

CHAPTER 21
Living with Suffering(s)

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Chapter Objectives:

In this chapter you will learn about the practice of living your values in the midst of suffering. After seeing the definition of suffering and learning about different kinds of suffering, you will look, as a way of “paying attention to suffering,” at one of the most common points of discussion regarding suffering in philosophical circles: the cause(s) of suffering. You will consider the range of “causes” explored in the history of philosophy East and West. Then you will examine more closely the “phenomena” of suffering, just what goes on when people suffer. You will look at this through the viewpoint of Buddhist philosophical systematic analysis and through the eyes of twentieth-century continental philosophy. Then you will pay attention to the effects of suffering, those situations that tend to happen after suffering, or as a consequence of suffering.

The second part of the chapter focuses on asking questions about suffering, in particular you will explore the age old question of “why” suffering happens and the difficulties philosophers of many varieties face in light of this question. Finally you will explore what it might mean to “live with suffering” as a part of the concrete practices of life. What might it mean to live a well-examined life with regard to our responses to suffering? This is the question that we probe in the last section of the chapter. You will see how the Roman moralist Plutarch advises his wife after the death of their son. And in your journal assignment you will have a chance to see how you might integrate your own beliefs and values into your own experience of suffering. After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- define suffering and give examples of different kinds of suffering
- identify some of the classic philosophical questions asked with regards to suffering
- describe the primary “causes” of suffering as they have been named by philosophers through history
- compare and contrast Buddhist and twentieth-century Continental philosophical

perspectives on the experience of suffering

- outline some of the problems that the problem of suffering presents for various philosophers
- summarize your own approach to suffering in the practical details of life.

Suffering(s)

Suffering. The questions doctors ask sum up so much: “Where does it hurt?” “What kind of pain is it?” “How long has it been this way?” They know. Suffering comes in different packages. But it hurts in every package. That’s why its called suffering.

There is the sudden pain of injury: a sharp, biting pain, a shock to our system. We fall down and break a leg--or we break a relationship--and it hurts *real bad, right now*. It hurts in our leg--or in our heart--and we can hardly bear it.

Perhaps we find ourselves “taking a beating” periodically. We hurt often. Our work is physical, demanding, and dangerous. Its part of the job, but it hurts. Or perhaps it is not work, but a spouse or parent. Every so often they get angry and we find ourselves taking a beating (physically or emotionally).

There is the chronic ache or pain. “I can’t remember *not* feeling this way.” We were born with a disability and it has always been the source of physical and emotional pain. We were born into a country torn by war and poverty and we live in hunger, fear, and death. The pain is a sense of constant misery combined with the realities of exhaustion, sickness, and lack of sleep.

There is the suffering of loss. “I used to be able to see just fine, doc, but now its like everything is gradually getting darker and darker.” We lose our eyesight and something is missing. We lose a special relationship and something is missing. After his son lost his life in a mountain climbing accident, Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophical theology at Yale Divinity School, wrote,

The world looks different now. The pinks have become purple, the yellows brown. Mountains now wear crosses on their slopes. Hymns and psalms have reordered themselves so that lines I scarcely noticed now leap out: “He will not suffer thy foot to stumble” . . . Something is *over*. In the deepest levels of my existence something is finished, done. My life is divided into before and after.¹

Even when we lose some *thing* there is suffering. A special ring slips off as we are swimming in the lake and is gone forever. They rearrange the office and our desk is moved away from that window we enjoyed so much. And we suffer just a little.

Failure is also a kind of suffering. Think for a moment of those times when you just quit. When you did not live up to your expectations. We reach the near-end of life and know that we have not finished well. We have compromised our own most treasured values. Either in critical moments or through habits or attitudes, we know we have failed. And we suffer that failure. It is a loss, a loss of “what might have been.”

And then there is the suffering of others, a suffering that we share. We watch a loved one degenerate bit by bit from disease, taking care for their needs, and it wears on us. *We* hurt. We see footage of damage caused by a hurricane, a tsunami, a terrorist attack, a fire, a concentration camp, or an earthquake and we ourselves are damaged. Shared pains are different than those we experience directly, but, surprisingly, they can hurt just as bad. Some shared pains last a long, long time.

Every area of life is subject to suffering. Our community suffers through a painful disagreement. We suffer financially after a lay-off or a bad harvest. We suffer intellectually as the world view we have known for so long crumbles under the pressure of difficult questions. We suffer a loss of “place,” as we move from here to there. Our sense of rhythm and time collapses as we welcome a new baby into the home (joy and suffering are often present together in unique

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 46

ways). Our nation suffers through its own “depression.” We could even say that everybody, to one degree or another, is living through suffering(s) all the time.

And the thing that hurts the most in suffering is not always what we might have imagined. We lose our eyesight and find that it is not reading, but the sight of scenery that we miss the most. A loved one commits suicide or a flood destroys a town, and we grieve not simply the loss of the other, but the loss of our trust in God or the world. Why didn’t God intervene?” “Why don’t things work out?” Our hopes and expectations in life (perhaps held unconsciously) shape the character of our suffering. Two people move to a small town; one relishes in the close knit community, while the other grieves the loss of opportunity to be an influence “where it all is happening.” Hopes and expectations shape our suffering(s).

And then there is death. Not the death of others (we talked about that above), but our *own* death. “But how is our *own* death a suffering?” you might ask. “I can see how aging or sickness leading to death might be suffering, but we don’t suffer our own death until it happens.” Ah, but there is a sense in which we *do* suffer our own death before it comes. It is always before us as an ever present possibility, and it is a certainty of our life. We know we will die. And we live into this loss, in one way or another, every day of our lives.

The community website “Wikipedia” defines suffering as “any aversive experience and the corresponding emotion.” How do *you* suffer? What suffering have *you* experienced, heard of, been affected by? When the topic of suffering comes up, what do you think of? How do you feel? How do you anticipate reading an entire chapter on suffering?

Foolish Suffering

As we might expect, there are wise and foolish ways of suffering. The foolish ways are well known to us. There is the persistent denial which refuses to believe that one is suffering, refuses to acknowledge the pain. Denial is a natural response, but if it persists, pain is not permitted to “speak” to the sufferer and to accomplish its purposes. We do not need to think in terms of a “total” denial, either. Denial of suffering may simply be related to one dimension of

the suffering. We blame our lack of energy on a recent change in life, not willing to admit that we may have a serious physical condition (or vice versa - we admit the physical condition, but deny that our sense of loss due to changes in life may be affecting that condition). In denial the problem is simply lack of attention to the suffering. We do not pay attention to our suffering, and because we do not pay attention, we do not ask appropriate questions of our suffering and we do not practice the reality of that suffering.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are consumed by their suffering(s). In this case, suffering becomes an all-pervading lens through which all of reality is seen and experienced. And indeed, we must grant that there are times when the pain of life is so intense that we would be insensitive to expect anything else. But for *some*, and especially if it persists too long, there develops an unhealthy whining-mentality, or a kind of depression, or other symptoms, which indicate that growth *in* and *through* this suffering has stopped. The attention to suffering has not gotten past the mere fact or presence of pain. The questions have only led to despair. And there is no living *with* suffering, only a living *under* the circumstances.

