

The Problem of Unbearable Pain

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In the essay, I deal with the problem of unbearable pain, which, to my mind, is the essence of the problem of evil and suffering. I distinguish between two types of pain. The first type of pain is pain with a potential for utility (while in the case of this type of pain, the potential may remain unrealized). The significance of this type of pain lies in the development and education of the interaction with the self and the surrounding environment of the individual experiencing it. Another type of pain evident in human experience is unbearable pain. Unlike the first type of pain, it lacks the inherent potential for utility, and unbearable pain can only be destructive and harmful. I pose the following question: why does the sphere of human perception, with all its variability, have boundaries that necessarily incorporate the realm of unbearable pain, considering that this pain serves no useful function as in the case of the first type of pain? Acknowledging the inherent irresolvability of this inquiry, I propose some considerations on the meaning of the domain of perceiving unbearable pain as experienced by the human being.

1. In my mind, the problem of evil and suffering boils down to the problem of the meaning of pain. Pain can be classified as follows. Within the realm of human experience, it may manifest as physical or mental, and it can also possess either potential utility or lack thereof. Pain that is considered “useful” (albeit this potential may remain untapped) facilitates personal development and instructs individuals in navigating their surroundings. The primary role of pain, as viewed through the lens of evolutionary biology, is rooted in its educational utility.

2. Another differentiation that arises in the context of pain pertains to its categorization as either bearable or unbearable. I posit that the latter represents a form of pain devoid of potential utility, and can be defined as only destructive. It could tentatively be suggested that unbearable pain distinguishes itself by preventing the consciousness from distancing or dis-identifying itself from the experience both during and subsequent to its direct impact. I contend that pain with the capacity for utility is

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bearable, whereas unbearable pain is invariably destructive. This implies that unbearable pain lacks practical value as it fails to educate. Only the bearable pain is endowed with an educational function.

Thus the question that I pose in the context of theodicy: Why does unbearable pain exist?

3. Indeed, here is a domain of human perception/consciousness. This realm is expansive enough yet constrained and shaped distinctively for various species. Concerning the realm of perception, the boundaries of this domain diverge substantially between humans and animals, and the perceptual realms among different species of animals vary significantly as well.

4. The recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated how biased, flexible, fickle, and limited the sphere of sensual perception is for us as human beings. What was considered delicious before infection often totally changed after the illness.

The problem with pain I see is that the very flexible and fickle configuration of the sphere of human perception, both sensual and mental, for unknown reasons includes, besides all other areas, the area of unbearable pain, and not solely the pain endowed with potential utility. But, the area of perception related to unbearable pain, when being actualized, only destroys the personality of its bearer. Hence, the presence of unbearable pain within our sensual framework, as well as other sentient beings, remains a perplexing conundrum.

6. For instance, it would have been conceivable to have such an arrangement of a living being as follows: initially experiencing pain which also holds potential utility, then progressing to a higher level of discomfort, yet not to the point of being unbearable, and ultimately, upon reaching a certain threshold, immediate death. Such an arrangement of a human being would lack the element of unbearable pain, useless for our existence and development. However, in reality, we possess a different structure, including this element within our sensory domain.

7. The concept of unbearable pain plays a significant role in Christian myth. Christian theology acknowledges the existence, among other forms of pain, of the realm of unbearable pain and asserts that God is well acquainted with it, being personally involved in such suffering. God knows this pain so deeply that, in the Incarnation, He Himself immersed into it, endured it, lived through it, and conquered it on the Cross. Thus, Christian theology acknowledges the very phenomenon of unbearable

pain and considers it crucial. However, in my view, Christian theology remains silent on the meaning of the presence of unbearable pain within the domain of human perception and of its origin. It does not explain why bearable pain would not suffice. This question remains a mystery.

8. However, further reflections and observations regarding the phenomenon of unbearable pain can be put forth.

Indeed, just as the realm of human perception encompasses, unclear why, an area of the unbearable, it also includes an area with an opposite sign, where the sensation of indescribable height and fullness becomes possible to experience. There seems to be a certain symmetry: the irrationally present sphere of unbearable pain within us, and a similarly irrationally bestowed opposite sphere. Therefore, one could reverse the thesis: if the latter exists, the sensation of indescribable fullness of being (caught up to the third heaven, as described by the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17), then symmetrically, there must also be the former, the possibility of the opposite sphere of perception - the sphere of unbearable pain. It could be argued that God has structured the inner world of man in such a way that in addition to the normative sphere of perception, the givenness of which is rationally understandable, this sphere encompasses super-normative areas - the feeling of indescribable fullness of being and its opposite, the feeling of unbearable pain. However, experiencing unbearable pain within the confines of our current existence is much simpler than reaching the feeling of indescribable fullness of being.

9. There is another consideration: the sphere of unbearableness (physical and/or mental unbearable pain) into which one can fall is always implicitly present in our everyday existence. We do not often think directly about it, but instinctively we fear it with panic. This sphere of unbearableness, yet unmanifested but constantly threatening us, serves as the invisible horizon of our ordinary existence, a black hole within us that is not directly visible but always latently present in our inner world, centering it. The region of unbearableness is one of the power centers inside us that rules us and somehow affects the trajectory of our lives. Thus, if God cares about how the trajectories of human life unfold, this gives significance to the sphere of unbearableness as one of the power centers of the inner world and instincts influencing this trajectory.

10. Finally, I would say that the fact of positioning of us by God in the face of the imminent threat of unbearableness hints that our very existence and trajectories of our lives are not a game but are given to us



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seriously. Since the states presented to us of unbearable pain and its opposite, the state of ultimate fullness of life, are profoundly serious states.