“How Good is Suffering?: Commentary on Michael S. Brady, Suffering and Virtue”

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1 Introduction

Let me begin by saying how grateful I am to have the opportunity to comment on Michael Brady’s impressive book, Suffering and Virtue. This is the best book on virtue ethics I’ve read in recent years. It breaks new ground in virtue ethics by presenting a sophisticated, well-argued defense of various senses in which suffering can be a virtue. In the course of doing this, Brady develops a nuanced theory of suffering and relates suffering to other virtues. Among other topics, he discusses suffering as a virtuous motive; suffering and virtues of strength and vulnerability; suffering, morality, and wisdom; and suffering, communication, and social virtue.

It is far beyond the scope of one short commentary to discuss all of the interesting themes and arguments that Brady presents – and the book is chock full of them. Here I will focus on a few themes from chapter four, “Suffering and Virtues of Strength and Vulnerability,” and will offer some of my own reflections on salient themes from chapter five, “Suffering, Morality, and Wisdom.”

Two initial caveats are in order. This session was originally scheduled for a year ago, but the Pacific Division Meeting was canceled because of COVID-19. Living through the pandemic has reshaped my perceptions of suffering, and with it, my approach to Brady’s book. In light of our experiences with COVID, the book seems all the more timely as a contribution to philosophical thought. That said, the sheer avoidability of many deaths and intense suffering occasioned by flawed governmental responses, the spread and embrace of misinformation about vaccines, and so on, has caused me to think differently about suffering from when I first read the book. I will refer to this point in the remarks that follow.

The second caveat is this. I doubt that Brady would disagree with much that I say in this commentary. Indeed, there could be places in the book where he endorses the views I present here. Though I tried to stay close to his views, I found myself

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bouncing off of them and thinking about them on my own. I think this is a tribute to their richness: they inspire productive thought on important topics, and that’s what philosophy is all about.

2 Two Themes from Chapter Four, “Suffering and Virtues of Strength and Vulnerability”

In chapter four, Brady considers forms of chronic suffering, both physical and emotional. Chronic arthritis and depression are but two examples – not only do these conditions entail debilitating pain, they can also be financially costly. He [1, 87] writes: “… it is implausible to regard these different kinds of suffering as generated by or associated with excellences of our physical or emotional make-up. These forms of suffering are not, therefore, virtuous responses or motives.” Thus, they fall outside the scope of the arguments about suffering that he made in earlier chapters of the book. In chapter four, he argues that these forms of suffering can be admitted to be intrinsically bad, yet can have significant instrumental value for the development of other virtues [1, 87]. These other virtues fall into two categories: virtues of strength and virtues of vulnerability. Though I will focus mainly on virtues of strength, I’ll conclude this section with some comments on virtues of vulnerability and how they might or might not relate to virtues of strength.

3 Virtues of Strength

The central idea of Brady’s treatment here is that suffering builds character. It is necessary but not sufficient for us to develop strength, resilience, patience, endurance, perseverance, adaptability, and a range of other virtues that help us to adapt to, cope with, or overcome adversity. To make his case, [1, 90-102] draws primarily on Nietzsche, but also on the Cynics and ancient Roman philosophers. Summing up his general discussion of these views, [1, 101, emphasis his] writes:

Where does this leave us? Nietzsche, like the Cynics and Cicero before him, holds that suffering is necessary for strength. On Nietzsche’s view, strength is a matter of a positive attitude towards suffering, adversity, hardship, and the like. I have argued that this general point seems correct, if understood in a virtue-theoretical framework, since suffering is necessary for one to develop and express the virtuous traits that constitute strength of character: fortitude, perseverance, courage, resilience, and patience.

The central claim expressed here is this:

(1) Suffering is necessary for us to develop and express virtues that constitute strength of character. Thus, even though suffering is intrinsically bad, it can be instrumentally good and necessary for character development.

Following Nietzsche, [1, 101-102] also adopts the view that:

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(2) “… the strong and noble will seek out suffering and hardship, so that they can display and express their strength in overcoming it …” [1, 101].