Other examples could be developed. My aim here is not to throw stones at those who suffer (just what we need in our suffering, yes?). Rather I just want to admit what we all know. Wisdom and foolishness can be practiced even with regard to our own ways of living in the midst of suffering. And we do it all the time; it is so easy. Perhaps that is what makes the wise especially commendable: they are able to pay attention, to ask the right questions in the right way, to practice truth, even in the midst of the difficulties of suffering, when it would be so much simpler just to give up and narcotize one's pain along with the crowd.

How do we “love wisdom” in the middle of our suffering then? And what can we learn from the lovers of wisdom in East and West? These are the questions facing us in this chapter. Philosophers have addressed a number of specific questions in exploring the “problem of suffering”:

- Where does suffering come from?
- Is human experience basically misery?

- Are there different kinds of suffering?
- What good comes from suffering? Is it worth the suffering?
- Is it reasonable to believe in a god who may be in some sense the Source of suffering? (which we addressed in chapter fourteen)
- How do we conduct our lives fully aware of our present or future suffering and death?
- How can we be freed from suffering?

These, and other questions like this (can you think of others?), have informed philosophical discussion about suffering throughout history. We will explore such questions in the present chapter. Needless to say, we cannot explore human suffering without reflecting on the meaning of human existence, the survival of a person after death, the whole notion of a self and self care, and other questions we have treated in previous chapters. There is a sense in which this chapter can serve as something of a review for those aspects of the other chapters.

We will divide our treatment of suffering by the three primary “skills of wisdom”: paying attention, asking questions, practicing reality. We will spend most of our time with the first division, because suffering is often misunderstood for lack of attention to the breadth of contributing factors. We will address one particular question--the question of belief in god in light of suffering--which has been a perennial topic of philosophical discussion. And then we will consider how our outline of assessment, evaluation and so on can be applied to suggest practical ways in which we can live authentic lives in the midst of our sufferings.

Paying Attention to Suffering

It is hard to pay attention to our suffering. The moment we stop, we feel the hurt all the more. And the distractions we would eliminate to facilitate attention are those very narcotizing activities/substances that soothe the hurt of suffering. Similarly, the “being-with” and “giving it time” that is so necessary for paying attention just place us in the middle of our suffering all the more. There are times to avoid suffering. But there are also times to lean into the pain. Wisdom

endeavors to pay attention to suffering all the way through: noticing the factors that contribute to its presence, the character of the suffering itself, and the effects that suffering has on experience.

Causes: Factors that contribute to the arising of suffering

One of the first considerations we have in a time of suffering is the consideration of cause. “What caused this pain?” “Where did this suffering come from?” Just as a physician explores the “etiology” of a disease in an attempt to get at the cause(s) of a given condition, so in philosophical reflection we might examine the “etiology” of suffering more generally in order to understand its causes. And here lies the difficulty: it is all too easy to oversimplify our notion of the causes of suffering in general, and in so doing to thwart an accurate etiology of suffering in particular cases.

In our chapter on metaphysics we discussed different “things” that are, in some sense, real. Specifically, we talked about states-of-affairs being real. From this perspective, a “fever,” for example, is real (and we certainly experience that reality periodically). A “fever” is seen not simply as the presence of certain germs in our body but a *condition*, a state of affairs, involving the co-participation of a number of different kinds of factors (body temperature, shivering, the presence of particular bacterial or viral infections, and so on). The particular configuration of each of these different factors gives rise to the various forms of disease that physicians address in their work. If our consideration, as lovers of wisdom, is not upon medical diseases, but upon the universe of suffering more generally, how are we to attend to the types of factors involved in the etiology of suffering as such?

Throughout this text we have tried to look at things from many perspectives, indeed from a *global* perspective. We have talked about “multiple causes,” of the value of “many-sidedness,” and, following C. S. Peirce, of a fallibilistic approach to knowing. What can we learn about suffering from a survey of global philosophical reflection? One thing we discover, pulling together ideas from here and there, is a catalog of different “causes”: a complex of factors whose

co-participation appears to give rise to the *fact* of suffering and whose nuanced character gives rise to the *shape* of suffering as it is experienced.

Spiritual forces - .

An explanation for suffering common to many cultures prior to written philosophical reflection was that it was due to the actions of spiritual forces: gods, spirits and such. Consider a discussion of epilepsy probably written by Hippocrates, considered the father of modern medicine (c. 460-377bce). He described the perspective of his surrounding culture toward epilepsy and toward the roles which the deities play in this disease:

If the sick man bellows or has convulsions, they say that the Great Mother is responsible. If his cries resemble neighing, Poseidon is the cause; if they resemble the chirping of birds, Apollo Nomios is to blame; and if he foams at the mouth and kicks with his feet, it is Ares' doing. Finally, if he has evil dreams by night, sees frightful figures, and leaps up from his bed, they say that he has been attacked by Hecate or by some hero.²

While the “spiritual forces” explanation has passed out of favor for many Western intellectuals, being identified with a shallow “primitive” approach to suffering (even by Hippocrates!), it is still employed by many thinking people today, and is even seeing something of a revival in some circles. Innocent Onyewuenyi, in an essay on “African Philosophy,” summarizes African metaphysics as a consideration of *forces*.

“Force, for them is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.’ When you say, in terms of Western philosophy, that beings are differentiated by their essences or nature;

2. Summarized by Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), 112.

Africans say that forces differ in their essences or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable and even mineral forces.”³

Similarly Christian theologian Gregory Boyd argues for what he calls a “spiritual warfare theodicy,” defending the justice of God in the midst of suffering [we will get to this topic later] by emphasizing the role of Satan and demonic forces in human experience.⁴ For many people around the globe, their sufferings arise from the influence of malevolent powers: gods, spirits, forces that work evil in human experience. There are some whose experience of evil can be described as nothing other than demonic.

Personal choices/actions/attitudes - .

A second factor commonly mentioned with regards to the arising of suffering is human action itself. “You got yourself into this mess,” we say. This explanation is used with regards to relatively minor situations (if you wouldn’t have played outside in the freezing weather with all those friends without a hat on, you would not have caught cold), to rather major problems (the survival of our planet itself is being threatened [and a host of other serious sufferings are brought on] by global warming caused by our irresponsibility).

One common way of talking about this factor in the East is through discussion of “karma.” We learned about *karma* in chapter 11, the idea that every action influences other actions, however minutely. When we consider their effects [and especially the effects of ignorant, grasping, or evil actions] over multitudes of lifetimes, an approach to suffering is developed that accounts for suffering not easily explained by other theories. Why, for example, is one child born

3. Innocent Onyewuenyi, “Is There an African Philosophy?” in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, ed. Tsenay Serequeberhan, Paragon Issues in Philosophy (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 40.

