The Meanings of Suffering

by STAN VAN HOOFT

Western thinkers have usually falsified our experience of suffering in trying to make sense of it. In a postmodern age, their accounts seem implausible. We need a way of making sense of suffering while admitting its horror.

Suffering is one of the most profound and disturbing of human experiences. The very word suffering has a resonance that relates to our sense of life’s meaning and the threat suffering poses to our hopes of happiness. It does not refer just to maladies, pains, and difficulties with which we can and should cope. It involves crises and threats that constitute a degradation or alienation of our being.1 It is the spiritual dimension of our existence or the “contemplative” aspect of our being, to use Aristotle’s term, not only the bodily aspects of our selves, that is implicated in suffering.

Suffering is a spiritual phenomenon, an event that strikes at the faith we can have in life. The role of suffering in our lives is contested at the level of discourse at which cultural meanings and visions of human life are negotiated.

In evaluating its role, the central question is whether suffering is a good thing or a bad thing. This may seem an odd question to pose; it may seem obvious that suffering is intrinsically bad. Given the ineliminability of suffering from our lives, however, a central project of human thought is to make it bearable or acceptable, and one of the most common ways of doing this is to show it to be good in some way. If suffering were seen as a positive event or force in our lives, we would be better able to endure it. Accordingly, our cultural tradition contains many attempts to make suffering positive. Simultaneously, there are those who think such attempts a species of bad faith and who argue that, if we are to be authentic in the face of it, suffering must always be considered negative. This paper explores a few of the attempts in the Western tradition to give suffering meaning and then asks whether an authentic acceptance of suffering as something inherently negative, destructive, and adverse to human happiness can still be acceptable.

Ancient Conceptions: Suffering and the World

From the very earliest of times in the West, suffering has been associated with the concept of justice. What the spiritual or contemplative functions of our thinking seek is a coherent and totalizing world view in which everything has its place and nothing disturbs the order. Within such a divinely decreed cosmos, suffering would result either from a human violation of the supernatural order or a divine response to such a violation.

Perhaps the most primeval and naive reaction to suffering is to think of it as punishment. Cultures and religions around the world abound with examples of the belief that suffering is a punishment exacted by the gods. But this is already an anthropomorphic rendering of a more primitive idea: namely, that, despite its ubiquity, suffering is something that should not happen. It is something that is inherently negative. It is a departure from how things should be. But why? Clearly, it is contrary to what the victim or victims of the suffering would want. But it would be hubris to suppose that the mere wishes of individuals could establish the axiological status of suffering. The value status of everything, including suffering, must arise from an order of reality greater than that of puny human individuals or peoples. It must arise from the gods. Suffering must be seen as part of the divine order, and the most obvious explanation in a universe that contains gods who have emotions and desires like human beings is that suffering is sent by the gods to punish human beings for deeds that displease the gods. In this way suffering becomes part of the divine order despite its apparent evil and acquires an explanation of why it is, after all, to be borne with equanimity.

The genius of ancient Greek thought was to have transcended the anthropomorphic gods and replaced them with more abstract concepts. The concept of justice acquired a content similar to that of destiny; it alluded to the cosmic order itself. The one fragment of the thinking of Anaximander that has come down to us expresses the matter thus:

Things perish into those things out of which they have their birth, according to that which is ordained; for they give reparation to one another and pay the penalty of their injustice according to the disposition of time.

Two crucial elements comprise this thought. First, there is the notion of change as a constant flow into and out of existence in accordance with an overarching destiny (an idea that, secularized further, became the concept of causal determinism). Second, there is the somewhat more complex idea that such change is somehow an offense to the divine order and that reparation therefore has to be made for the very contingency of the existence of things. Change is an offense to the eternal and changeless scheme of justice, where justice involves that fated order in which everything is as it should be. In contrast to this divine order, changeable reality is an offense that calls for reparation. The penalty that needs to be paid is suffering. In this way a conceptual association is expressed and forged between suffering, existence in this world, and punishment. Suffering in this world was inevitable, negative, and necessary. But it was ordained by the supernatural order, and therefore ultimately positive.

