenon of the dark night of the soul. When later they emerge from this awful experience, they emerge with all vanity ground down to powder and all pride burnt down to ash: it is better in the frail state of human nature to have nothing to burn, to hide our occult experiences from the knowledge of others.

The sombre loneliness experienced during the Dark Night of the Soul is unique. No other kind of loneliness duplicates it either in nature or acuteness, although some may approach it. It creates the feeling of absolute rejection, of being an outcast.

Hope withers in the heart and joy is put away during this dark night of the soul. The man once eager, passionate, and ardent in his aspiration, becomes dried and sapless.

When the dark night of the soul falls he may find himself entering a desolate apathy, a loss of interest in things and matters for which before he had a keen appetite. Nought is the consolation to be found in surroundings and persons who formerly raised his enthusiasm.

When he enters the dark night of the soul, life becomes unreal and hollow. He is playing a role in a stage play, but it is all acting, it is not real. He has lost the basic interest in life and he performs what he has to do like a mechanical robot.

To the informed quester, the dark night of the soul inside him is simply another phase of his growth. It is no more to be feared than the coming of dark night of the world outside him is to be feared.

Few are willing to make this change so Nature often forces it upon them by plunging them into "the dark night of the soul."

It all seems so utterly futile, so bleak, so useless during the dark night of the soul. But wait—patience and more patience has positive results.

When he reaches this condition wherein his whole being seems emptied of hope and light, of certainty and reality, he learns the dread truth that nothing in himself can be relied on and that nobody outside himself can help him. This is the lesson of the "dark night of the soul."

The dark nights which come to the inner man, when he feels deprived of peace and hope or especially when he feels utterly deserted by the Overself, are as necessary to educate him as the bright days when joy fills him because of the divine nearness.

Dark Night of the Soul: In passing through this, the greatest humiliation he has ever experienced, and passing through it resignedly, patiently, and without rebellion, he reduces the ego to a cipher, and destroys its power over him.

This is perhaps the greatest test of all, this phase of the aspirant's career which has been called "the dark night of the soul." Any one or all of several different causes may bring it on, any one or all of several different results may ensue.

In that terrible darkness he will find himself absolutely alone, able to depend on nothing else than what he finds within his own innermost being. Without anyone to guide him and with none to companion him, he will have to learn an utter self-reliance if he is successfully to gain one of these results. It is useless to complain of the terror of this experience for, from the first moment that he gave his allegiance to this quest, he unconsciously invited its onset. It had to come even though the day of its coming was yet far off.

It is not only by the experience of feeling at times the presence of God that an aspirant may develop inwardly: it may also happen by the equivalent non-experience, by feeling quite deserted by God, quite left alone! This—the "dark night of the soul"—is just as essential.

It is unfair of those who perceive the limitations of the intellect to decry books. Only if they find themselves suffering from the Dark Night of the Soul for a time are books likely to be of little service or make little appeal. At all other times inspired work can give some reassurance or restore some calm, just as perceptive work can give needed intellectual food. But if, during the press of personal preoccupations, they do nothing more than remind us of larger issues, they still render a service.

This period of crisis which may descend upon a Quester and which has been called the dark night of the soul is a period of spiritual stagnation, moral discouragement, and mental fatigue. Nothing and nobody seems able or even willing to help him and books themselves become useless, arid, and futile. Not only can he proceed no farther, but there seems no point in trying to do so. Yet, as I have often pointed out before, it is in this crisis when he seems most deserted that he is really being most guided, guided from a path, the Long Path, which has reached its end towards the Short Path, which he must now begin to travel.

If the end of the Long Path is spiritual stagnation, this is not to be taken to mean that the Long Path is not worth entering, nor that its efforts are valueless and so much time wasted. That would be an error. This so-called stagnation is really the "dark night of the soul," in Spanish Saint John of the Cross' phrase. It makes the man ready to receive grace.

However tirelessly and relentlessly he pursues the Long Path, he may come one day to the tragic discovery that the ideal it proposes to him embodies a humanly impossible perfection. With that discovery he will fall into a numb inertness, a pathetic and hopeless state which could even bring his overwrought mind not far from a breakdown. He may feel alone and deserted. He may enter into the dark night of the soul, as some mystics name it. His ego will feel crushed. He will not know what to do, nor even have the strength of will to do anything more. At this point he must wait... out of bleakness and weakness there will presently come a guidance, bidding him respond affirmatively to a suggestion, a book, or a teacher directing him toward what is really his first step on the Short Path.