4. See Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan & the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

in poverty with a debilitating disease when another is born into health and prosperity? This is the result of *karma*, the sins committed in previous lifetimes. Various doctrines of *karma* are debated in the different schools of philosophy in the East (What exactly is passed on from one lifetime to the next? What kind of freedom do we have in light of the determinations of karmic formations? What happens between lifetimes? and so on). We shall look at *karma* further below.

In the context of Western reflection, the word “sin” is dominant. Some schools speak of “original sin”: an inherent predisposition away from God and one’s excellence in creation and toward evil/suffering. This inherent sinful predisposition gives rise to a kind of natural “entropy” in human experience. There is a tendency toward conflicts, mistreatment and so on built into human experience in light of original sin. Others simply speak of particular sinful choices and actions, choices and actions which give rise for the potentiality of other harmful choices and actions.

As you can see, one’s approach to the human causes of suffering is shaped a great deal by one’s view of the basic “goodness” or “badness” of humanity, a topic we discussed in chapter ten. We see the sufferings of humanity--the harms brought on ourselves and others--as natural functions of brutes in competition for limited resources (Hobbes), or as the failure of good people to avoid evil influences (Mencius), or as a consequence some other factor essential or accidental to humankind *as* human.

In Buddhist circles, the cause of suffering is identified with “craving” or “attachment” (*tanha*). The *Visuddhimagga*, for example, speaks of attachment as “*Concerned with this and that: wherever personality is generated there is concern with that.*”⁵ Our being is an issue for us, we are attached to it, and our suffering is tied to that attachment. It is not, as with “sin,” that our evil tendencies produce suffering for ourselves. Rather the very fact of suffering is a consequence of our perspective on things. If we realized the insubstantialness of “securities” (if we were not attached to wealth), for example, we would not suffer from losses at the stock

5. Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Perfection*, Bhikku Nanamoli (Seattle, WA: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), XVI.60.

market. If only we truly understood the deep transience of life, we would not suffer from the decay of our bodies through disease and age. Here it is not human *actions* so much as *attitudes* that precipitate our experience of suffering. Buddhism is not alone in this realization of the role which our standpoint toward reality plays in our experience of suffering. Stoicism, for example, also shares a similar idea. Epictetus, a Stoic writer and a Roman slave, poses the question: what is “freedom”? Is it freedom when we are a ruler and can presumably do what we want to do and enjoy what we want to enjoy? But the leader is a “slave” to the wishes of his subjects and himself. What is not fully “his own,” he is not free to enjoy (his money, his rule, his bodily health, and so on), and so he suffers under their loss. It is only the purity of one’s will that lies outside the control of others. “Who is free from restraint?” Epictetus asks, “He who desires nothing.”

There is another sense in which human experience itself is a cause of suffering. We go through different “stages” of life during which our basic attitudes and perspectives change. And in the midst of transition from one to another there are losses, losses which are felt as suffering. The “identity-crisis” of adolescence brings with it a kind of re-orientation to reality that involves a loss of self, a “death” to what was before. And in the midst of this transition, other kinds of sufferings are experienced with a unique quality. Others experience similar crises at other transitions of life (mid-life, old age), crises which are experienced *in and of themselves* as suffering and which also accentuate the character of other sufferings experienced. Perhaps some of human suffering can be traced to the earliest transitions of life, from our most fundamental dependency on the mother in the womb to the independence of birth and the later development of speech.⁶

At times we choose courses of action that bring suffering on ourselves. At times our own attitudes towards things create or exacerbate our suffering. At times the changes of life itself contributes to our sense of suffering. And at times these all work together. Thus, whether due to

6. On this see the philosophical reflections of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and their followers.

particular actions, to our attitude towards our experience, or to the natural passage of life itself, we appear to contribute to our own experience of suffering.

The natural course of things -

“___it happens,” we say. That’s the way things are. Beyond the spiritual forces of evil, beyond the dys-functional acts and attitudes of humans, perhaps there is also a sense that some evil arises (or some aspects of evil situations arise) simply because it is in the nature of things. Given enough time a car will break down, and it just “happened” that the brakes gave out on the freeway. We all know that the earth is molten lava and somewhat unstable in the center. At times the tectonic plates will move and there will be earthquakes and tsunamis. It happens.

Naturalist or Materialist perspectives (such as Epicurean or Carvakan) often use this account of suffering. One says that events simply follow events. Actions of atoms and forces cause reactions by other atoms and forces, and the chain continues. Another might point to the inherent randomness of the universe, arguing that a necessary unpredictability lies at every level of the universe. We can expect to have unexpected hurricanes (ecological), epidemics (biological), or world wars (social). We have yet to experience the next random cosmic accident (such as the shooting star that hits earth) which causes the destruction of life as we know it. A Taoist might speak similarly about “the way things are,” mentioning seasons of pleasure and pain (*yin* and *yang*) in the universal process of the Way.

We can also talk of “the way things are” by speaking of *samsara*. As we learned above, one way of looking at the “cause” of suffering in the East is to interpret it in terms of *karma*. The concept of *karma* links specific sufferings to specific acts or causes in the past. A more general way of approaching suffering, however, is to look at the whole of existence--the whole universe of karmic cycles and all--as a pattern of misery, ignorance, and illusion. This is *samsara*. *Samsara* is that from which we long for release. Thus king Brhadratha pleads to the revered Sakayana,

O Revered One, in this foul-smelling, unsubstantial body, a conglomerate of bone, skin, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, rheum, faeces, urine, wind, bile, and phlegm, what is the good of the enjoyment of desires? In this body which is afflicted with desire, anger, covetousness, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from what is desired, union with the undesired, hunger, thirst, old age, death, disease, sorrow and the like, what is the good of the enjoyment of desires? And we see that all this is perishing, as these gnats, mosquitoes and the like, the grass and the trees that grow and decay. But what indeed of these? There are others, superior, great warriors . . . they went forth from this world into that. But, indeed, what of these? Among other things, there is the drying up of great oceans, the falling away of the mountain peaks, the deviation of the fixed pole star . . . the departure of the gods from their station. In such a world as this, what is the good of enjoyment of desires? For he who has fed on them is seen to return (to this world) repeatedly. Be pleased to deliver me. In this world (cycle of existence) I am like a frog in a waterless well.⁷

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, summarizing the points of agreement of the various “orthodox” schools of philosophy in India, states that except for Purva Mimamsa, “all the systems aim at the practical end of salvation. The systems mean by release (*moksa*) the recovery of the self of its natural integrity, from which sin and error drive it. All the systems have for their ideal complete mental poise and freedom from the discords and uncertainties, sorrows and sufferings of life, “a repose that is ever the same,” which no doubts disturb and no rebirths break into.”⁸ Similarly the Jain philosophical system speaks of a fundamental “bondage” built into the structure of the

7. *Maitri Upanishad* I.3-4; published in *The Principle Upanishads*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, The Muirhead Library of Philosophy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1953), 796–97. Specific mention of *samsara* is given in Sakayana’s conclusion [after presenting the yoga method of liberation]. See *Maitri* VI.34.

8. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 354.

universe. Bondage, sin and error, discord and uncertainty, condemned to return to phlem and fear forever. This is the idea of *samsara*, existence itself as suffering from which we long for release.

Those in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition who speak of “original sin” (or even of a cosmic “fall” of angelic beings prior to the creation of earth) also speak at times of a twistedness of the “natural” processes of the world. The earth does not yield its harvest easily. This twistedness of the natural order is not for this philosophy, however, a basic and unchanging pattern like *samsara*. Rather it is a characteristic of the world made good by creation, distorted *in corruption*, and destined to be restored by God.

Injustice/disorder - .

While some might speak of suffering as a necessary part of the “order” of things, others might emphasize the characteristic “dis-orders” lying behind the sufferings of the world. For those who see suffering as “dis-order” it is not that we acquiesce to the pains of the world as being “the way things are,” but that we say “things don’t have to be this way.” And we choose to do something about the suffering. This approach was pervasive in the modern West. It is also characteristic of many approaches to social evils.

One might approach disease, for example, not as a consequence of spiritual attack, an effect from prior *karma*, or an inevitable characteristic of the process of life, but rather as a *disordered* pattern of conditions and events, a disordered pattern which we can influence (and heal) by knowing and acting on those patterns themselves. Similarly hunger in the midst of drought can be addressed by developing irrigation and food-storage. Waste and unemployment can be relieved by restructuring the corporation. Communication can be expanded by the creation of the Internet. And so on. This was the vision of the modern era, a vision where the sufferings of the world--at every level--were seen as *un-necessary* elements of human experience.

Consider the socio-political area of life (remember our chapter on politics?). At times the suffering(s) of many are seen as the consequence of an unjust or unworkable social system. What

ordering of society best facilitates the health of the society? The health of its members as individuals? Younger brother is in pain because older sister hit him (not that younger brother was entirely innocent, mind you). Suffering is, at times, the result of tyranny, conflict. Perhaps tyranny and conflict can be addressed by introducing democratic measures where needed. Whether we see the resolution of suffering through the institution of Shari'a law, through the institution of a classless state, or through the development of "democratic freedoms," we still often view social ills as the result of unjust or unworkable systems, systems which can be changed.

At times we understand suffering as "the way things are." Other times, we understand suffering as "the way things ought not to be."

"*God*" - .

And then there is the idea that suffering is somehow caused by "God," however god is conceived. Recall, for example, the debate in Chinese philosophy between those who thought that human beings are basically "good" and those who thought that human beings are basically "evil" (or some combination). What we did not mention there was that part of the energy behind this debate was the difficulty some had in attributing evil to the Tao, while others see within the Tao a necessary source of both the good and the evil in the world ("The Tao gave birth to the one and the one to two . . ."). Is this an attribution of suffering to *God* or to *Nature*, to the way things are? It all depends on how you interpret Taoist philosophy.⁹

Within philosophical schools that speak of a more "personal" deity, God is mentioned as the source of suffering in a number of contexts. God is spoken of as the creator, maintainer, and destroyer. God, at times, punishes or judges individuals or communities. God introduces suffering into the experience of an individual or community in order to bring it to further enlightenment or transformation. God permits the suffering of one due to the sin of another.

Indeed each of the "causes" of suffering mentioned above can be interpreted in terms of a prior

9. Note, for example, that *T'ien* is translated both Heaven and Nature.

(either temporally or logically) “cause” permitted or determined by God. The attribution of suffering to God (or even the notion of God permitting suffering) has stimulated some of the philosophical debate discussed in chapter fourteen.

What causes suffering? Where does suffering come from? If we take our cues from a global survey of philosophical reflection we find that suffering comes from a lot of different places. Some suffering is from ourselves, some suffering is from others. Some suffering is from the natural way of things, some suffering is from spiritual forces of evil. Some suffering is from God. Every strand of the web of our related-ness is fraught with pain and suffering. And the complication is that some of these “causes” might be simultaneously present in a given situation at the same time (like different factors more or less present in the etiology of disease). Paying attention to suffering means noticing the dynamics of each of these “causes” in our lives in any given moment.

Where have you experienced most of your suffering? What factors have stood out most directly for you? Have you ever noticed situations in your own life or in the lives of others you know where a number of different factors were present simultaneously? What was that like?

Phenomena: The Experience of Suffering

Paying attention to suffering also means paying attention to the experience of suffering itself, to the “phenomenology” of suffering, to the way suffering appears to us. It is one thing to know something about the factors that contributed to an experience of suffering. It is another to know something of what is going on within you *during* the experience of suffering, to know what suffering *does*. Part of this involves reflection on the doctor’s questions: where does it hurt, what kind of hurt is it, how long has it been this way, and so on. Descriptive philosophical reflections on the nature of the experience of suffering have been most significantly provided by two diverse systems of thought: Buddhist systematization and twentieth century European philosophy.

Buddhist systematization - .

The Buddhist term for suffering (*dukkah*) has been the subject of a massive literature. The fact--and the character--of suffering is the First Noble Truth of Buddhist philosophy, a truth that sets it apart from all the other philosophies of the world. To understand this truth, therefore, is important. As the saying goes, “to know suffering is to know the cause of suffering, which is to know the path of the release from suffering.”

The Scriptural presentation of the nature of suffering is found in the records of the Buddha’s first sermon, and is repeated many times in other documents. For example in the *Samutta Nikaya*, we read

Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of pain: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful [or “association with the unloved” and “separation from the loved”]. In short the five aggregates of grasping are painful.¹⁰

The *Visuddhimagga*, a compendium of Buddhist doctrine, develops this list point by point, describing in what way each of these (birth, old age, sickness . . .) can be described as “suffering.” In doing so it articulates various nuances of the experience of suffering. For example, it differentiates between “sorrow,” “lamentation,” and “despair,” saying that, “sorrow is like the cooking [of oil, etc.] in a pot over a slow fire. Lamentation is like its boiling over from the pot when cooking over a quick fire. Despair is what remains in the pot after it has boiled over and is unable to say more, going on cooking in the pot till it dries up.”¹¹

10. *Samutta Nikaya* v. 420 ???

11. Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Perfection*, Bhikku Nanamoli (Seattle, WA: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975), XVI.53.

