

The curse of everyday suffering: An ethical study

Timo Airaksinen¹

Abstract

I discuss everyday situations that bring about and contain suffering. We must take it seriously and distinguish between mental and physical pain and full-fledged suffering that entails dysphoria. I focus on morally relevant cases where I am innocent and contrast them with cases where my suffering is my fault. I discuss cases where we harm others and suffer from guilt and remorse. Our moral emotions cause extra suffering; sometimes, a person's suffering is vicarious. Finally, I tackle the argument that suffering develops the sufferer's virtues. I believe suffering is an intrinsic evil, and its good consequences are controversial and, at best, incidental. One may also argue that suffering ruins the victim's character. This question may belong to empirical psychology.

Keywords: harm, guilt, virtue, remorse, self-presentation, ketman, vicarious suffering, typical mind fallacy, ideal mind fallacy

Everyday suffering: A brief guide

To set the stage, we limit the types and situations of human suffering. We are not interested in the lives lived in “quiet desperation,” à la Henri David Thoreau (1995, Ch. 1). This apt but melancholy notion refers to culturally induced depression whose variable causes are and remain intractable, as well as perhaps, uninteresting to a philosopher. Sigmund Freud talks about the discontent of civilization and the distressing modern culture that creates a plethora of mental problems and their associated forms of suffering (Freud, 1961). Perhaps Thoreau and Freud talk about the same thing. Everyday life is not always good; hence, our mental troubles can be a natural and even a healthy reaction to its deprivations.

Everyday life is challenging, risky, and sometimes even tragic. We must accept that and carry on with our lives. We all suffer but hide our battle scars, showing a brave face outward. Our everyday roles – how we present ourselves – should project an optimistic, dynamic, and successful personal image (Goffman, 1956). We practice impression management. Our joys and happiness are public, and our suffering private. We must not bother others with our sorrows; we do not expect other people to identify with them, and it would be too stressful for us to identify with other people's worries. We pay attention only when they reach extraordinary levels – but at this point, we may have already crossed the borders of everyday life. Perhaps we can define everyday suffering as a personal matter that may not interest others, except the family and closest friends, if they exist. Many people suffer alone, relying on professional and pharmaceutical support. And yet, everyday suffering knows no limit. Pathological depression, severe anxiety, psychotic disorders, and suicides are not out of the question in everyday life. Some people become alcoholics, abuse drugs, and behave violently at home and in public places. At this point, everyday suffering leads to extraordinary consequences. Everyday life is not a closed system.

We may indeed retire to quiet desperation, but this is just the endgame that follows from anxious self-examination, fervent moral debate, and a flood of practical reasoning back and forth, for and against, concerning remorse, guilt, resentment, and their consequences (Taylor, 1985). We reason to determine who is guilty of my suffering and what could be done. I will show that most of this moral labor is incoherent and inconclusive in a way we fail to amend. If this is true, our reasons-

¹ University of Helsinki; email: timo.airaksinen@helsinki.fi; ORCID: 0000-0001-8850-418X

for-action model of psychological action explanation seems trivial. Rationality becomes a ritual, a ritual of rationality. We may aim at rationality, but the relevant cases are so complicated and interpretationally controversial that no definite conclusions follow. We must act, explain, and justify our behavior without valid reasoning. Rational reasoning and debate are process notions that fail as success notions. We discuss essentially contested cases. Our conflicting viewpoints do not cohere because we cannot find a shared “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986). Even the Ideal Observer will stumble in these deeply personal situations.

Kevin Hart explains Dr. Samuel Johnson’s view of everyday suffering as follows. Hart says, “Each day is charged with moral significance,” and then quotes him:

As daily experience makes it evident that misfortunes are unavoidably incident to human life, that calamity will neither be repelled by fortitude, nor escaped by flight, neither awed by greatness, nor eluded by obscurity; ... Nor are these [Christian] obligations more evident than the neglect of them; the neglect of which daily examples may be found, and from daily calamities arise. Almost all the miseries of life, ... are the consequences of these duties (Hart, 1999, p. 166).

Prima facie, this is not quite consistent. Johnson thinks we could avoid unavoidable misfortunes and calamities if we behaved morally. However, morality cannot help if the calamities are unavoidable. Perhaps Johnson means that everyday calamities cannot be avoided in our wicked world, unlike in a Christian utopia. This sounds implausible. When my house burns down, no moral failures may explain the event. Many everyday calamities are accidental, which means they occur independently of what we do, want, and plan. Sometimes, the world turns against us, and then we suffer. However, much suffering is based on morally relevant human interaction – these are the most interesting cases. They are open to discussion and debate, but as I will show, moral responsibility and guilt will remain hidden in too many crucial cases.

