

# Grow, Learn, Suffer: Human Experience as a Community of Pain

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## Abstract

*Over the past few decades, images of suffering have been slashed across our newspapers and TV screens and have become everyday symbols in our society. Despite feeling a desperate need to protect ourselves and those we love from experiencing pain, we have developed a fascination with watching these spectacles of horror played out across the news, and the line between fact and fiction has become blurred. By looking at the teachings of the major religions alongside early philosophical thought, it is possible to trace the foundations of ideas surrounding suffering. Whilst claiming that suffering is a terrible experience that must be overcome, many religions praise the humbling aspects of suffering as ways to cleanse the soul and become righteous, charitable and strong of faith. It is this mindset that is present in society today and encourages us to facilitate suffering as a means of character building and social control.*

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In contemporary society fear is all around us. It controls our perceptions of the world and other people, it validates our choices and decisions and it facilitates our ability to blend and adapt into our communities. Fear is the most powerful tool of the media, sensationalising suffering and foregrounding pain as a means of publicity, business strategy and social control. The idea of suffering is channelled into our homes through our TV screens and brings with it a sense of numbing towards the traumas of the world around us, as well as a protective barrier through which we allow ourselves to become engrossed in the suffering of others. The images of horror and tragedy are played out to us like the storylines of a soap opera, obscuring the boundaries between fact and fiction.

The idea of suffering is a contradictory doctrine of society; we spend our lives trying to avoid suffering and trying to protect those we love from pain, whilst also accepting and promoting suffering as an essential part of human life and personal growth. It is clear to see that the idea of necessary suffering has lived within our societies for generations

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and is shaped and moulded by tradition. The modern family incites and provides suffering as a means of punishment, whilst also celebrating it as a means of grounding and character building in a child. This continuation of a cycle of fear and suffering brings about a 'community of pain,' a society that both adores and abhors suffering, that is governed by fear and the desire to protect themselves and those around them from pain, whilst also embracing and revelling in the very nature of it.

The roots of this psychological and sociological perspective of suffering are grounded in tradition, the passing down of shared knowledge and belief systems. We can trace the early rationale of a 'community of pain' to the philosophy of ancient Greece and onwards throughout the ages, following a common pattern of faith, endurance and reward. The major religions address the idea of suffering in different ways, although most agree that suffering is a necessary part of self-preservation and a test of the strength of faith. Indeed, many religious figures chose a path of suffering as a means of self-sacrifice, holiness and cleansing. Jesus is the ultimate figure of suffering and human endurance, the pinnacle of which is his death on the cross signifying the ultimate sacrifice for Christian people. Although God is Almighty, He made the ultimate sacrifice and he felt what it is to suffer and He suffered alongside the people. Similarly, in Islam, suffering reveals the hidden self to God, so He may see who is truly righteous. Life, for those in the Islamic faith, is the great struggle to become pure of heart and mind in order to reveal one's true self to God.

This paper aims to explore the traditions of suffering and perspectives of overcoming pain that have influenced the sociological bearing of suffering in the modern day. By firstly providing a brief historical overview of philosophical and religious ideas about suffering, I will then analyse how western society has become immune to images of suffering due to sensationalisation by the media, and how this has affected the way in which we interact, raise our children and achieve our aspirations.

### **Suffering in Religion**

One of the most important and significant concepts in Buddhism is 'dukkha' and the elimination of dukkha through meditation and clarity of mind and body. 'Dukkha' is often translated as 'suffering,' 'anxiety' or 'unsatisfactoriness' and is considered to be a great concern and hindrance for people of the Buddhist faith. Dukkha can be broken down into many

different types of suffering. The first is *jati*, the discomfort and fear of experiencing the world for the first time. Birth is the first traumatic event that we experience and prepares us for a lifetime of uncertainty and pain.

Death, or *marana*, completes the circle of pain by presenting us with the unexpected and loss. The periods between birth and death are fraught with potential anxieties including: not getting what you desire, getting what you do not desire and not being able to hold onto what you have. Similarly, in Hinduism suffering arises from *Samara*, the circle of life and the trials and tribulations that encompass the different aspects of life.