Plato developed this contrast between two worlds, one of divinely constituted perfection and the other of worldly change and corruption, into a secular metaphysical system. Martha Nussbaum has argued that Plato’s metaphysical system was a response to the fragility, danger, and sorrow of worldly existence. In the face of these afflictions, the contemplative mind created a realm of perfection from which to draw consolation. On the eve of his death, Plato’s hero Socrates welcomes his fate on the ground that it will take him out of this world of suffering, change, and obfuscation and into a realm where clarity and light will guarantee his knowledge of the Forms of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. Although there is no direct link here between suffering and punishment, there is an association between suffering and a lesser form of existence, namely, existence in a world of variability, corruption, and epistemological uncertainty.

Christianity: Suffering as Reparation

The idea that suffering is an inevitable and inescapable aspect of worldly existence but that it can be
escaped by a form of self-transcendence, an elevation to a higher mode of existence, can also be found in many of the great world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In the West, the predominant way of giving suffering meaning is still derived from Christianity. For a Christian, human beings are tainted with original sin. There is here another version of the notion that worldly existence is less than perfect, even corrupt, but in this version, the primordial condition of humanity requires reparation. As a natural outgrowth of a religious tradition in which ritual blood sacrifice was used to appease God and seek His favor, and in which guilt for sin was washed away in sacrificial blood, suffering came to be seen as a price that had to be paid for sin. And so heinous was the original crime of humanity that nothing less than the suffering of a God was required to achieve reparation for it. Christ’s suffering on the cross thus becomes a paradigm case of positive suffering. It was this sacrifice that saved human-kind from sin, and every Christian is called upon to participate in it by dedicating their own suffering to this salvific task or by declaring their faith in its achievement. Thus the Christian believes that salvation is achieved through suffering, whether their own or that of Christ.

This account can be complicated. At least one writer in the Christian tradition, Stanley Hauerwas, has recently argued that Christians should not in any simplistic way align their suffering with that represented by the cross. According to Hauerwas, only suffering accepted for some moral reason is Christlike. Hauerwas argues that suffering is an intrinsic part of our moral lives. No human life could be complete without accepting some suffering as part of its moral project. Just as we should be prepared to accept death for some overwhelmingly noble cause, so we should be prepared to accept suffering in proportion to the value at issue. Even in mundane contexts our moral self-project or our autonomy involves being able to give up things that we want. “Suffering is not morally significant only because things happen to us that we cannot avoid,” writes Hauerwas, “but because the demand of morality cannot be satisfied without asking the self to submit to limits imposed by morality itself. In this sense, without allowing ourselves and others to suffer we could not be human or humane.”

This insightful observation about human life recasts the meaning of suffering by turning it into sacrifice. Suffering for a cause, even merely giving up something we want for the sake of something more worthy, frustrates our desires and might for that reason be thought of as suffering. Insofar as these experiences are freely accepted for the sake of some good, however, they are actually cases of sacrifice. That is, one is accepting some frustration, pain, or negative experience for the sake of something better or worthier.

However the relation between the Christian’s suffering and the sufferings of Christ is understood, the outlines of the Christian theory of suffering are clear. At the contemplative level of our being, where we establish the meaningfulness of our lives by relating it to a larger story, reality, or cosmic theory, Christians relate their suffering to the story of Christ so as to give it meaning. In this way Christians feel that they can contribute their suffering to the salvific plan of God. Suffering loses its prima facie negative character for the victim by being given a transcendent, positive meaning. The Christian concept of divine providence works in a similar way, by suggesting that all the unfortunate things that occur in the world have a larger purpose and will ultimately tend to the good, as guaranteed by God. This too is a theory that

Our bodies might suffer maladies, we might suffer pain, our zest for life might be lost, our relationships shattered, our projects failures, our suffering real, and yet we can think of it as for the ultimate good.
Even within the Christian tradition, these ways of turning suffering into something positive have been questioned. In a rich and complex argument, Simone Weil has stressed the irreducibly negative character of suffering even when conceived from a theological perspective. Weil argues that some suffering amounts to what she calls “affliction,” a form of suffering that damages the selfhood and crushes the spirit of its victim. Where-as everyday pain and suffering are troubles we can cope with, in the face of which we can bless God for the challenges He sends us, affliction cannot but lead to despair. Whether because of the intensity or the interminable duration of the agony, the victim of affliction is reduced to being a thing completely determined by the blind forces of causality. Such suffering is a form of humiliation and of absolute degradation. To endure it is to be a slave to the pain and anguish that the victim undergoes. Moreover, by focusing the victim's attention exclusively on personal distress, it constitutes the victim as totally alienated in relation to others and to Otherness. Affliction leads to total separation from hope, from society, and from God.