Brady recognizes that (2) needs to be carefully circumscribed. He also makes the following claim: “… it is not that the suffering involved in serious illness will necessarily promote such virtues. But it is true that without suffering, it is highly unlikely that creatures like us will be able to deal appropriately with the global disruption that serious illness brings” [1, 109].

Brady argues well for these claims and his arguments do have plausibility. For the sake of time, I will not address (2) here, but will focus my reflections on (1) by starting with a quote from Nietzsche that [1, 93, emphasis his] includes in his discussion: “‘Suffering for what?’ … The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering was the curse which has so far blanketed mankind.” [1, 93, emphasis his] goes on: “For Nietzsche, psychological weakness consists in a particular kind of negative response to the unavoidable fact of suffering: the weak person is someone who despairs over the fact that they suffer, who is hostile to this fact, who resents it.”

I submit that many forms of suffering are meaningless, and this fact raises the question whether meaningless suffering is necessary for developing strength of character. To the contrary, meaningless suffering might undermine the development of character strength, leading us into just the forms of psychological weakness that Nietzsche associates with despair, hostility, and resentment. If this line of thinking is correct, then only forms of suffering that the sufferer regards as meaningful are necessary for developing virtues of strength.

Let me illustrate this point with some examples. In the movie, “Cool Hand Luke,” Luke, a prisoner and leader of prisoners, is made by the sadistic prison commandant to dig a deep hole, fill it up, then continually repeat the process. The process involves the infliction of physical pain and mental suffering and is intended to break Luke down. At least in a certain part of the movie, it seems to succeed. Similarly, in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel, Invitation to a Beheading, a prisoner who is awaiting execution is arbitrarily made to suffer emotional abuse. Again, the point of this is to break down his character, and again, this seems to succeed. The hallmark of these inflictions of and experiences with suffering is that they are arbitrary and meaningless. They in no way build virtues of strength. In fact, their intended effect is the opposite – the suffering is meant to destroy the characters of the prisoners.1

My point is that the circumstances under which suffering occurs affect whether the sufferer can experience her suffering as meaningful, and sometimes those circumstances are beyond her control. But unless the sufferer experiences what she is going through as meaningful, I think it is highly likely that she will not develop virtues of strength, but instead will end up either sinking into apathy or developing attitudes of despair, hostility, and resentment toward her plight. Consider three

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1 One cannot help but be reminded of the myth of Sisyphus by these examples – Sisyphus was punished by Zeus for his hubris in thinking himself cleverer than Zeus. His punishment was the meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again, with no hope of completing his task. See https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Myth-of-Sisyphus. Accessed March 14, 2021.
examples that are more familiar than those of Luke and the other prisoner and that focus directly on experiences of serious, chronic illness.

First, the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic strike me as bordering on the absurd. Mistakes were made by many governments at many levels that allowed the virus to extend around the globe, resulting in countless deaths and needless suffering, some of it leaving sufferers permanently impaired. What makes completely avoidable suffering -- caused by government ineptitude, widespread ignorance, and worse -- meaningful? Perhaps some people did find their personal experiences of suffering from COVID meaningful, and that approach to their suffering enabled them to develop virtues of strength. But if so, that would have been despite the circumstances in which their suffering occurred, and in the face of considerable frustrations.

Second, consider the plight of sufferers of diseases about which knowledge is incomplete, that is, not much is known about the disease (there is some overlap here with COVID, whose novelty caught the world by surprise). Autoimmune diseases are cases in point. These diseases can be quite serious and can result in death or serious disability. On the other hand, some can be controlled with medication. The severity of the disease, its manifestations and effects, the efficacy of medication -- all seem to depend to a large degree on the individual physiology of sufferers, so that generalizations can be misleading, and reliable information is often hard to come by. Here (and in many other cases) the lack of reliable information and knowledge about the disease can frustrate a sufferer's efforts to come to grips with it and deal with it. Finding herself in a state of ignorance and uncertainty about what will happen to her -- what the course of the disease or the treatment will be, for example -- could render her psychologically unable to develop virtues of strength, or at least, make doing so quite difficult.