Buddhists believe that *dukkha* can be overcome by strength of mind and human kindness. Compassion towards those less fortunate is encouraged as a way of alleviating community *dukkha*. Despite being foregrounded as a negative force which must be overcome, the Buddha claimed "what ordinary folk call happiness, the enlightened ones call *dukkha*" (Samyutta Nikaya #35), showing that the place of suffering is important and necessary on the journey to peace and contentment. This is a theme that seems to flow through most of the major religions, the idea that suffering is not merely something that must be overcome but something that must be embraced, celebrated, and respected. Similarly, in Christianity suffering of the common people is foregrounded as something to be relieved through faith, goodwill and charity, but is also holy and necessary in order to become a 'good Christian'. The Bible strongly emphasises the link between evil and suffering, presenting suffering as a dark force to be overcome by strength of faith and endurance. Jesus himself was "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3), having received repeated isolation and persecution from his peers as well as experiencing moral and political corruption all around him.

It could be argued that suffering is seen as a commendable and respectable condition within the Bible, as it is righteous people who suffer for their beliefs and strength of conviction. Suffering can easily be alleviated by sin, but those who are true to God endure pain as a sign of their commitment to Him. In return, after death, they are rewarded: "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God Himself sacrifices His only son in order to save the people from sin and lead them to the light. God understands suffering and has felt it Himself; in this way Jesus becomes the one answer to suffering as proof of both God's existence and love. In Islam, suffering is either the painful result of sin or it is a test of the individuals' conviction. Suffering reveals the true self to God so that He may separate those who believe and those who do

not. Those who do not believe or who fail to serve God enter a state of unbelief called 'kufir,' meaning that they have forgotten God. God is all-knowing and cannot be deceived by kufirs, according to this passage from The Koran:

And some men there are who say,  
'We believe in God and the Last Day';  
but they are not believers.  
They would trick God and the believers,  
and only themselves they deceive,  
and they are not aware.  
In their hearts is a sickness,  
and God has increased their sickness,  
and there awaits a painful chastisement  
for that they have cried lies. (II: 5 The Cow)

An overarching message of the Koran is that life is a struggle or a great jihad to perfect one's heart and live in complete submission to God. It is acknowledged that the temptations of sin can turn one's head, but the suffering of temptation can be alleviated through good works and charity. In Judaism, much focus is placed upon the pain of the existence, brought about by man and world being separate and distinct from God. This separation causes pain and suffering as we, as mortal human beings, are distanced from God. Judaism places high emphasis on extending sympathy and help towards those who are suffering. An individual should share in the suffering of a community, and cannot be content if those around them are in pain. Many members of the Jewish faith believe that, with the coming of the Messiah illness, poverty and death will be abolished, and this will be the reward for their endurance, charity and faith.

### **Suffering in Philosophy**

Writing in the heart of classical Athens, Socrates said "it is better to suffer than to do injustice" (Plato, 2008). By saying this, Socrates promotes the idea of self-sacrifice in the interest of others and in order to keep the mind and body purified of evil. To suffer on behalf of someone else is considered, by the Ancient Greeks, to be a noble and just cause. Furthering this, Socrates' contemporary Aristotle delved deeper into the uncertain world of ethics and pain by claiming "suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through greatness of mind" (Aristotle, 2016). Aristotle's declaration goes

beyond Socrates' vision of suffering as something that should be endured and begins to lay the foundations of 'the suffering tradition'.

The idea that suffering can be 'beautiful' may at first appear to be an alien concept, but to Aristotle the strength of the mind is confirmed and defined by suffering. Suffering is a test of the strength of the mind and soul; suffering builds character and is an honourable and glorious trait. One must not only endure suffering but be cheerful about it, as it is positivity and forward thinking that is the key to unlocking happiness and contentment. To Aristotle, being humble and gallant is just as important as shouldering the burden. Through this, Aristotle formed the foundations of the modern ethics of suffering that we still abide by today. Much later, in 19th century Sweden, Søren Kierkegaard, who would later be named the 'Father of Existentialism,' searched for a common 'truth' about humanity that would not contradict his faith or make assumptions about man and the essence of the soul. Gordon D. Marino (1998) claimed in "Anxiety in the Concept of Anxiety": "One of Kierkegaard's central insights, an insight inscribed in various forms throughout this text and, I believe, the entire authorship is that the struggle to lead a good and true life is a struggle against, or if not against then with, anxiety" (Marino 1998: 309). To Kierkegaard, anxiety, or suffering, is an unavoidable part of existence, linked to the quest to be a good, righteous and holy individual. Indeed, in his own life, Kierkegaard experienced the pain of existence and the pain of attempting to become an idealised follower of Christianity. "Kierkegaard confessed that he loved his melancholy, truly loved it. Religiously speaking, he took his love to be a fatal flaw. While the cure for his melancholy was there, Kierkegaard would not let himself be cured of it so indented was he with his sorrow that he could not imagine himself without it" (Marino 1998: 323).