And yet, Weil goes on to say, it is precisely in this total abnegation that the victim participates in the affliction of Christ. Christ also suffered abandonment by God. The following passages give the flavor of Weil's thinking:

Men struck down by affliction are at the foot of the Cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God.6

As for us men, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father (p. 446).

If the tree of life, and not simply the divine seed, is already formed in a man's soul at the time when extreme affliction strikes him, then he is nailed to the same cross as Christ (p. 453).

The key to Weil's thinking in these quotes is the notion of distance. Weil argues that the incarnation both establishes and bridges the distance between God and creation but without thereby alleviating the meaningfulness and alienation of creation. The Cross of Christ therefore represents the reality of the abandonment and hopelessness of the human condition arising from its distance from God. Affliction is a state that we must all accept, just as Christ did, because it is inevitable within our created condition.

And yet Weil does not deduce from these insights that affliction has a positive meaning. She rejects utterly any doctrine of providence. Creation really is meaninglessness and purposeless and our place in it really is subject to the utter degradation of affliction. The perennial cry of every afflicted person, “Why?”, was uttered by Christ himself and received no answer. We must simply accept that the love of God sets up this distance between creation (including the incarnate Christ) and Himself. It is because of this distance that affliction (as well as other more positive mysteries such as beauty) occurs. Our quest for meaning yields only silence and in this silence is the space for love and faith. “God's secret word of love can be nothing else but silence” (p. 467).

Suffering in a Secular Age

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas also firmly rejects the possibility that suffering has any providential meaning. Reflecting on the Holocaust, Levinas concedes that suffering of such magnitude and such uselessness cannot be absorbed into a justifying theological narrative. God was silent in Auschwitz and remains so. And yet there is a nontheological meaning that can be ascribed to suffering if one's view of one's own suffering might be different from one's view of the suffering of others. Indeed, it must be different. To say of the suffering of another that it is justified by having a meaning or a purpose is to denigrate the other by making him a means to some purpose. It is an immoral gesture that refuses to see the suffering for what it is: useless. Our response to the suffering of the other must be compassion, not explanation. Indeed, Levinas argues that suffering is a unique possibility for overcoming the isolation that we all experience as atomistic individuals in a narcissistic society. Even in our own experience, suffering cannot be absorbed into the world that we constitute for ourselves as our own. It is always strange and foreign. Whereas it is the existential nature of our being to be active in relation to the world, in the face of suffering we are passive. As a result suffering is always an alienation of our being. It destroys our self-possession and our self-satisfied enjoyment of life.

This allows us to be open to the suffering of the other through compassion. Rather than being enclosed in the solipsism of self-concern, with the presence of the other a mere rational posit unable to touch our being in its intimacy, our encounter with the suffering of another calls upon our responsibility and awakens us to the real presence of the other in his or her need. In this way the negativity and meaninglessness of suffering, rather than being wiped out in a theodicy, provide the basis of real contact with others. It creates the interpersonal space in which ethics can occur. As Levinas puts it, “For pure suffering, which is intrinsically meaningless and condemned to itself without exit, a beyond takes shape in the inter-human.” My helping the other is a recognition of that person's being, and a recognition no more theoretical thought could accomplish. Suffering, therefore, has a meaning in the interhuman world that preserves its inherent negativity: it grounds the ethical.

Are such ways of giving meaning to suffering available in a postmodern secular age? What meaning is available for people without religious or even humanistic faith? A schematic
With human virtue or with natural law. To be moral was all. This in turn meant that we should seek good things, shun bad things, and be indifferent to things that are indifferent. Among the indifferent things is health, since it can be used for good or for bad and so is in itself morally neutral. Good things make us morally good and bad things make us morally bad, but of itself, health does neither. And so it is with the opposite of health. As Seneca put it, “That which is evil does harm; that which does harm makes a man worse. But pain and poverty do not make a man worse; therefore, they are not evils.”