Finally, let me observe that the health care system in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) can make it difficult and tiring for patients to get effective treatment. Chronic disease sufferers must deal with the feeling that they are simply cogs in a part of a large patient processing system -- one that does not value individual care -- and that they are often at the mercy of their insurance companies in getting treatment, medication, and so on. Here, too, it is not impossible for sufferers to develop virtues of strength, but the challenge of being caught in a seemingly arbitrary system is highly likely to make patients perceive their suffering as meaningless -- to give up, and say, "What's the point?"

The theme that unites all of these examples is the sufferer's lack of control over the circumstances of her suffering. To have meaning in our lives, we need to have a sense of control -- a sense of effective agency over at least some of what happens to us. When we feel that we lack control over what is happening in and to our bodies, our sense of agency is diminished, and also, the extent to which we are able to get meaning from our lives (I take it that this is one of the reasons why rape is wrong, and why reproductive freedoms are so essential for women). So I suggest that the argument for the instrumental value of chronic suffering as necessary for virtues of strength should home in on the meaningfulness of that suffering to those who experience it. That would entail acknowledging that some suffering is perceived as meaningless by those who suffer, and that this is not due
to objectionable psychological weakness on their part, but instead, to the circumstances under which they suffer. This gives us all reason to seek to change those circumstances so that unavoidable chronic suffering can become more meaningful for the sufferer, and can, indeed, foster virtues of strength.

Additionally, it provides some insight into the conditions under which praise and blame can reasonably be attributed to sufferers. I will pursue this point in a moment, but first want to comment briefly on chronic mental, as opposed to physical, illness. It seems to me that chronic mental illness presents unique challenges to the thesis that chronic suffering is necessary for the development of virtues of strength. Brady [1, 90] acknowledges as much, noting the challenges of certain emotional disorders such as severe alcoholism or post-traumatic stress disorder to the development of virtue, but he sets this point aside. I think a closer look is in order, and this can shed light on the conditions under which suffering can be meaningful. This, in turn, will help us make headway in sorting out conditions for the attribution of praise and blame.

Depression is a cognitive-affective disorder that produces despair in the sufferer. In the midst of the experience of depression, it is difficult to see how virtues of strength might develop, unless they emerge slowly and gradually during a course of treatment with cognitive therapy and drug therapy that alters levels of serotonin and other neurotransmitters. After coming out of the depression, one might be able to look back on the experience as formative and contributing to virtues of strength. If that trajectory does occur, we would certainly praise the sufferer for her virtue development. But if someone does not come out of the depression, but, perhaps, commits suicide as a result, do we want to blame that person for viciously not developing virtues of strength?

The foregoing remarks clue us in to the complexities of attributing praise or blame to sufferers who do or do not develop virtues under conditions of chronic suffering. Let us take first the case of suffering chronic physical illness. The suffering can be either meaningful or meaningless to the sufferer. If it is meaningful to the sufferer, we would certainly praise her for developing virtues of strength. But would we be justified in blaming her if she does not? In other words, having the virtues of strength under conditions of meaningful suffering clearly counts as virtuous, but does lacking them clearly count as vicious? Is there some third option, whereby someone who does not possess virtues of strength in the face of meaningful chronic physical suffering can be considered neither virtuous nor vicious, and if so, how can we distinguish that person from sufferers whose inability to develop virtues of strength is vicious and blameworthy? Might we distinguish (1) people whose inability to develop virtues of strength under conditions of chronic physical suffering is excusable and not blameworthy – perhaps because the severity of their pain and the rigors of treatment detract from their ability to develop virtues – from (2) those who lack a certain strength of will, and can be considered akratic, from (3) those who make the deliberate choice of despair, hostility, resentment, and so on, when they could have chosen perseverance, patience, resilience, etc.? The deliberate choice of these negative attitudes when a more positive choice is in the sufferer’s power, it seems to me, is truly the hallmark of vice in these situations.
A second set of considerations arises when we turn to chronic physical suffering that the sufferer regards as meaningless. Here we need to ask whether she finds the suffering meaningless due to some fault in her character, or whether she perceives it as meaningless due to the conditions under which the suffering occurs. If she finds her suffering meaningless due to some character flaw, we should, I think, tread carefully before assigning blame. Perhaps she is intellectually lazy and does not want to reflect on her suffering and how to integrate it into her life. This, I think, could be reason for blame. On the other hand, perhaps her suffering is so debilitating that she is weakened and overwhelmed by it, and unable to take the cognitive steps to find her suffering meaningful. In such cases, sympathetic understanding and support, not blame, would be in order.