Some years later in Germany, Friedrich Nietzsche concerned himself with the idea that alleviating suffering is absurd. Drawing on the philosophy of Aristotle, Nietzsche believed that suffering was the only thing that bestows value on the world and makes us human. He claimed:

In man creature and creator are united: in man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but there is also the creator, the sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divinity of the spectator, and the seventh day - do you not understand this contrast? The body must be fashioned, bruised, forged, stretched, roasted and refined - it is meant to suffer. (Nietzsche, 2013)

Nietzsche believed that it is enduring suffering that allows us to unlock our potential. It is pain that facilitates creativity, achievement and success. It not only spurs us onwards but challenges us, provokes us and inspires us to continue. In Nietzsche's opinion, darkness and light have equal place in the soul of the individual. In this way, suffering is not only a burden to be endured and overcome but it is the force of nature behind the formation of the soul, the element that separates humans from other animals. Suffering unlocks empathy, creativity, inspiration and drive. It changes the way that we experience the world, other people and everything around us. The Spanish Philosopher Miguel De Unamuno believed that it is suffering that makes us human, and suffering is entangled in love and being. In his most famous work *The Tragic Sense of Life*, (2005) he claimed

Suffering is the path of consciousness, and by it living beings arrive at the possession of self-consciousness. For to possess consciousness of oneself, to possess personality, is to know oneself and to feel oneself distinct from other beings, and this feeling of distinction is only reached through an act of collision, through suffering more or less severe, through the sense of one's own limits. (Unamuno, 2005)

For Unamuno, suffering is the key to the self and the soul. Only through suffering can we begin to learn who we are as people, to begin to empathise and to understand the world around us. "How do we know that we exist if we do not suffer, little or much?" (Unamuno, 2005). If our existence is confirmed by our rationality of mind, then the reality of pain is experience as a common truth, something that is able to ground us and confirm that we are living, breathing animals linked through emotion and feeling.

### **Suffering in the Media**

Every day, the media presents us with a barrage of images of human suffering, warnings of future misfortunes and theories of devastation. Although the news supposedly keeps us in touch with 'real life' happenings and portrays the 'truth,' it is a twisted truth, one built upon moral panic and fear mongering as pawns of capitalism and consumerism. Although it is in the interests of all to avoid suffering at all costs, suffering is the lifeblood of the media, it is the ace card of the news. By portraying images of suffering and despair, the media provides the public with a taste of horror that is close enough to experience as true discomfort, but far enough to be insulated and protected by the plasma screen barrier that forms our

bubble of disillusion. In *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) discusses how this setting minimises the effect of the viewed suffering, claiming that

The second remove from the scene of suffering has to do with the fact that spectators receive the spectacle of suffering in the safety of their own living rooms. This occurs because the image of suffering, already fictionalized, is further contained within the material frame of a television (Chouliaraki 2006: 25)

The audience watches the news report in an area they associate with comfort, safety and happiness. They are at the centre of their social hub, the family home, and all outside influences are filtered through this medium. The television, a device used almost entirely for entertainment purposes, is the same device that will bring pleasure, laughter and contentment after the broadcast has ended and the following film, show or documentary will contain no trace of the previous flash of 'reality'. This flash of 'reality' that we have been willingly or unwillingly exposed to is such a tiny fragment in our television consumption that it barely holds any element of truth or reality, instead blending into the images from other TV shows that we know to be fictional. How can we differentiate the scenes of warfare in a film that we watch for pleasure, that we enjoy as part of escapism from the humdrum of everyday life from 'real' images of pain, suffering and death?