Pain within a Life Project

Although he owes much to the Stoic philosophers, Nietzsche presents us with a rather different suggestion as to how a positive meaning might be given to suffering. He develops it in this typically rhetorical and eloquent passage:

You want if possible—and there is no madder “if possible”—to abolish suffering; and we!—it really does seem that we would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been! Wellbeing as you understand it—that is no goal, that seems to us an end! A state which soon renders man ludicrous and contemptible—which makes it desirable that he should perish! The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—do you not know that it is this discipline alone which has created every elevation of mankind hitherto? That tension of the soul in misfortune which cultivates its strength, its terror at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, exploiting misfortune, and whatever of depth, mystery, mask, spirit, cunning and greatness has been bestowed upon it—has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering?

Nietzsche praises suffering as the means whereby a higher order of humanity will evolve. Nietzsche strong-

What meaning is available for people without religious or even humanistic faith?

The Stoic philosophers encapsulated their view in saying that we should live life “in agreement with nature.” By this they variously meant that we should live in accordance with human virtue or with natural reality itself. The cosmos does not run in accordance with a divine plan or an inherent goal. There is no overarching fate or justice. The world is just a vast dynamic system of change and becoming. Everything becomes what it is and changes in systems of mutual interaction and effect. Human beings are subject to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Whatever happens is caused by blind and purposeless processes. It is appropriate to do what we can to protect ourselves from bad luck and evil, but if we become victims we can only accept what has happened as inevitable. And so it is with the opposite of health. As Seneca put it, “That which is evil does harm; that which does harm makes a man worse. But pain and poverty do not make a man worse; therefore, they are not evils.”

Epictetus offers similar advice in paragraphs eight and nine of his Manual:

Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace.

Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to the will, unless the will consent. Lameness is a hindrance to the leg, but not to the will. Say this to yourself at each event that happens, for you shall find that though it hinders something else it will not hinder you.

Epictetus’s thought is, first, that those people who accept everything that befalls them in the physical world will live with equanimity, and second, that illness, lameness, and other forms of suffering are physical events; they affect the body but not the will or moral being of a person. Provided this moral being is kept intact, the person will experience inner freedom and peace. Acceptance of fate, along with a focus on one’s inner existence, are the guarantees of a peaceful mode of being.

In this conception, suffering is something toward which the victim should remain indifferent. It is neither good nor bad. It is to be given no meaning. The contemplative dimension of our being should not trouble itself with it and should look beyond it toward an eternal and changeless nature conceived as moral and transcendent. We can see the influence of Plato’s Socrates on this view. The tragic view of life, as articulated by the Stoics, leads to a life that secures our moral being and integrity by withdrawing from our worldly existence. But it is not likely to be useful to us today. While we may view it with admiration, its emphasis on withdrawal ensures that it will not have much appeal to our modern sensibilities.
The challenge of postmodern authenticity is to refuse the false consolations of theodicies or metaphysical theories that make suffering positive.

Nietzsche admired effort and striving. He admired commitment and dedication and the willingness to put up with hardship and pain in the pursuit of a noble goal and in particular, in the fulfillment of our existential quest for self-affirmation and self-assertion. He saw this quest as leading to a newer and better kind of human being. But this being who would overcome mere humanity would not emerge if we focused only on comfort and the avoidance of suffering. The avoidance of pain and amelioration of suffering were forces of decadence that led to the softening of the human spirit and a loss of focus upon the task of self-overcoming, which was essential to human advancement. Suffering was the crucible in which a higher form of humanity could be forged.

Nietzsche’s view is attractive. It is implicitly accepted by nations that define their identity through the suffering and sacrifice of their founding fathers or war heroes, as Australia does with its annual celebration of a major military defeat on Anzac Day. In at least one respect, too, Nietzsche’s view is similar to the view of some Christians, since it embraces suffering as a sacrifice for a higher goal. Indeed, Nietzsche’s view might seem noble were it not for his further view about pity. Nietzsche thought that pity belittles the person who feels it as well as the person who is its object. It belittles the person who feels it because it shows that the person fails to appreciate the positive power of suffering, and it belittles the object of pity because it represents that person as failing to bear suffering courageously. Pity goes hand in hand with the desire for comfort, thought Nietzsche, and should be repudiated on that account. But if the rejection of pity constitutes a rejection of compassion, then Nietzsche should himself be repudiated. So understood, Nietzsche comes to seem callous and uncaring.