Walpola Rahula, following the lead of the *Visuddhimagga*, summarizes this list of suffering(s) into three primary categories: (1) ordinary suffering, (2) suffering due to change, and (3) the character of the aggregates.¹² The first two are easily understood. We suffer when we are the victims of injury and such. We suffer when we lose that which we desire (all good things come to an end). It is the third that requires some explanation. We learned about the aggregates in a previous chapter. There we discovered that Buddhist philosophy speaks of the “self” in terms of a set of “aggregates” (*skandha*): matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. What we call a “self” is merely the momentary appearance of these aggregates. But why are these aggregates identified with *suffering*? Each of these aggregates is subject to birth, aging, and death (think of the process of perception, for example). Each is subject to sorrow, dejection, lamentation, despair. Each is subject to contact with the unloved and loss of contact with the loved. The impermanence of the good is itself a suffering for our mental formations, for our consciousness, and so on. Our being is a concern for us, it concerns us, and we suffer this being from moment to moment. It is a cycle of ignorance, consciousness, mental and physical phenomena, faculties, contact, sensation or feeling, desire or craving, clinging, becoming, and birth, leading to death, decay, lamentation and so on. For the Buddhist, each of these elements--and indeed every activity of existence--functions as a (vain) effort to “hold things together,” to establish a stable self in the face of the non-reality of the same. It is a fruitless endeavor destined to failure. Consequently, it is an existence bound up with constant suffering.

Twentieth-century Continental thought -.

Whereas Buddhist philosophy reflects on the phenomenology of suffering in general (how our entire life is experienced as a life of suffering), twentieth-century European philosophy has tended to explore the functions of suffering within human experience more

12. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, second ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 16-28.

particularly. Philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida all have applied something of a descriptive (phenomenological) reflection on suffering and death and their functions in human experience.¹³

For Martin Heidegger, awareness of our death brings us face to face with our own temporality: a “not yet” which still confronts us.¹⁴ We see death as a coming-to-an-end in which we are no longer engaged in life, in which we are no longer being “there,” in which we *are* no longer. And while we can speak about the life of someone who has died, their actual self-experience, their “being here” can not be represented. Our own being is absolutely unique. And so our living is really a “dying,” a living in the face of the inevitability of our own non-being. In one sense we cannot really experience our own death--for that is the point, in our own death we are not “being” any more. But on the other hand our entire life is a life lived toward our death: itself a life of dying. Dying, then, is how we live *toward* our own death, in light of the awareness of this upcoming non-being. In the face of the potentiality of our no-longer-being-able-to-be there we stand absolutely alone. All other relations have been undone and we realize that we are thrust forward into a world wherein we are pointed toward our own end.

One consequence of our “living as dying” is that the realities of our being are revealed to us through coming to grips with our death. There are those moments when we become anxious about things, about our own death. And something is revealed. Normally we fall in with the crowd, we speak of death casually as something that happens here and there, a “case” which can be brushed aside. Normally we (along with the crowd) avoid death, conceal death. This is, for Heidegger, the way of *inauthentically* understanding death. He writes, “our everyday falling evasion *in the face of* death is an *inauthentic* Being-towards-death. But inauthenticity is based on

13. I will treat Heidegger and Levinas here. See also Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

14. My discussion of Heidegger here summarizes his discussion of death in *Being and Time*, John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 279-311.

the possibility of authenticity.”¹⁵

Authentic Being-towards-death neither evades nor covers up one’s death through explanations provided by the crowd. Rather we expect our death, living in light of its possibility at any moment. We anticipate our death and in so doing we realize that our possibilities are really possible. By confronting the possibility of the *impossibility* of our own being, we see the possibility of possibility itself. Furthermore, we anticipate *our* death (our *ownmost* possibility--not one provided by others) and in doing so we live without relation to others, of our own accord. We face death as the uttermost possibility, one not to be outstripped, absolutely certain, though uncertain as to when it may happen. Thus anticipation reveals to us our lostness in the crowd and brings us face to face with the possibility of being itself, an impassioned freedom toward death, a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the crowd and which lives anxiously certain of itself. While this is experienced most dramatically as we face death (Heidegger spends his entire reflection on our confrontation with death), perhaps these dynamics could be experienced to a lesser degree in the midst of other forms of suffering.

Whereas Heidegger sees our confrontation with death as an individualizing force, Emmanuel Levinas, Heidegger’s student, sees confrontation with death (and suffering in general) as an inter-humanizing force. In his well-known *Totality and Infinity*, he introduces death as he begins to speak of what he calls “the ethical relation and time.” Time, for Levinas, is the postponement of death. “Time is precisely the fact that the whole existence of the mortal being--exposed to violence--is not being for death, but the ‘not yet’ which is a way of being against death, a retreat before death in the very midst of its inexorable approach.”¹⁶ For Levinas, the exposure to violence and to death is ultimately an exposure to the Other: to the person who can do me in, to that which draws near to me, *against me*. Death maintains an interpersonal order.

15. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 303.

16. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, reprint, 1961 (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 224. Further citations from this work will be given in parentheses.

“Death is a menace that approaches me as a mystery” (235), proceeding as “from a foreign will” (234). Death is a confrontation with the absolute, infinite, abyss of the Other.

Levinas also interprets the phenomena of suffering interpersonally in a brief reflection on the notion of “useless suffering.” Suffering, he states, is passivity. It is no longer the performance of something, but a submission wherein the content of the submissive consciousness is simply “woe.” Nevertheless, what is simply passive and meaningless for the sufferer confronts another as *duty* (consider the call for help). Thus Levinas writes, “for pure suffering, which is intrinsically senseless and condemned to itself with no way out, a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman.”¹⁷ Suffering and death thus open us up out of our own self-absorbed enjoyment into the face of the Other who can put us to death or bring us aid in time of need.

Whether individualizing or inter-personalizing, our confrontations with suffering and death shake us up. In one sense all of life is experienced as constant loss, constant change in which we try fruitlessly to “take care of our selves” and it is this fundamental release of “self” that is freedom from suffering. In another sense our self--and its basic orientation toward the Other--is revealed to us only in these crisis moments of suffering. What do you think? What do you experience when you experience suffering? Is suffering different when arising from one cause as opposed to another (or from different configurations of causes)? In what ways might life itself be experienced as a never ending cycle of suffering? Have you ever thought about your own death? When? Why (or why not)? How did those thoughts affect you?

Effects: Conditions that tend to arise following suffering

17. Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 93–94. See also his discussion of the dynamics of sacrifice in Emmanuel Levinas, “Dying For...,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 216–17.

Paying attention to suffering involves not merely looking at the “causes” and the “phenomena” of suffering. It also involves a noticing of the functions, or fruits, or consequences of suffering. What happens after suffering?

Perhaps the most obvious thing we notice “after suffering” is *damage*. There is the scar, the limp, the rubble, the remains, the aftermath. There is the room of the deceased loved-one which must now be cleaned. There are the weekends left to myself, now that my lover is gone. There is the hatred for those who were opposed to us in war, who killed our people. There is damage to the land, to our hearts, to our view of the world. Suffering shatters things, and it may take time to put things back together again. There is simply no minimizing the damage which follows suffering.