To digress slightly, the images that we recognise as 'real' on TV become so absorbed in 'fiction' that we no longer are able to provide the same emotional response as if we were to see a catastrophic event happen in the street right in front of our eyes. Slavoj Žižek explored the idea of 'the real' as losing its 'reality' in his renowned *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2007), claiming that:

Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience 'real reality' itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since as Jeremy Bentham knew - reality is the best appearance of itself? (Žižek 2007: 11)

As Žižek discusses, it is almost impossible to assimilate the scale of atrocities when we see them every day in a fictional context. The films

about war, violence, abuse, rape, and other horrendous events that we watch for entertainment and escapism become more real than reality itself, as Baudrillard claimed some years earlier: "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard 1996: 203).

The images of real life suffering are merely replications of scenes from popular films and TV shows, and it is this conditioning towards images of horror that leads us to focus more on the spectacle of the event rather than provide an emotional response. As Chouliaraki suggests, "the overexposure to human suffering has unaestheticizing, numbing effects. Rather than cultivating a sensibility, the spectacle of suffering becomes domesticated by the experience of watching it on television" (Chouliaraki 2006: 18).

It almost seems that in recent years, tragic incidents of human suffering have become more frequent, and although this may be true to some extent, it is the media's part in portraying these events that has brought trauma into our homes. Iain Wilkinson explores the role of the media in his book *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction* (2005), claiming that "the daily routine of watching television brings us into contact with more violence, war, famine, death and destruction than would have ever been known to previous generations" (2005: 136).

Human suffering is now unavoidable, it is plastered over our television screens, newspapers and computers. Unlike in previous generations, where the horrors of poverty in developing countries were accessible to the general public merely through hearsay and misinformed newspaper reports, the face of the malnourished child has become a symbol of the struggles of African communities and is a symbol that is instantly recognisable through repeated TV broadcast and foregrounding. Note how the media contrasts the face of innocence with the horrors around them for maximum effect, the image becoming part of the media's brand, moving away from a figure of truth, and becomes yet another marketing tool to use for their own gains. Wilkinson claims that: "Arguably, the overall effect is to amplify and accentuate some of the most horrific aspects of human experience, so that these always maintain a significant power of influence over our collective outlook on life" (2005: 136).

Indeed, our view of impoverished communities is formed by and filtered through the media in order to present us with specific images and specific messages. Everything we see is carefully selected and controlled. This is sent out to millions of people across the planet and creates a

universal image of suffering that we are unable to contest, unless we go experience it for ourselves. This tool is used by the media to facilitate their own needs as a business, as well as providing us with information. Wilkinson claims that "In this context, critics maintain that news media corporations are not so much interested in providing us with in-depth accounts of the social contexts in which suffering takes place as in visually portraying suffering in sensational terms" (2005: 138).

The mediated perception of suffering is made up of two key parts. The first level response, which is to empathise. We see an image of a starving child and our hearts go out to them, in the same way as we cried and felt pain for the victims of the Boxing Day tsunami, 9/11 and 7/7 and countless other horrors experienced in the past decades. The media selects the images that will evoke the greatest emotional response in order to engage its audience and draw us in. The chances are the more emotionally pained we feel by an event, the more likely we are to follow the progress of the story; buying the newspapers, following the reports on television or webpages, unwittingly promoting the corporations on social media by sharing links and videos. We are a captive audience, desperate to learn more from the snippets of information and falsehoods we are fed. The second level response is more complex. The empathy that we experience when watching a violent horror film is genuine but is limited as we know that what we are watching is fictional. When presented with a real life horror, we empathise in the same way, but this empathy does not just appeal to the victims exclusively but also to ourselves. We interpret the level of response to events through our own and mediated perceptions of 'risk'. Watching a news report about a terrorist attack provokes a strong emotional response, not only because we sympathise with the victims but because of the potential risk to ourselves and the fear of suffering ourselves. Wilkinson claims that "more often than not, 'risk' is communicated for public attention in graphic portrayals of bodies in pain and harrowing images of people in distress" (2005: vii).

Through these horror images we are able to imagine ourselves all too clearly in similar situations. Suddenly we are able to see ourselves mutilated, our own families mourning and we can almost feel the pain of suffering as physical pain ourselves. Terrorism in particular would provoke such a response, with the threat of irrational and unprejudiced violence becoming a significant fear worldwide. Arguably, natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes will not affect those in European countries as

much as other areas of the world as the risk of this happening is perceived as very low.