But what is suffering? It is a dysphoric mental state that contains real and metaphoric pain, fear, discomfort, anxiety, agony, and anguish. We feel hurt, worried, and unhappy. We are strongly motivated to avoid suffering and feel fear when we see it coming (Massin, 2020). We can seek bodily pain and even enjoy it, as the sexually oriented SM-people and religious ascetics and penitents do (Airaksinen, 2018). This shows the difference between bodily pain and suffering: one may enjoy pain but not suffering. Mental pain one cannot enjoy. Also, one may suffer without pain, for instance, when one is severely depressed. Many educational systems relied on physical pain (Pearsall, 1971).

Any psychological approach to feelings such as suffering is vulnerable to two logical fallacies: the Typical Mind Fallacy and the Ideal Mind Fallacy:

[U]p until the 1870s psychologists and philosophers found nothing especially problematic about mental imaging. But that was before Galton’s *Inquiries into the Human Faculty*, 1883, which, as William James put it, “made an era in descriptive Psychology.” For, as James goes on to say in his *Principles of Psychology*, 1890, chapter 18, until Galton’s pioneering work “it was supposed by all philosophers that there was a typical human mind which all individual minds were like ...” (Berman, 2021, Ch. 1/6).

Humans are not similar; we feel differently, and our fears and hopes vary. We are different. We cannot peek into other minds, leaving us without models to imitate. We tend to synchronize our thinking with others’ conventional but unreliable verbal reports, making the typical mind fallacy difficult to recognize and avoid. Another fallacy is that of the ideal mind. Too many moral

philosophers and moralistic thinkers share Immanuel Kant's view that less-than-ideally moral minds are pathological in the sense of being independent of moral law. Pathological means non-ideal. When they write moral psychology, they focus on highly idealized models of the mind. They discuss free, good, and blameless cases. Their focus is on a virtuous person in the Platonic sense. As is easy to see, this leads to the conclusion that the ideal mind is the typical mind and vice versa, which means that the two minds are equivalent. I try to avoid such a bogus starting point. My approach to personal suffering is, of course, problematic. Whom do I describe? We are all different. The reader decides. Those whose private experiences and intuitions differ from mine may still learn something about their fellow human beings. One thing is certain: we want to avoid the fallacies of the typical and ideal mind.

Construing the guilt in innocent cases

We suffer in circumstances that are not of our own making. We are innocent, and yet we must suffer. This allows two varieties: I can accuse others of causing my suffering, or I cannot. However, we identified a residual class of innocent cases: I could have done something to prevent the harmful event.² Two examples: An obvious culprit exists when a car hits my child. Second, no culprit exists when the child fell from a tree she had climbed alone and unattended. If I feel innocent, my suffering is simplified and mitigated. I have no regrets, which makes my suffering unidimensional. I suffer only because of my child's harm. However, much suffering is multidimensional because we try to blame someone, and this creates moral and mental problems that entail anxiety and other painful emotions. Why not accept that the case is innocent, if we can, instead of complicating it with such uncomfortable concerns as blame and guilt? The KISS principle applies here, too: "Keep it simple, stupid." I may think I did not properly instruct my kid about the dangers of traffic and tree climbing; this unnecessary worry is a source of my regret and remorse. I should keep my suffering simple.

I suffered innocently when it was not my fault. In other words, I am in no relevant causal relation to the causes of the suffering. Suppose my house burns down and, with it, my valuable collections and lifetime work. My suffering is caused by the fire caused by a lightning strike, which I cannot causally influence. I also suffer innocently when another person causes my suffering without my causally relevant interaction with them. Someone does not like my public appearance and attacks me. I did not interact with this person. A woman is sexually assaulted because of her revealing party dress. The cause of the attack is her dress, but because of the missing interaction, she is innocent.

The innocent victim suffers a mental shock and a painful mental trauma, but once she gets over the worst effects, it is only natural that she starts asking questions. Was the lightning strike preventable? Did someone make a mistake that caused the fire after the strike; who is responsible? Here, we find a threatening breakdown of the original innocent case. The anxious assault victim asks whether she could have avoided the assault by dressing more modestly. The problematic subjunctive is here:

If the woman had a less revealing outfit, they would not have sexually harassed her.

This is true but misleading from the liberal point of view. However, revealing the dress is, it does not justify an attack. The dress – but not the woman – is causally connected to the causes of the attack, but this connection is now irrelevant. We may have a causalistic action explanation but no moral justification. The victim may have a hard time remembering this, namely, that her case is

² I follow Joel Feinberg's (1984, I/1) definition of terms like harm, injury, etc.

an innocent one. She should not blame herself. Emotions typically lead one astray. The culprit may refer to the above subjunctive and claim that it justifies his action. In this case, the victim and the victimizer may agree, which is a scandalous joint mistake.