If the conditions that make her suffering meaningless are beyond her control, we might want to regard her as blameless for not developing virtues of strength. I would incline in this direction, since it would seem unreasonable to expect a chronic sufferer to undertake the actions needed to change the knowledge currently available about her disease, the availability of treatment, vaccines, etc., the ease of accessing health care, etc. — in short, the external conditions that contribute to her perceptions of the meaninglessness of her suffering.

A final comment concerns how chronic mental or emotional illness complicates this picture. Finding meaning in suffering, and with it, the wherewithal to develop virtues of strength, is made exceptionally difficult when one is in a state of chronic mental or emotional impairment. While we would certainly praise people who are able to develop virtues of strength as they battle depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and so on, I would be loath to blame them for failing to do so. Individual situations are complex, however, and could have a bearing on our justifications for blaming someone. Perhaps a person suffering from depression is at a stage at which she can in fact make progress toward developing virtues of strength, but clings to meaninglessness as a way to avoid moving forward — perhaps out of fear. She chooses to remain in the “holding pattern” of depression. The key factor in assigning blame in such cases, it seems to me, depends on the sufferer’s capacity for rational choice. Is she at a stage at which she can in fact make a choice toward a healthier future, and fails to do so out of culpable weakness, or is she genuinely unable to choose to move forward?

4 Virtues of Vulnerability

Let me remark briefly on what Brady [1, 89,102-109] calls the “virtues of vulnerability.” These include the virtues of humility, intimacy, adaptability, creativity, and presumably, compassion. They are what I would call “soft-making” virtues, since they seem to imply a gentleness or softening in one’s approach to overcoming illness. By contrast, I would call the virtues of strength “hard-making” virtues, since they seem to be concerned with the kind of “toughening up” of character needed to cope with one’s plight. I wonder how reasonable it is to think that a single sufferer could develop and possess both hard-making and soft-making virtues. I do not think there is a logical contradiction here, but I worry that there could be psychological
tensions as the sufferer strives to be both resilient and perseverant, yet humble about her ability to overcome hardship. These two sets of virtues seem to pull their possessor in opposite directions in terms of character development.

One might seek to finesse this problem by pointing out that virtues that seemingly contradict one another or are in tension can be directed toward different ends. If so, there need not be a very deep contradiction or tension. For example, I might be intellectually humble in my disposition and actions toward the knowledge of my disease, yet perseverant in my efforts to cope with or overcome it. Here I have different ends: knowing about my disease and coping/overcoming. But even with respect to the same end, for example, coping with my disease, the virtues need not conflict or be in tension. Adaptability and creativity could help me to be perseverant and resilient, as I strive to find creative ways to cope with my situation.

But there are other cases in which opposing dispositions directed toward the same end could be conflicting, or at least, having one could hinder the efficacy of the other. How can I be perseverant and resilient as I pursue my end of overcoming or coping with my disease, yet be humble as I pursue it?\(^2\) Humility, according to several accounts, presupposes knowledge of my limitations, but perseverance and resilience require me to soldier on, despite that.\(^3\) That seems to be a tall order for someone suffering from a chronic disease. Pettit [7] is instructive in his view of substantial hope as a form of cognitive resolve. We have substantial hope, which helps us to attain long-term, difficult goals, when we put ‘offline’ negative information that might unsettle us or cause us emotional distress that would weaken our resolve. A similar point applies to humility: since humility involves owning one’s limitations, perhaps it is best to be without it, if one seeks to persevere in efforts to cope with or overcome one’s illness. Perhaps what is needed to strengthen one’s resolve is not humility, but a touch of blind over-confidence, which, like hope as cognitive resolve, buoys one in one’s efforts.