### **Suffering in Family Life**

Regardless of whether they come from families that are religious or non-religious, that keep abreast of the media, that are well read in philosophy or that are isolated from society, every child undergoes a form of social conditioning that teaches them how to experience suffering. Most parents will claim that it is their duty in life to protect their child from suffering, whether this is by teaching them not to speak to strangers, telling them not to touch the hot stove or showing them how to cross the road safely. As human beings we want to keep those we love safe from harm, as a way of both cherishing and protecting the wellbeing of the individuals and also as a means of protecting ourselves from heartbreak. Alas, do we really mourn for a dead friend's loss of life or do we truly mourn our own loss of friendship?

Despite wanting to protect our children from experiencing suffering at a young age, in Western society suffering is used as a means of punishment. Whether this is physical suffering such as a smack on the leg, or emotional suffering such as forbidding a child from playing with its favourite toy or going out with its friends, suffering is seen as negative reinforcement that will encourage a child to grow into a good, rounded individual. Without delving into the realms of ethical debates about child rearing, it is argued that a child who does not experience discipline in its childhood may grow up to be disobedient towards the laws of society. How can a child who is allowed to swear and shout at their mother be expected to be respectful towards a teacher or a police officer? It is this train of thought that leads to a fear within parental circles and within society, a fear of allowing a child to fulfil their own potential and a desire to mould them into an idealised figure of righteousness.

In his book *The Death of the Family*, David Cooper (1974) describes the family as an "ideological conditioning device" (1974:5), and later goes on to explain this in greater detail. He claims that "The vital point here is the family's role in inducing the base of conformism - normality through the primary socialization of the child. 'Bringing up' a child in practice is more like bringing down a person. Education similarly is leading a person out of himself and away from himself" (Cooper 1974: 13).

In this passage, Cooper criticises the structures put in place by both the family and other institutions that restrict a child from becoming an

individual. Arguably, the parent or institution wants to raise a child to be a carbon copy of their own ideals, perfect in its morals and judgements, effortlessly polite and ultimately good. In order to do this, the parent or institution must first break away all that remains of a child's personality and confidence by showing them that their desires are wrong. This denial of free will and freedom of speech is experienced as real pain by the child, as they are just learning the possibilities of the world and mimicking the adults around them. Instead the child's interests and activities will be governed by the parent, preparing them for the adult world of work, law-abidance and repression.

## **Conclusion**

It is curious that a society that is so repelled by the idea of suffering is also so engrossed and fascinated by it. Suffering has now become so bound up in our culture that we are unable to distinguish between happiness and sadness, and more alarmingly between reality and fiction. As explored above, the foundations of the modern world have been built upon the pillars of religion and philosophical thought, and the teachings of both of these have had great influence upon modern thought today. Although all of the major religions condemn suffering as either the result of sin, the temptation of sin, a challenge to be overcome or a cause to feel pity for, they all are quick to endorse the positive aspects of suffering as a way to cleanse the soul.

Suffering is a base emotion, something that can be experienced by all living things, something that unites us as animals. Unamuno would claim that it is one of the few things that make us human, the ability to feel pain and experience misfortune as a shocking and humbling event, something that grounds us and makes us realise, or remember, who we truly are.

In recent years the media has begun to use images of suffering as a business strategy in order to create a mask of illusion that turns fact into fiction. Employing the same devices, camera angles and special effects as Hollywood, the news corporations are able to engage their audience through the spectacle of horror, through presenting déjà vu repeated scenes from disaster films as reality. The viewer is unable to separate these two images in their mind, leading to two reactions: firstly, numbing and distancing from the event and an inability to truly empathise with the images behind the screen. And secondly, engrossment and addiction, the need to see the same images constantly, the small guilty sense of

fascination when experiencing the spectacle of horror, in the same way one does when waiting for the next episode of their favourite TV drama. It is clear to see how both the traditions of suffering and mediated perceptions of it have fed into our everyday lives and affected how we choose to act in society. In Western society, we recognise that suffering has a place in the community and that discipline is necessary in order to become what society deems 'good' people. If we do not experience pain then we cannot feel empathy for others, and it is empathy that allows us to build relationships, love and be loved. We love and loathe suffering, we hate to feel pain and to experience loss, but we need it to keep us human. We embrace it as a means of social control and as a source of twisted pleasure in the community of pain.

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