Even in simple accident cases, like the fire in the house, people may find it difficult not to ask questions and present claims of blame that unnecessarily complicate the case. Doing so relieves one's anxiety but, at the same time, may, paradoxically, enhance suffering. Short-term relief flares up long-term suffering when the simple case becomes complicated. Perhaps, I hope, I will find a way to take somebody to court. In a litigious society, this is what we do. This move promises financial compensation and works as a short-term anxiety release valve. The motive may be justifiable if not artificial and greedy. Here is an example of deeply ambiguous practical reasons no one can keep track of: suing is motivated in two different, mutually independent, and even incompatible ways that are greed and anxiety relief. Or, if one's motives are mutually compatible, they together represent overkill because one reason would be enough to motivate the victim. Which one is the actual, true motive?

To blame and sue a third party alleviates self-accusations, which are painfully anxious and notoriously hard to bear. Their form is, again, subjunctive:

The fire would not have occurred had I made all the necessary fire-proofing preparations.

Obviously, I did not make all the necessary preparations. My planning was not good because my house burned down, which makes the conditional subjunctive. It also makes my reasoning circular because I infer the system's defects from the fire and fire from the defects. Suppose I found a way to sue the building contractor. Would the personal accusation subside? Not necessarily, because I can still reason as follows:

This would not have happened had I chosen the contractor more carefully and inspected their work.

This sentence may be accepted as trivially true. The problem with these subjunctives is that they are resilient against all attempts to exorcise them. You may realize you are trying to do what should not be done, but you are still emotionally driven to blame someone. You reject the idea of an accident. The only rational strategy is to appeal to an Act of God.³ People unintentionally harm others, and we still blame them. To do so, we manufacture a conviction that the harm depends on their carelessness and neglect.

I wanted to show that innocent cases should but may not remain undisturbed by spurious claims and arguments. The victim tries to find a culprit where no culprit may exist and, simultaneously, blames oneself – both cases are specious when the causes of the harm and suffering are accidental. In accidental cases, the victim is innocent, and the culprit is missing. Nevertheless, accepting the cases as accidental is a massive task. We want to find a culprit, or perhaps we will create him. Lawcourts do this all the time. Suffering refuses to stay fully innocent. I drank too much and crashed my car. The culprit is the bartender who served me my last drink. A youngster broke into my weapons cabinet and later caused an accident. I am the culprit because my cabinet was not breakproof. Accidental cases of a person harming others are tricky because accidents and their relation to responsibility are so difficult to define. Edward Westermarck shows the amazing variety and cross-cultural relativity of the ideas of responsibility (Westermarck, 1906).

³ An "Act of God" clause or force majeure clause is a contractual provision where the parties attempt to limit their liability in the event of nonperformance of the contract or injuries caused as a result of an event defined to be outside the control of the parties (<https://incorporated.zone/act-of-god-clause/>).

Sometimes, an accident is just an accident and not something else. Perhaps everything is avoidable in some possible alternate world, but one should not build too much on this idea, regardless of how much anxiety relief it may promise. The question is, was it avoidable in this world of ours? Suffering is a private emotion that does not justify expansive strategies that force others to share and participate. My suffering does not mean some other people should suffer, too. Such a transfer of guilt and suffering is immoral.

First-person victimization

We must expect suffering at the hands of others. People hurt and harm each other intentionally and unintentionally. We are active, and we all have our projects and goals. We work to realize them. Hence, collateral damage may occur, or if it means accidental damage and harm, some projects and their goals also bring about non-accidental and non-collateral suffering. A simple example is the selection of the best candidates for a job, which will disappoint and hurt the rejected hopefuls – this is a systemic and not a collateral case. Suppose the process was fair. Hence, we cannot complain; we were not harmed, although we suffer. Unfair and otherwise questionable processes are common sources of resentment. One suffers unfairly – a bitter idea that calls for restitution and, perhaps, revenge.

I harm others, and thus, they blame me. They feel hurt, and they suffer. They resent me. They would hurt me back if they could, but this may not be possible in civilized life. I may feel guilty because I am the culprit who should feel regret and remorse. I may pity them (Taylor, 1985). I said I was sorry and I wouldn't do it again. They still hate me. This is a heavy load to bear and a common source of the victimizer's suffering. I fell in love elsewhere and left my young family. The harm is systemic, and they hate me now – with a good reason, I admit. This bothers me now and will haunt me till the end of my days. My guilt feelings prove distressing and persistent. The possibilities are limitless. My wife hates me because I drink and occasionally abuse her, which worries me and makes me remorseful. I pity her, but I cannot stop drinking. This is a collateral case: my drinking harms me and sometimes causes damage to the family. The difference between divorce and drinking cases is that in the first, the damage cannot be avoided, and in the second, it can.

Some agents are tougher than others – no typical mind exists – but only the callous or very dull do not suffer; they have no conscience – and such people still figure in everyday life. They live by their peculiar values and follow twisted rules and norms; others are driven to depression and suffer from nasty guilt feelings; some are more resilient or simply insensitive and dismiss such mental problems – without being callous. Here, we stipulate that we study average, reasonably sensitive, morally aware, conscientious, and caring people. We bypass oversensitive neurotics and overtly dull or callous minds. We study moral problems and the suffering they cause to ordinary people in normal circumstances in everyday life. However, we do not postulate ideal minds and refrain from calling my sample of characters the typical mind.