But damage is not *all* that follows suffering. By virtue of its very character as something which “shakes up,” suffering stimulates *consequences of more positive kinds*. In times of suffering some are emptied of a foolish self-sufficiency which enables them to enjoy authentic relationship with others. Others are stripped of an over-consciousness of their circle of peers, freeing them to become themselves in a way that had not been available before. At times virtues are strengthened and vices are broken. One person finds courage in a time of suffering; another finds a healthy resignation. In times of suffering we are often drawn from the superficial distractions of life into the important things. A community is drawn together to address future dangers after a flood damages a large section of the town. And there is the suffering which feels strangely sorrowful or guilty for surviving and learning from the disaster. A person leaves an addiction behind in light of the profound meaning of a spouse’s cancer. Indeed, we can even see these kinds of consequences arising from some of the larger disasters in history (especially plagues, droughts and such -- have we learned from war?). Philosopher of religion John Hick considers this world to be a place of “soul-making.” He sees “our human existence on this planet as part of a much longer process through which personal spiritual life is being gradually brought

in its own freedom to a perfection that will justify the evils that have been a part of its slow creation.”¹⁸

Paying Attention to Your Own Suffering

We begin a life of wisdom first by learning to pay attention to our suffering. How is this to be done? We start with *assessment*, taking account of our own experience of suffering. Some of this can be done just by thinking about it. It might, however, be helpful to write some of this down in a journal. Where have you suffered? When have you suffered? Why have you suffered (there’s that “why” question, again, with all its various meanings)? What factors have been involved in your sufferings: list them all (even in injury or illness it is common to have physical, social, financial, and psychological factors present) and describe how they have affected your suffering. Look at your history. Where and how has this story found itself in your own story of life? Perhaps you define your life, like Nicholas Wolterstorff, in terms of “before” and “after” the crisis. Perhaps your suffering has wound itself into your life in a different kind of way. How are your story and your suffering related (or unrelated)?

What do you have that can help you through this suffering? For some it may be a sense of organization. For others it may be a prayerful spirit. For others it may be an innate optimism. For still others it may be a no-nonsense realism. What do *you* have to help you live with your suffering? What are your possibilities. Now really, look far and wide, look realistically, look to the impossible, just what are the possibilities of your life in this situation?

Perhaps you discover that a little *supplement* might be in order. You have read this book and you keep hearing about this notion of “meditation.” And here it is again as we talk about preparing for death. You decide that it’s time you looked into this whole practice of meditation more. It seems like a waste of time, but it keeps getting associated with really important things.

18. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 118. For his notion of a “soul-making” world see John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Foundations of Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 40–41.

Maybe you should give meditation a try. You decide to start by just thinking about your own death, imagining that you have died and others are speaking at your funeral. Perhaps watching what they say about you might encourage your own sense of living right here and now. Or perhaps you decide that health and diet are issues of concern. Your suffering and your relationship with food are not unrelated.

To pay attention to suffering is to stop, to wait, to give time to suffering, and to let it *be* suffering within and around us, as we notice it for what it is. It is to open ourselves to the *whole* of suffering. We look at the various factors which are involved in the arising of suffering: personal choices, spiritual forces, natural causes, divine actions, injustice and so on. We also pay attention to the experience of suffering. What is sickness *like*? What is failure *like*? Perhaps attention to the experience of suffering will enable us to identify actions we might take to address it in the future. Perhaps this kind of reflection simply brings us humbly before the mystery of existence. Finally, we look at what arises “after suffering.” We assess the damage, explore the possibilities, and learn from the past. Needless to say, this is not easy. Nevertheless, if suffering is to contribute to an authentic “love of wisdom” then we must give it the time and attention it deserves. We must let it speak to us, deeply.

Asking Questions About Suffering

One of the consequences of suffering is that it brings questions. There is nothing like suffering to stimulate questions. We have already asked the first question above, “Where did this suffering come from?” “What ‘caused’ this suffering?” These are the questions the doctor asks. But then there are the other questions. Often they take the form of “why”. “Why did they have to die?” “Why can’t I be rid of this?” “Why are things this way?”

Asking and Suffering

Asking questions begins with doubt, with the dis-satisfactions of life. And suffering is (almost by definition) dis-satisfaction. There is a kind-of disconnect between mind and heart, between body and mind, between this and that experience. And we are forced to ask questions. “What should I be expecting of life, anyway?” We suffer through a couple of lame classes at school and we begin to ask, “What is school really about?” We suffer through a broken relationship and we question the function and value of others in our lives. Living doubt leads to inquiry, and inquiry leads to further questions. There is a dis-integration somewhere and it wants to be resolved. At times our suffering and doubt are rather minor (recently I wondered about a cut on my hand that took a while to heal). Other times, however, our sufferings provoke us to a Cartesian rejection of nearly all our most basic beliefs.

Furthermore, our asking of questions changes depending on the kind of suffering experienced. Consider doubt in the midst of injustice, doubt in the midst of debilitating illness, doubt in the midst of the suffering of another, doubt in the midst of intellectual confusion. The “who” of our questions, the “when” of our questions, and more, are all shaped by the character of the suffering that leads to the doubt. And again, regarding the “how deep” of our questions, some questions in the midst of suffering are rather shallow. Others address the deepest levels of our experience.

The “why” questions are of two kinds. On the one hand there is the “why did this happen to me?” which is really a question of *cause*. In this use of the question, one is simply looking to address the factors that led to the suffering in the first place. But then one can ask the same question again--“Why did this happen to me?”--and it is now a question of *meaning*. In this case we are trying to understand how things fit in life. And at this point we are thrown back to the issues faced in chapter ten: human nature, human experience, purpose, and meaning. Suffering is experienced in the context of a horizon of meaning. Tension is experienced (and this tension accentuates the suffering) when our experience does not match our approach to the meaning of life.

In suffering, perhaps above all times, it is valuable to consider the “Questions about Questions” presented in chapter 5 (and again in JA 5.2). Because suffering has a tendency to shake us up, we lose sight of ourselves and a safe navigation of our questions is even more difficult. It is good to stop and ask ourselves, “Just what (really) is my question in the midst of this suffering?” See if you can look beneath the pain and hurt and anger and depression (There is also the “why did this happen to me?” which is not a question at all, but rather a rant--and perhaps a necessary rant), to discern what the key questions are. Listen to yourself. Why are you asking *this* question, *now*? What, of all the questions swirling around you in this time, are the few questions that are *unavoidable*, the one question that *must* be asked? And what, realistically, can you put into addressing this question? What sources do you have at your disposal? These must be sources of support as well as sources of information and wisdom. And then consider how you will live until things are resolved? What might happen if it *is* resolved?