In any event, it is interesting to think about how virtues of strength and virtues of vulnerability might combine in the psychological economies of chronic sufferers. Perhaps the virtues that should be prescribed depend very specifically on the circumstances and moral psychology of sufferers. Virtues of strength could be appropriate for some people, virtues of vulnerability for others, and some combination of the two for yet other sufferers. A cautionary note is worth adding. It isn’t difficult to see how great damage can be done by prescribing the wrong virtues. One can imagine scenarios in which families tell their suffering loved ones to buck up and be resilient, when the sufferer simply does not have the wherewithal to do so, or worse yet, condemn a suffering person for a perceived lack of resilience, patience, or perseverance. The abuse and misuse of virtues is a commonplace in history. Great care

\(^2\) We have been discussing the virtues of strength and vulnerability in my virtue ethics seminar this semester. A student, Michael Deutsch, offered a wonderful example of how humility and perseverance can complement each other. Chemotherapy patients, he pointed out, need to be both humble and perseverant during the course of their treatment. They need to persevere in order for the treatment to be effective, but they also need to be humble about their decreased physical abilities and accepting of them as they experience the impairing effects.

\(^3\) See Snow [8], on intellectual humility, Whitcomb, et. al. (2015).
should be taken that sufferers are not harmed by even well-intentioned admonitions to virtue.⁴

5 Reflections on Themes from Chapter Five, “Suffering, Morality, and Wisdom”

Among many other insights from chapter five, Brady offers two: (1) that suffering is necessary for wisdom and understanding; and (2) that reflection on experiences of suffering is important. Reflection on experiences of suffering, I take it, is the thread that unifies these themes: reflecting on suffering allows us to grow in wisdom and understanding and is important for making sense of our lives. To make his case, Brady [1, 134-136] draws on the work of psychologist Dan McAdams, who has studied the importance of a certain kind of self-reflection for human well-being. Making sense of our lives is crucial for well-being. We make sense of our lives by constructing a coherent narrative through self-reflection. Part of the point of this sense-making narrative construction is to provide explanations for negative events. Presumably, constructing a narrative about how suffering fits within our lives helps to make meaningless suffering meaningful. Needless to say, it can also function as a coping mechanism in the face of illness, disease, or other distress. I wish to explore self-reflection further by making some observations about the roles of perspective, time, and a person’s situation with respect to events that cause suffering.

Let’s note first the role of perspective. As an audience member watching the film, “Cool Hand Luke,” it is apparent that the prison camp commandant is seeking to break Luke’s character by forcing him to perform a back-breaking, meaningless task. Perhaps it was also apparent to Luke, too, but at a certain point in Luke’s extremity, it was clear that his capacities for reflection had been seriously beaten down by exhaustion. That is, given his physical and psychological state, his capacities for reflecting on his experience, and thus, of making it meaningful, had been severely undermined. The general point is that the kind of self-reflection needed to integrate the experience of suffering into a coherent first-personal narrative could be unavailable to those in the throes of great physical or psychological suffering. This, of course, relates to points I made earlier in this commentary.

However, even if Luke had been able to reflect on his experience, we cannot conclude straightaway that it would have made his suffering meaningful. It could simply have made it intelligible, in the sense that understanding the commandant’s malice and fear of Luke’s power with the prisoners would have helped Luke understand why the commandant wanted to break him down. So I think we need to bear in mind the distinction between meaningfulness and intelligibility. Intelligibility, it seems to me, is the thinner concept. An explanation of how cancer cells destroy the body is intelligible to me, in the sense that it enables me to understand how cancer works. That explanation becomes meaningful for me, that is, it takes on meaning in my life,