Erotic love is an endless source of suffering. Desire is a possessive and predatorial sentiment in the Western canon of love and marriage. Together with sexual desire, love may justify deeply questionable behavior that, at the same time, remains socially functional and, therefore, acceptable. Let me analyze typical examples. A woman feels she must get that man, who happens to be married with children. She seduces him, and the wife finds out and leaves the man. Suppose that law does not sanction such behavior; for instance, adultery is not a legal issue, and divorce is a mere

formality, say, in Scandinavia.⁴ Nevertheless, the consequences can be devastating, including violence and murder. Jealousy is a mighty sentiment, especially when it is connected to resentment. Agents feel the need to justify their behavior, and their audience ponders the rational acceptability of the offered justification. In my example above, the seducer's love justifies her action, but her audience may explain it by referring to a predatorial instinct. The woman says I want him because I love him. She desires the man and calls it love, trying to make the man fall in love with her. In the end, they may love each other, but at this point, the damage is already done. What started as an acquisitive desire resulted in love. Her initial action is not difficult to explain; at first, it was hardly justifiable, but in the end, it was justified by mutual love.

Should she pity the wife and children? Would it be irrational to pity one's victims? The culprit may well think as follows:

If I had not seduced him, the family would still be together – it is a pity they are not.

Is this inconsistent? Can it be said in good faith? I do not think so. Think of its next iteration:

If I had not seduced him, the family would still be happily together – it is a pity they must suffer.

In the first case, she pities the family because of the harm, now defined as a broken family. However, her pity sounds hollow because the broken family was not collateral damage; in this case, it followed systematically from her actions as their necessary side-effect. She could not get the man without breaking the family. In the second case, suffering is not necessary in the same way. We can imagine that it will not occur, although we expect it to happen in normal cases. Thus, it is collateral damage and invites the culprit's vicarious suffering that, combined with guilt, is a valid source of meaningful remorse. She comprehends and vicariously shares the wife's suffering and resentment and pities her, especially because she is now the principal source of those sorrows (Rescher, 1975, Ch. 1).

To alleviate her guilt feelings, she may try the following argument from necessity:

If I had known an alternate route, I would not have behaved as I did and caused the family harm and suffering.

If she finds this subjunctive passable, she may eliminate all her budding regrets – you do not regret what you must do.⁵ This justificatory move is difficult to evaluate but is not strong because she could have always left the act undone. She must face her guilt and the wife's resentment:

If I had not done it, I would not have caused suffering to others.

Now the question is, is the following ad hoc reasoning acceptable?

My pain ex-ante was nasty, but if I had not done what I did, it would have been intolerable and more intense than the wife's pain post hoc.

This may sound like a possible justification if the culprit thinks her pain in toto would have been more than the wife's pain. However, such a simple utility calculation dismisses guilt as a negative psychological factor; her actions eliminated her initial suffering but made her guilty of the family's suffering. The wife's suffering is guilt-free – what does that imply to the utility calculations? Suppose it is true that the culprit would have suffered more than the wife did. Suppose guilt is a

⁴ This was not always the case. In 17th-century Sweden, adultery was punishable by death, especially if the couple eloped. These laws were derived directly from the Mosaic Law.

⁵ This is not an instance of "Ought implies can."

form of mental suffering, and we get the following result: the successful culprit suffers from the pain caused by her guilt and vicarious negative emotions like pity, and therefore, after success, her mind is still troubled. When we calculate the wife's innocent and simple pain and compare it with the guilty and complex pain of the culprit, we may imagine the result. The wife's pain -100 points. The culprit's pain before seduction was -200, and after seduction, 0, but after adding guilt and pity, -100. Given this calculation, the culprit and the wife suffer equally. Yet, her action was well-motivated because she reduced her suffering from -200 to -100, which is a considerable relief factor. I cannot estimate how realistic my example is. However, I am certain the wife's innocent suffering is morally more significant than the culprit's pain reduction. She should not have done it. If she felt she had no alternative, she needed sympathetic help and perhaps psychotherapy. One may be soundly motivated to hurt another person but hardly ever justified. Possible justified cases are related to revenge for the harm and suffering you caused me. Imagine the wife's feelings. Regardless of any Christian duty of forgiveness, one's atavistic moral feelings, such as resentment, demand revenge, which is an anxiety reduction technique with a rational foundation:

Without the threat of revenge, other people could harm me as they like.