Whether or not we reject Nietzsche, however, his position is important for understanding how we confront suffering. Even if abhorrent, it expresses the attitude to suffering that many people in our culture have. It is yet another theory, created by the contemplative aspect of our being, of how suffering might be made more meaningful. In this theory there is a story of how humanity reaches its highest types and of how suffering is necessary for this to be achieved. Interestingly, Nietzsche himself would not dispute this framing of his account; he would react to it with irony. It was his view that humanity tells itself a variety of stories in order to make life livable and that his own story is just one of these. None of these creations of contemplative reason could be taken as ultimately true, including Nietzsche’s own.

The reason that Nietzsche’s view and its self-deprecating irony finds a ready response in contemporary postmodern thinking is that it rejects overarching theories of providence or human progress. In postmodern thinking there is little scope for contemplative reason. The existential quest for meaning that used to be expressed in the theoretical aspect of our being is still in us, however. In a postmodern culture it is exercised in the “integrative” aspect of our being, the aspect in which we engage in the preconscious task of combining the various dimensions of our lives together so as to constitute our wholeness and identity. This can be achieved by faith or commitment. And above all else, Nietzsche might be seen as urging us to live in a committed way. Which ideals and hopes we commit ourselves to does not much matter; they would all be meaning-giving stories anyway. But the key point is that we achieve the integration of our being by infusing every aspect of our existence, including the bodily, with the enthusiasm for, and commitment to, those of our goals which define our identity. Both our zest for living and our practical tasks would in this way become, along with our very biological being, an expression of our commitment. Our highest ideals would shape the way we live. Our bodies would be infused and enlivened by our commitments, not just as their vehicle, but as their very expression, for we feel more alive when we are engaged upon an absorbing task. In this way we would overcome the all-too-human desire for comfort and security and extend ourselves both physically and spiritually towards the goal of self-overcoming. Our pain, effort, and struggle would then not be meaningless suffering since they would not frustrate our whole being. While there might be pain and hardship, our commitment and drive for becoming would shape all them into a single life project. Our pain and hardship would validate our identity.

Whether this way of thinking would allow us to embrace the suffering that is inflicted by disease or accident, the suffering that is not part of our life’s plan, is perhaps still doubtful. Useless suffering in the face of which we are passive might continue to be meaningless in terms of our life’s goals. Or it might be embraced as the test of our mettle, the ultimate
ordeal through which our existential faith and commitment might be tested. Whether one is a Christian who sees suffering as part of God’s salvific plan for humanity, or a humanist who thinks that suffering grounds the possibility of ethics through compassion, or a Stoic who maintains an indifference to suffering as something morally irrelevant, or a Nietzschean who holds that suffering ennobles the human spirit and makes possible human advancement and personal self-validation, the perennial and inescapable question of the one who suffers is, Why me? But rather than seek an answer to that question, we should ask, in the spirit of Nietzsche, why we want an answer to it. The challenge of postmodern authenticity is to sever the link between suffering and justice. It is to accept the blindness of fate and the inevitability of bad luck. It is to refuse the false consolations of theologies or metaphysical theories that make suffering positive. Suffering is to be borne. There is nothing more to it.

The only question remaining about this way of thinking would be whether it could give rise to compassion for the suffering of others. That is, even if we reject the ancient and Christian attempts to accept suffering, we should try to incorporate some part of Levinas’s humanistic insight. And this seems possible. Insofar as suffering is borne, it opens us to the suffering of others. Indeed, attempts to make suffering good blind us to the reality of our and of others’ suffering by allowing us to view it as something that ought to happen or that ought to be accepted. Cruelty and insensitivity lie down this path. The tragic bearing of suffering, on the other hand, awakens us to its reality. If neither the gods, the cosmos, providence, nor a faith in human progress rob suffering of its tragedy, then we are left just with the brute fact that we and others suffer. And in this there is community. Our own suffering awakens us to what the other is going through and thus creates in us the compassion through which relieving actions can be motivated. In this community of suffering, a meaning might yet be found for our own suffering. Perhaps all the meaning that suffering can have is that it teaches us to care for others.

References


2. For a fuller treatment of these ideas in the context of health care, see Rodney L. Taylor and Jean Watson, eds., They Shall Not Hurt: Human Suffering and Human Caring (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1989).


8. Diogenes Laertius, SVF I, 179z (1, 552).

9. An anonymous reviewer of this article has pointed out that the Stoics could still differentiate among indifferent things. Some could be preferred to others and could therefore be legitimate objects of pursuit, even though they were ultimately morally indifferent.

10. Diogenes Laertius, SVF III, 166.