The “Problems” of Suffering

And then there is the *one* question so often asked in the context of suffering: the question of belief in God in light of the existence of suffering, the “problem of evil.” When we addressed this question in chapter fourteen we divided it into four parts: (1) the argument against the existence of God from evil, (2) the defense of God’s existence in the face of evil, (3) an explanation of how evil might fit into an overall theological perspective (theodicy), and (4) the more existential considerations of living with suffering in the light of one’s understanding of the problem. The first three have been treated in chapter fourteen, where we explored the more technical religious questions dealing primarily with monotheistic religions. We will explore living with suffering more fully below.

But as we mentioned earlier, the fact of the matter is, we *all* have a problem with suffering. It is not simply a matter of “proving” or “disproving” god’s existence, but of making sense of the full range of experienced reality no matter what our basic metaphysical orientation. Just as the monotheists of the world struggle to reconcile their god’s love, knowledge and power

with the sufferings of the world, so the materialist or the idealist struggles with the ambiguities of things.

Some are not willing to have (or are simply unable to conceive of) a god who is tainted with the creation of a world where evil is present. And yet they are fully convinced that a single Ultimate exists. Such was the case with the Gnostics of Mediterranean late antiquity, who attributed creation of the world to a lesser god. Likewise “deists” of one sort and another safeguard God’s purity in the light of evil by affirming a God who functions as the initial Creator but who is entirely removed from involvement from the world from that point on (natural processes take over once things have begun). And yet there is tension for the deist. People throughout the world recount various encounters with the divine or with spiritual entities (remember the religious experience argument?). And is not God still the cause of evil in starting the whole ball rolling?

For the Hindu idealist, there is the tension between *Brahman*, who/which is understood as non-different with all that is, *samsara*, which is understood as the world in its ultimate illusion and misery, and *karma*, which is understood as the dynamics of cause and effect in the life of sentient beings. Different people will place a different emphasis upon one or another of these three elements. As we mentioned in chapter fourteen, some brought accusations against the Advaitan school, that they had made *Brahman* subject to injustice as the Source and cause of everything. And Shankara’s response was to place the weight on *karma*, a *karma* of unending lifetimes.

Those who believe that only matter and material forces are real do not have to try to reconcile an omniscient God with the realities of suffering. Suffering comes from the way things are, from the facts of a determined set of material causes or through random chance. Nevertheless, many materialists do struggle with a sense of meaning. What ultimate *purpose* is served by good or evil? They also face the questions of *spiritual* good and evil. It is difficult to “prove” that there is (or is not) spiritual reality. But if one does not believe in such realities one must present reasonable accounts for the varieties of sufferings claimed to be brought from gods,

from jinn, or from a Supreme Reality. For those who see humans as mere animal materiality, as we mentioned in chapter ten, there is also the “problem of good,” an account to be made for the heights of human compassion and beauty that appear to move beyond mere survival needs.

Buddhist metaphysics can also struggle with something of a “problem of good.” Is this world, with all its beauty and life, is each flower, each animal, really a momentary configuration of formations? Is suffering really the First Noble Truth, or is the truth of suffering dependent upon a prior truth of the goodness of things, things that have legitimate reality in and of themselves? And even in Taoism, where there is no personal god to defend and where both the physical and the spiritual are acknowledged, we find debates about the presence of good and evil proceeding from the Tao.

Each system of thought must struggle with suffering in its own way. None is exempt. Each language-game (or life-game) must find ways of accounting for and living with the painful ambiguities of life. It is a funny thing about dis-continuity, in-coherence, dis-integration. There is a difference between the somewhat-contented rest in the Mystery of life which lies beyond our ability to put things together, the confusion of authentic Doubt which demands resolution here and now, and the ecstatic confrontation with Transcendent Reality which surpasses all questions and pains. Each are needed in their own time. Perhaps wisdom lies in knowing where to head and when.

Living with Suffering

The final question we ask in a time of suffering is, “How do I live with this?” “How do I act in the face of this pain (this loss, this failure . . .)? Living with suffering involves both living with the suffering of the present as well as preparing ourselves for the suffering of the future. One leads to the other.

In one of Plato’s dialogues, a man called Phaedo recounts his last hours with Socrates before Socrates drinks the poison and dies. In the midst of this conversation Socrates speaks of

the relationship between body and spirit in death, and how that relationship ought to influence our life here on earth.

Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward. . . .The truth is much more like this. If at its release [death] the soul is pure and carries with it no contamination of the body, because it has never willingly associated with it in life, but has shunned it and kept itself separate as its regular practice--in other words, if it has pursued philosophy in the right way and really practiced how to face death easily--this is what 'practicing death' means, isn't it? . . . But no soul which has not practiced philosophy, and is not absolutely pure when it leaves the body, may attain to the divine nature; that is only for the lover of wisdom. This is the reason, my dear Simmias and Cebes, why true philosophers abstain from all bodily desires and withstand them and do not yield to them.¹⁹

“Practicing death.” Contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida writes, in reflection on this passage, “Philosophy isn’t something that comes to the soul by accident, for it is nothing other than this vigil over death that watches out for death and watches over death, as if over the very life of the soul.”²⁰

Pierre Hadot calls it “learning to die.” One must remember that the foundations of Western philosophy lie in the death (the martyrdom!) of a man (Socrates) for his beliefs.

19. Plato, *Phaedo* 64a, 80e, 82c; see also 67e “if a man has trained himself throughout his life to live in a state as close as possible to death, would it not be ridiculous for him to be distressed when death comes to him? . . . Then it is a fact, Simmias, that true philosophers make dying their profession and that them of all men death is least alarming.”

20. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.

Consideration of what is worth dying for, and how one ought to live in light of what one is willing to die for, is one important way of thinking about the whole enterprise of philosophy. Learning to die involves little deaths, putting to death those desires and passions that separate the soul from truth and life. Learning to die involves time given to meditation and inner dialogue, training the soul to “see” the truth about things, about one’s life and death. Learning to die involves the changing of one’s mind, a conversion to a proper perspective of the relationship between the here and the hereafter. Learning to die is a deep awareness of the uncertainty of the future for the sake of a keen awareness of life in the present. The insignificance of human affairs, the impotence of death, the vision of the Ultimate Reality which lies above or beyond death, these are the themes which characterize the reflections of those who have learned how to die, and in learning how to die have also learned how to live.

Plutarch (45-120ce), a moralist of the “middle Platonist” variety, wrote a letter to his wife after the loss of their daughter. They had already had at least a couple of sons, and were overjoyed to now have this daughter--that is until her death. Plutarch was away at the time of death and comforts his wife through correspondence. The genre of “letters of consolation” was well known in Greece and Rome. Listen here to an example of this genre as Plutarch teaches his wife how to live in the midst of her suffering.²¹

The messenger you sent to report the death of our little child seems to have missed me on the way as he travelled to Athens; but when I reached Tanagra I learned of it from my granddaughter. Now the funeral, I suppose, has already been held--and my desire is that it has been held so as to cause you the least pain, both now and hereafter; . . . Only, my dear wife, in your emotion keep me as well as yourself within bounds. For I know and can set a measure to the magnitude of our loss, taken by itself; but if I find any extravagance of distress in you, this will be more grievous to me than what has happened. . . .