A no-revenge principle entails chaos and mayhem in social life. Homo Sapiens is a social species, and hence the revenge principle sounds necessary. If you harm me, I can pay back my suffering to you without feeling guilty. The next step is the principle of the mutual proportionality of the harm caused. In such cases, we are justified in harming others. Sometimes, the law punishes the culprits, but this is not always true, and therefore, the revenge principle must be accepted regardless of the law and its assistance (Airaksinen, 2024). The wife may and will dream of her revenge in the main example above. Such a thought alone offers some consolation to a mind in pain. She may put her trust in cosmic justice, which will separate the new couple and hurt them in the future. Most people tend to entertain such an idea of cosmic justice – the world somehow maintains the moral balance, especially if the good God created it. This is the famous thesis of theodicy in philosophy and theology, meaning “the vindication of God.”

Blaming oneself

These are painful cases where self-blame and remorse dominate. I smoke, and my doctor reads my cancer diagnosis and death sentence. My demise is self-created. I am guilty of my vile suffering, yet I pity myself. Can I blame others? If I can, I open an escape hatch and feel better. Here is a way to save face in a self-serving and self-deceptive manner, which we may call the Martyr's Syndrome:

If I did not live with a smoker, I would have stopped a long time ago.

I may also accuse the people who taught me how and why to smoke and thus helped me to form the habit. Smokers have sued the tobacco industry and blamed its advertising. This is understandable because anxiety and suffering in these cases are maximal. Still, all this is in vain when the threats implied by one's risky behavior have already been realized. This applies, among other risky desires and habits, to alcohol abuse and unhealthy lifestyle issues. The list of voluntary risks is long, including dangerous hobbies and sports, careless sexual behavior, stressful human relationships, and unhealthy working conditions. The key terms are abuse and addiction (Heather & Segal, 2017).

How can I face my misery honestly and honorably, showing moral courage and integrity? If I manage, my self-respect stays intact, and I can face the world proudly and independently. I can say, this is me, and I am fine. If I fail and seek help and relief through dishonest self-pity and deceptive reasoning, I may alleviate my mental pain, but its price is the nagging feeling of my moral failure

– and when the truth hits me, the pain returns. Moral integrity, as a virtue, has its rewards. Alas, such high-minded advice may refer to the Ideal Self, which may not be philosophically advisable.

Think of a bitter and anxious, paralyzed, severely underinsured gymnast whose promising career turns sour because of an accident. She aims at honesty and integrity; how should she think? She may initially blame her decision to take up such a risky sport. However, she should realize that her decision could have been rational, independently of her accident many years later. Initially, she calculated the risks and compared them with the benefits of a successful career as, say, a gymnast. She reviewed the accident statistics and decided that the benefits justify risk-taking. Statistically, the risks are small compared to the sizable benefits and profits. In one way, her decision was reckless, however. The worst that can happen is paralysis and death. This worst-case scenario is truly bad; thus, for her utility calculation to go through, she cannot recognize the minimax principle: minimize the maximal risk, which is paralysis and death. The gymnast is now facing the worst of bad results. If the worst case is rare, most people ignore it – who can blame them? We may well conclude that her initial decision was rational. Now, she must not infer like this:

If I had never started as a gymnast, my body would have stayed fully functional.

This is trivially true, yet he must dismiss such backward-looking subjunctives. She made a rational decision; hence, the presently realized risk is irrelevant. The risk existed; it was never ignored, and things happen. However, she suffers and quite reasonably regrets her bad luck. Occasionally, she may hope she never took up gymnastics, but realizing the immaturity of such a thought, she corrects it.

Such arguments also work for Epicurean drinkers and gourmands who started the plentiful drinks and fine food program without considering its risks (Brillat-Savarin, 1852). The hedonistic lifestyle is often based on slowly and gradually acquired habits, not decisions. They start drinking plonk and, step by step, graduate into the exalted world of fine wine, Cuban cigars, and fine dining. They think it is a wonderfully satisfying lifestyle. They are happy until their doctor tells them the ugly truth, and they stop or die. Some people would rather die; others struggle and suffer to change their lives. They may say, I wish I did not live like that.

Suppose the gourmand gets a deadly liver problem after fifty years of pleasant life. He never made decisions that he could now ponder and blame. All his addictions developed gradually and stayed unnoticeable for a long time. He always assured himself that he could stop anytime without a problem. This means self-deception, which is difficult to shake. Instead of becoming sentimental, the gourmand may have some rational reasons that alleviate his present suffering. He should ask himself, did I live my life well, and then compare the answer to his present low quality of life and its miserable prospects. He may or may not conclude the following. If he is lucky, he has led a good and satisfying life whose total positive value his present and future suffering has not yet greatly influenced. He calculates that he is still ahead, which is to say that considering his whole life, the sum of utility and pleasure is still positive. The value of his life is the past sum of pleasures minus the present and future suffering. Classical Greek thinkers had two seminal ideas. The greatest luck is to die young, and no one should be called happy before his death. Our gourmand may wonder whether he will be called happy when he dies.