⁴ Again, my students had great insight on this point, arguing that virtues should be cultivated in supportive ways, and not through harsh admonitions to be virtuous.
when I or someone I love has cancer. Because of its personal significance for me, I become more invested in understanding cancer and how it works. I will revisit this point in a moment. For now, I would say that making an illness or other suffering-causing event or state of affairs intelligible is a first step in the kind of self-reflection needed to make it meaningful.5

A second point is about time. Time can affect the perspective a sufferer has on the suffering-causing event. In other words, sometimes temporal distance is needed for the self-reflection necessary to make sense of suffering. This can be so for several reasons. First, one’s physical and psychological state, which could have been debilitated and diminished at the time of suffering, could be stronger after time has passed. I noted this earlier when mentioning depression and the development of virtues of strength. After time has elapsed, the sufferer could have greater cognitive and emotional capacity to reflect on her past experience. This greater capacity could afford her the personal wherewithal to move beyond intelligibility to meaningfulness. What might this “wherewithal” amount to? For one thing, temporal distance from a negative event can give one a sense of safety – of not being susceptible to further pain or harm – and this sense of safety could aid in one’s ability to revisit and reflect on a difficult experience by making one less afraid of any “secondary suffering” that might be experienced through reflection. Several years after being brutally raped, the victim could still have a sense of trauma, but perhaps not as immediate as in the days, weeks, and months immediately following the event. Perhaps, after the passage of time, she is no longer as afraid of “reliving the event,” of being “raped all over again,” and can bring to bear her reflective capacities without undergoing further emotional harm. Whether the rape becomes meaningful or only intelligible to the victim depends in large part, I think, on how she is able to respond to it, and her responsive ability depends in turn on her psychological and agential capacities. Consider someone who is the victim of a brutal, apparently random rape, who cannot come to terms with it. The rape is intelligible insofar as she understands the act itself, the circumstances, and the fact that she was an apparently random victim. But it is not meaningful to her, or if it is, it is only as a damaging, traumatic event that has stunted her life and her capacities for engagement.

We might contrast this with the case of someone for whom the rape was a turning point. Jerome Bruner [2], a psychologist, discusses “turning points” as points in a person’s life at which her narrative takes a turn – a new direction – sometimes as a reaction against what others see her as or want her to do. Turning points are

5 An interesting question is whether an event or experience can take on meaning for a person without first becoming intelligible to her. I am inclined to think that some form of intelligibility is necessary for an event to be considered meaningful. The kind of intelligibility involved need not be that provided by scientific or factual explanation. For example, the Virgin Mary apparently appeared to three shepherd children in the village of Fátima, Portugal in 1917. Certainly, the experience was mysterious, and inexplicable through science or fact. It became intelligible, and indeed meaningful, to the children and many others in virtue of their Roman Catholic beliefs about the Virgin Mary, miracles, etc. Had it not become intelligible in virtue of religious beliefs, I doubt that it could have become meaningful, but would have remained an inexplicable mystery. For further information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fátima,_Portugal.
assertions of the autonomy of the self and the beginning of new patterns of self-directed activity. They are steps toward crafting the life one wants and sees oneself as living. Perhaps the rape victim’s experience ultimately sensitizes her to the social problem of rape, to the needs of others who have been raped, and energizes her to direct her efforts toward ending rape in society or providing help and advice through a rape hotline. The experience of being raped has been a catalyst that has given her life new meaning. She no longer sees herself as a helpless victim, but as a strong survivor who can help others. This kind of experience is not uncommon and can come about through self-reflection. Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the parents of children from Sandy Hook are cases in point. Here a caution is in order. Though we should admire people who are strong enough to make their experiences of suffering meaningful, we should not automatically condemn those who are unable to do so – for whom those experiences lay at the level of mere intelligibility or worse – are life-shattering, unintelligible experiences of which they cannot make sense.