But I do not see, my dear wife why these things and the like, after delighting us while she lived, should now distress and dismay us as we take thought of them. . . . But rather, just as she was herself the most delightful thing in the world to embrace, to see, to hear, so too must the thought of her live with us and be our companion, bringing with it joy in greater measure, . . .

21. See Plutarch, “Consolation to His Wife,” in *Plutarch Moralia*, vol. VII, trans. Phillip H. DeLacy and Benedict Einarson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 580–605.

But we observe that most mothers, after others have cleansed and prettied up their children [at birth], receive them in their arms like pets; and then, at their death, give themselves up to an unwarranted and ungrateful grief, not out of good will toward them--for good will is rational and right--but because the combination with a little natural feeling of a great deal of vain opinion makes their mourning wild, frenzied, and difficult to calm. . . .

Do, however, try to carry yourself back in your thoughts and return again and again to the time when this little child was not yet born and we had as yet no complaint against Fortune; next try to link this present time with that as though our circumstances had again become the same. For, my dear wife, we shall appear to be sorry that our child was ever born if our conduct leads us to regard the state of things before her birth as preferable to the present. Yet we must not obliterate the intervening two years from our memory; rather, since they afforded us delight and enjoyment of her, we should credit them to the account of pleasure; and we should not consider the small good a great evil, more, because Fortune did not add what we hoped for, be ungrateful for what was given. For reverent language toward the Deity and a serene and uncomplaining attitude toward Fortune never fail to yield an excellent and pleasant return; while in circumstances like these he who in greatest measure draws upon his memory of past blessings and turns his thought toward the bright and radiant part of his life, averting it from the dark and disturbing part, either extinguishes his pain entirely, or by thus combining it with its opposite, renders it slight and faint. . . .

If you pity her for departing unmarried and childless, you can find comfort for yourself in another consideration, that you have lacked fulfillment and participation in neither of these satisfactions; for these are not great blessings for those deprived of them, but small for their possessors. That she has passed to a state where there is no pain need not be painful to us; for what sorrow can come to us through her, if nothing now can make her grieve? . . .

[after some debate with the Epicureans and others who do not believe in an imperishable soul, he now presents comfort through the idea of reincarnation]

Consider then that the soul, which is imperishable, is affected like a captive bird: if it has long been reared in the body and has become tamed to this life by many activities and long familiarity, it alights again and re-enters the body, and does not leave off or cease from becoming entangled in the passions and fortunes of this world through repeated births. For do not fancy that old age is vilified and ill spoken of because of the wrinkles, the grey hairs and the debility of the body; no, its most grievous fault is to render the soul stale in its memories of the other world and make it cling tenaciously to this one, and to warp and cramp it, since it retains in this strong attachment the shape imposed upon it by the body. Whereas the soul that tarries after its capture but a brief space in the body before it is set free by higher powers proceeds to its natural state [free of the body] as though released from a bent position with flexibility and resilience unimpaired. . .

[he closes the letter with reference to the law and customs of his land, which forbid certain rituals on behalf of children who die in infancy--presumably rites in order to insure their after life in a favorable environment]

It is rather in our ancestral and ancient usages and laws that the truth of these matters is to be seen; for our people do not bring libations to those of their children who die in infancy, nor do they observe in their case any of the other rites that the living are expected to perform for the dead, as such children have no part in earth or earthly things; nor yet do they tarry where the burial is celebrated, at the graves or at the laying out of the dead, and sit by the bodies. For the laws forbid us to mourn for infants, holding it impiety to mourn for those who have departed to a dispensation and a region too that is better and more divine. And since this is harder to disbelieve than to believe, let us keep our outward conduct as the laws command, and keep ourselves within yet freer from pollution and purer and more temperate.

What do you notice reading this letter of consolation? Do you see how beliefs, feelings, and conduct are intertwined in the philosophical “practicing death”? Is there someone *you* know that has died? What would you write to someone by way of a letter of consolation? What actions would you encourage? What feelings would you engender (or caution)? What beliefs would you remind the one who grieves? Perhaps you would like to write such a letter as an exercise in the “practice of death.”

After supplement comes *discernment*. You take some time alone (some *real time really* alone) just to sit with your suffering, to let it reveal itself further, to see what might rise to the top. You review you options of life in the context of this suffering, honestly evaluating those possibilities listed in your assessment. You share with others and allow them to teach you, to comfort you, to guide you. And perhaps, over time, you catch a glimpse of a “next step.” A step of action on behalf of justice, a step of changing your own mind, a step of waiting in uncomfortable contentment.

And so you employ *intent-ment*. You make a choice of how to live in the midst of suffering. On the one hand suffering is a very passive space. We “suffer” what comes to us, receiving it as from the hands of an Other. But there is a kind of “active passivity” wherein we

choose the *way* in which we receive what comes. Each element in our suffering (spiritual forces, personal choices, natural causes and so on) may require a different movement on our part. Our response to suffering, then, is a thoughtfully considered recognition of every element of the complexity of “causes” and phenomena that make up us and our suffering at any given moment. The battle is often fought on all fronts simultaneously (although at times we fight on one front knowing that we are leaving others for later). This “thoughtful” intentment, however, is not a dry rationalization. Rather our thoughtfulness incorporates within the very thoughtfulness the depth of our emotions. Only then can we find the zeal to see us through the follow-through of our discernment in the light of the experience of suffering itself.

And we *experiment*, we play with things, revising as we go along. At times we succeed in minimizing our suffering. And we move into *management*. At times we discover that the aim is not to minimize suffering, but to learn to live *through* it. And at other times we just suffer, and the failure of our experiments is part of the suffering itself. There are times when we find ourselves cast upon Mystery too deep for us to fathom. We cannot understand, we cannot fix it, we have no strength to act. We abandon ourselves to we know not what, hoping against hope, perhaps crying out to the Supreme Other for help. And we wait.

*Long enough, God
 you've ignored me long enough.
 I've looked at the back of your head
 long enough. Long enough
 I've carried this ton of trouble,
 lived with a stomach full of pain.
 Long enough my arrogant enemies
 have looked down their noses at me.*

*Take a good look at me, God, my God;
 I want to look life in the eye,
 So no enemy can get the best of me
 or laugh when I fall on my face.*

*I've thrown myself headlong into your arms—
 I'm celebrating your rescue.
 I'm singing at the top of my lungs,
 I'm so full of answered prayers. (Psalm 13, Message version)*