Unlucky people live bad lives. They make bad decisions and accidentally drift into positions that offer them only long-term mental pain and, at most, a life of quiet desperation. When they look back in time and anticipate their future, they see mere suffering and negative utility. They have had no chance of living a good life and die happy. As the cynical thinker says, they would have been luckier to die young. Such people have the right to self-pity and remorse. For them, to look back in time is natural, asking what they could have done differently or whether they were predestined

to face all that suffering. Who can blame them? Yet, they are on thin ice if they blame others for their misfortunes. Others may hurt us and accidents happen, but ultimately, a person is responsible for her life and decisions. This moral principle is different from a mere practical norm. The following is true, of course:

My life could have been better if people near me had acted differently.

But this means self-pity and vain regret. It is a trivial factual statement in a complex moral context. The main question here concerns responsibility for one's life, which is mine alone. From this point of view, the above subjunctive takes an opposite meaning, too:

If others near me had acted differently, my life could have been much worse.

External influences are what they are; they work most unpredictably and unexpectedly. It would be best not to use such crutches when unraveling the mysteries of one's life. That is not where one's responsibility is.

Finally, you realize that a lived life is an intrinsic value, which means life is always good from the metaphysical perspective or in theory, if not always in practice. However, much pain and suffering life may contain, it still is worth living – suicide is seldom a good alternative. However, this kind of worth does not entail pleasure and satisfaction. It may entail no hope for a better future or a chance to put the past right. Yet, it is your only life, the most important truth. At the same time, I agree that fates worse than death exist, which justifies suicide and morally necessitates euthanasia. To disagree with this is sheer callousness and religious-moralistic fanaticism. Would you allow the doctors to torture you for the rest of your life simply because you have a natural duty to live? If you agree, you are a fanatic in a sense defined by R. M. Hare: you are ready to suffer however horribly because of an abstract principle you hold valid (Hare, 1963, Ch. 9). Sanctity of life is a good example. When your time is up, it is up, and you better go. Many old people welcome their deaths with good reasons and clear heads. Absolute abstract principles do not belong in practical life. Suffering is always concrete and, in this sense, practical and never abstract.

The spurious value of suffering

Thomas Hobbes writes:

And when the Civill Sovereign is an Infidel, every one of his own Subjects that resisteth him, sinneth against the Laws of God (for such as are the Laws of Nature,) and rejecteth the counsell of the Apostles, that admonisheth all Christians to obey their Princes, and all Children and Servants to obey they Parents, and Masters, in all things. And for their Faith, it is internall, and invisible; They have the licence that Naaman had, and need not put themselves into danger for it (Hobbes, 1651, III.43, Or Infidel).

A Christian believer must participate in pagan rites. Still, she can retain her status as a Christian because her faith is independent of her external behavior (also Buruma, 2024, Ch. 5). Czesław Miłosz would say Hobbes's Christian believer practices *ketman* when he pretends to follow the religious laws of the infidel sovereign when he, in fact, silently believes and repeats that Jesus is Christ (Hobbes, *ibid*, The Only Necessary Article of Cristian Faith; Miłosz, 1953, Ch. 3). Hobbes does not see any problem here. However, he reintroduces the age-old problem by utilizing the notion of *ketman* to describe the ideological impasses of the Soviet ideology: one must hide his dangerous but true political convictions. "Miłosz borrowed the term *ketman* from the history of Islamic theology. He found it in the French orientalist Arthur de Gobineau's *Religions and*

Philosophy of Central Asia (1865)” (Mikanowski, 2017; Miłosz, 1953, p. 57), although the problem was obvious and Hobbes, among many others, discussed it. However, ketman goes deeper: “In origin, ketman is a mental defense. It is a way of living with contradiction. It allows those adept at it to create private sanctuaries of the mind, untouched by compromise, even as compromise floods the rest of their lives” (Mikanowski, 2017).

To practice ketman is to respond to a desperate cultural and political situation where one suffers without hope. A male homosexual youth in a conservative environment fails to get out of the closet – he cannot afford it. He must pretend to be what he is not until he is no longer certain of his true identity. Perhaps he marries a woman. He deceives himself by deceiving others. He tries to avoid the imminent disaster by living through another one. His life is painful, and he suffers without hope, which erodes his pride, values, integrity, and ultimately, his self. He is doomed. He must suffer. Ketman is a trap for him, just like it would be for the Hobbesian believer among the infidels.