Suppose, however, that one is not situated so as to develop a sense of safety from a suffering-causing event. This can occur when the suffering is still immediate, when one is still susceptible to the ravages of pain. Perhaps, with the passage of time, one can become used to the suffering, and can integrate it into one’s existence. In this way, one manages or gains control over an illness or disease, although one is not “safe” from it, in the sense of being free of it. In cases of chronic suffering as well as traumatic events, the point is not that “time heals all wounds.” The point is that time can give us a vantage point from which to reflect on and manage the negativity of the experience. I think this kind of wherewithal – of not being “safe” from a disease but being able to manage it -- is possible, though far more difficult, in cases in which one’s suffering includes the fear that a dread disease will recur. Think of cases in which a cancer that has been in remission resurfaces in a person’s life. Perhaps the experience of having overcome it once gives her strength and confidence in her ability to do so again. But perhaps not – so much depends on the psychology of the sufferer and her circumstances.

Let me now comment briefly on a person’s situation with respect to the events or experiences that cause suffering. This is related to perspective, but goes deeper, and is related to time, but introduces a different point. The point concerns how situations impact and shape our perspectives on suffering and was touched on earlier when I introduced the difference between intelligibility and meaningfulness using the example of understanding how cancer works. Consider another example. Suppose that we learn on the news of the brutal torture, rape, and murder of a small child whom we did not know and with whom we had no connection. As decent people, we are horrified, and discover that the perpetrator had been a victim of abuse who suffered from various psychological pathologies. We now have an explanation and this allows us to make some sense of the suffering of the child, if only in a minimalistic, detached, clinical way. In other words, it makes what happened intelligible. My hypothesis is that this explanation, though it provides
intelligibility, will not enable the child’s parents to make either their own suffering or that of their child meaningful. This is because they are deeply related to the child, and thus, are situated with respect to her suffering in a way that differs significantly from ours. To make this shattering experience meaningful, an explanation that provides bare intelligibility will not be enough. The parents might turn to religion, to try to place the suffering of their child (and of themselves) within the context of a deeper, more meaning-laden world view. But even this might not be enough. It might even make them despise and feel contempt for a ‘just’ and ‘loving’ God who would allow such atrocities to happen (and the ‘free will’ argument seems to add insult to injury). Alternatively, they might, as some of the parents of the Sandy Hook students did, be motivated to use the experience to bring about a greater social good.

Consider an example that raises a different point about perspective and meaningfulness. Suppose that from an early age, a child is repeatedly the victim of sexual abuse. The abuse occurs long before the development of her rational capacities, and indeed, shapes and distorts her world view. The very meanings that she is able to make and the narrative that she is able to construct have been corrupted from the outset by these early, formative experiences. Not even years of therapy and counseling can enable her to break free of these demons and gain a healthier perspective. Though she builds a successful career and has a family, it all becomes too much, and she commits suicide. This is a true story of someone I knew, and, sadly, it is not unfamiliar. Other cases can be recounted of individuals who similarly suffered, did not commit suicide, but still were unable to live their lives to the fullest, free of blight. Think of the many victims of religious pedophiles.

My point is not to make everyone despondent. My point is to highlight the numerous factors that can impede the kind of self-reflection needed for our experiences of suffering to be meaningful, and to lead us to wisdom and understanding, as well as to the development of virtues. I also wish to observe that in those cases in which meaning can be made from experiences of trauma and suffering, the narrative the person constructs extends well beyond the event’s impact on the self. The rape survivor who gets involved with the helpline, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Sandy Hook parents, and others – survivors of abuse by clergy who form support and advocacy groups – recover meaning from their sense of agency, from being able to change circumstances so that similarly situated people either do not have to endure what they suffered or do not have to do so without help. This involves not only community, but also hope. I think what is needed to make our experiences of suffering meaningful is hope. We might have hope in the efficacy of our own agency to bring experiences of suffering within our control, or to reinterpret them and integrate them into our lives in ways we can live with. Or, recognizing the limits of our agency and failing to have a clear end in view, we might have hope that a higher power will show us the way through difficult experiences that we cannot understand, and guide us to a place of sanity and safety. Exactly how hope impacts suffering, meaningfulness, and the recognition of our agency and its limits are, however, topics for another book and another day.
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