Although good suffering – suffering is an intrinsic evil – sounds paradoxical, embarrassing, and even cynical, some serious thinkers forcefully argue in its favor. They refuse to see an oxymoron here. For instance, suffering is an intrinsic evil and an instrumental good that can teach us many virtues and ultimately make us better people. Miłosz maintains the opposite. Ketman destroys the person. In her comprehensive, positive review article of Michael Brady’s book *Suffering and Virtue* (Brady, 2018), Nancy Snow writes: “Brady develops a nuanced theory of suffering and relates suffering to other virtues” (Snow, 2021). Suffering is now a virtue when it should be an intrinsic evil, and intrinsic evil cannot be a virtue. Snow writes in a way that, for me, looks dubious. To talk about a “positive attitude towards suffering” sounds like a slip of the tongue if she does not mean the audience’s view or the sufferer’s post hoc self-deception. Alternatively, she must speak of the ideal self, which she understood as typical. But this is misleading. I would not trust a controversial romantic extremist like Friedrich Nietzsche in this profound context. Snow quotes Brady:

On Nietzsche’s view, strength is a matter of a positive attitude towards suffering, adversity, hardship, and the like. I have argued that this general point seems correct, if understood in a virtue-theoretical framework, since suffering is *necessary* for one to develop and express the virtuous traits that constitute strength of character: fortitude, perseverance, courage, resilience, and patience (Snow, 2021, p. 572) (my italics).

The key term here is “necessarily.” If it is a logical necessity, the following would be true:

If one’s excellent character traits developed without suffering, they would not be virtues.

I do not think we should accept this idea. To emphasize suffering in this way sounds, from the point of view of those who suffer, outrageous. Perhaps Brady should talk about pain instead of suffering. The problem is that painful training regimes may not entail suffering. Pain and suffering are two different things. Athletes gladly and happily experience pain in sports but should not suffer. They suffer when they lose. Their rule is, no gain without pain or gain without suffering. The effects of suffering are highly ambiguous when you compare them with pain. Infantrymen suffer in trenches during the war, and some go insane; many grow bitter, but very few come back home – if they come – as better persons. Of course, right-wing militarists claim the opposite. Perhaps we should say an ideal self stays virtuous regardless of how she suffers, but this does not mean she becomes virtuous because she suffers.

In his book, Miłosz argues in detail that persistent suffering tends to lead to ketman, which destroys one’s character. One becomes bitter, self-centered, cruel, socially alienated, and selfish.

One wallows in self-pity. If one does not, one is already virtuous. Snow recognizes the difficulties and leans on the denial of the typical mind. Different persons respond to suffering differently, but Snow does not recognize that some people might regress:

In any event, it is interesting to think about how virtues of strength and virtues of vulnerability might combine in the psychological economies of chronic sufferers. Perhaps the virtues that should be prescribed depend very specifically on the circumstances and moral psychology of sufferers. Virtues of strength could be appropriate for some people, virtues of vulnerability for others, and some combination of the two for yet other sufferers (Snow, 2021, p. 577).

Should I seek and cultivate suffering if I seriously want to develop my virtuous personality? The question is ironic. Perhaps I shun the most extreme versions of suffering, knowing that they may kill me, and focus on their carefully moderated versions. I misbehave and feel sorry afterward. Am I now a better person? Aristotle says we become better people by doing virtuous deeds. Did he forget that we can become virtuous by personal suffering? Or does Snow think we need a repetitive series of the same suffering? Both suggestions are implausibly ironic. In everyday life, we tend to drift from one source of suffering to another, but most cases are unique. The doctors failed to diagnose my serious illness, and now they refuse euthanasia. I harassed women at an office party and lost my dream job. The everyday cases are so varied that no particular message may follow. Some sources of suffering are medical, others are political. This is where ketman works, as Czesław Miłosz shows, concentrating on political cases. In the medical field, cancer patients say they fight their malady, and they are sure they will prevail – this is again ketman as self-deception. Brady and White may call it courage, but courage without honesty is not a virtue.

Here is a quick sketch of a possible answer to Brady and Snow. Perhaps suffering itself does not change the sufferer. What affects the change is the context of suffering. Suppose I suffer alone in a small cabin in the wilderness, or I suffer in the middle of nasty enemies who laugh at me, or I suffer supported by sympathetic people who treat and console me, or I suffer in the middle of fellow sufferers with whom I share my anxieties. Suppose the cause of my suffering is the same in all these cases, yet the sufferers' mental and moral development must vary from case to case. What happens if the context remains the same and the suffering varies? I should say the sufferers' development does not vary. I cannot discuss this hypothesis here.

Christians tend to believe, or must believe, that suffering ennoble the person; this follows from theodicy and is also exemplified by Christ's passion. God created a perfect world where all suffering must be meaningful, which entails its ennobling effects. Meaninglessness has no place in His great plan. But this kind of grand metaphysics is void for those who suffer. "The glorious crown of suffering" sounds like empty rhetoric to them. To clarify this issue, let us look into the following authoritative statement:

Quoting from *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), the major Catholic social teaching document from the Second Vatican Council, St. Pope John Paul II says that intrinsically *evil acts* are any acts "hostile to life itself . . . whatever violates the integrity of the human person . . . whatever is offensive to human dignity," ranging from homicide, genocide, and abortion to deportation, slavery, and subhuman living conditions (<https://uscatholic.org/articles/202010/what-is-intrinsic-evil>) (my italics).

Why do they dismiss torture? Evil acts bring about suffering – that is why they are evil. And they are intrinsically evil because suffering is. Indeed, intrinsic evil "violates the integrity of the

human person” and is “offensive to human dignity.” However, personal growth stops when suffering is “hostile to life,” violates personal integrity, and is offensive to human dignity. Can one argue against this? To say that the more you suffer and the less life, integrity, and dignity you possess, the more you grow as a virtuous person, sounds inconsistent. Think of torture (Wisniewski, 2010). Something goes wrong here because the lack of integrity and dignity necessarily means less virtuous development. Suffering simpliciter is different from suffering that is, figuratively speaking, “hostile to life.” In this Catholic view, such suffering cannot be good in any meaningful way. Why glorify it?

We must take suffering seriously and refuse to play games with it. We cannot avoid suffering, whatever we may do. Some of us suffer more than others, and an unlucky person’s suffering can be indecently horrific. Suffering works like pain; it knows no upper limit – then you die. Suffering is meaningless except as a simple warning: don’t do this, it will bite you. Avoid the misery of a bad life. Avoid major risks, never trust your good luck, and learn by the single-case inductive method. You are stupid, reckless, and doomed if you need more than one experiment to convince you. Yet, much suffering is unavoidable.

Empirical issues

Perhaps the thesis that suffering develops character is an empirical thesis philosophers should not tinker with. If we reject the typical mind thesis, psychologists may study what kinds of minds may benefit from what kinds of suffering and how. However, I do not think psychologists would like to touch on the issue because concepts like virtue and better character are so difficult to operationalize, and suffering is such a sensitive issue when studying real people and their intimate troubles. Such a research project may not get the green light from your university’s friendly research ethics committee.

We can study the relevant intuitions: some people feel that suffering is intrinsic evil without a good-making capacity; others say suffering makes the sufferer better and more virtuous. Why is that so? The issue looks essentially contested. People’s opinions may be unreliable even when they are strong. They suffer, and when they think of it, they feel they have changed for the better – why do they say so? Two possibilities exist when one explains why some people believe in good making suffering. Reaction formation: suffering is an evil state, and as a compensating reaction to it, what is evil must also be good. To deny it sounds pessimistic and fatalistic, which means extra suffering to the suffering person. To affirm feels like a proud and noble reaction that elevates the person. Against the typical mind fallacy, not all people are prone to compensate for their suffering. Who are they?

The second strategy against pure evil comes from behavioral economics. I must change and modify my beliefs, attitudes, and habits and use my mental resources to keep the suffering-related anxiety and dysphoria under control. In this way, I invest a lot in my suffering. But if my suffering does not bring about some good, preferably a surplus of good and profit, my investments will go to waste. Suffering must not mean a loss; therefore, I must calculate how much I could gain. My investment should be profitable, and the promise of being a better person may count, to some people, as a profit. The problem with this approach is that it advises you to invest in suffering because that makes you a better person. These people are optimists. For others, suffering does not promise any such benefits. They are pessimists. What about the following bargain: I can maximally torture you for twenty minutes; after that, you do not remember anything, and you then get a ten million dollar bonus. What kind of people would accept such a devil’s bargain?

Concluding comments

I have discussed everyday suffering and focused on morally relevant cases and contexts. I have not discussed physical pain, depression, mental illness, and the end of life. All these need separate chapters. Morally relevant suffering comes in various forms, but the key terms are guilt, regret, pity, and other vicarious emotions. A mature and virtuous person is not immune to other people's suffering, regardless of her guilt. I have mapped several morally relevant contexts without paying much attention to the need and duty to alleviate pain and suffering. I do not think philosophers should advise people on how to live. At least, this would require a deeper moral approach than I have adopted here. Whatever one says about this problem, this much is certain: it does not do simply to recommend a better and more virtuous lifestyle and warn against hurting oneself and other people. This would be trivial, but here we are, approaching the center of ethics, asking how to live a good life together with other people.

I have adopted an almost cynical approach by asking only what kinds of reactions we have and should have ex post facto when the bad things have already happened and their consequences harass us. Please think of the regrets one has after finding out that his lifestyle has caused him deadly harm. By studying such cases in detail, we also learn about the production of harm and why we must pay attention to it before it is too late. In this way, my approach is indirectly normative. I do not want to advise people because I believe we will find the right path if we know more about the bad things in life. My approach is Socratic since I believe that if you know, you also do the right thing. Knowledge is the best advice. Accordingly, I want first to ask about our mistakes and how not to live and then query what emotions will hurt us most when we make mortal moral mistakes anyway. I call this moral suffering. However, as I argue, one thing is certain: we should not console ourselves by dreaming of the virtues of suffering. Suffering is an intrinsic evil to be avoided as far as possible.

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