SEVEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT POINTLESS SUFFERING

What Philosophy Can Tell Us about the Hardest Mystery of All

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It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.

JAMES BALDWIN

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INTRODUCTION

THE PARADOX OF POINTLESS SUFFERING

Man from *his* vantage point can see Reality only in contradictions. And the more faithful he is to his perception of the contradiction, the more he is open to what there is for him to know.

ALFRED KAZIN

I think of my pal Matt Kaufman, a curly-blond fifth-grader, full of possibility and mischief, who was popping wheelies on the edge of town when a high-schooler came whizzing over the hill in a car. On impact Matt's body vaulted through the air, landed on the nearby playground, and ballooned to what seemed like twice its original size. Since school had just been let out, a young audience witnessed the scene and waited beside his immobile bleeding body for the med-evac. He died on the way to the hospital. I was in fourth grade at the time. My mom confirmed my friend's death as I was playing anxiously on the stairs with my action figures. I felt the question "Why?" creep through my whole body. My toys fell and lay in awkward poses on the steps.

The suffering of children sharply illustrates the gap between how the world is and how we think it should be. You need the imaginative gymnastics of past lives or inherited sin to see anything remotely

like justice in most of it. Just think: somewhere right now there are children cringing at the screams of their parents, children begging for food, children walking in fear to school, children coughing up blood, children being born with painful deformities, children dying. Somewhere right now another Matt Kaufman is writhing in pain. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime, one in five girls and one in twenty boys are the victims of sexual abuse: so it's too painful to continue to imagine what children are going through somewhere right now.

Fleeing to the adult world isn't much help. Every minute some of us are being raped. Every minute some of us are dying before we had time to bring to fruition our potential. Every second, every fraction of a second, we're enduring pains that we did not choose and that serve no apparent purpose: madness, injustice, loneliness, grief, terrorism, torture, tyranny, boredom, depression, humiliation, oppression, despair, unrequited love, and—for that matter—requited love. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton observes,

> I can show no state of life to give content. The like you may say of all ages: children live in a perpetual slavery, still under that tyrannical government of masters: young men, and of riper years, subject to labour, and a thousand cares of the world . . . the old are full of aches in their bones, cramps and convulsions, *silicernia* [a funeral feast], dull of hearing, weak-sighted, hoary, wrinkled, harsh, so much altered as that they cannot know their own face in a glass, a burden to themselves and others; after seventy years, "all is sorrow" (as David hath it), they do not live, but linger.[1]

As Burton's four-century-old book reminds us, pointless suffering was hardly invented yesterday. Our ancestors, on top of the usual miseries, from which they were anything but immune, had to cope with such horrors as lynching, the plague, Hiroshima, the Thirty Years' War, beheading, the Middle Passage, and Treblinka. They commonly suffered and died from polio, yellow fever, hookworm, malaria, measles,

mumps, rubella, and smallpox. Has the eradication of these diseases, insofar as they have been eradicated, caused a corresponding loss of something right and good? In other words, would anyone of sound mind wish that we could reintroduce them more generally? What does that say about the world we live in?

What about animals? Arthur Schopenhauer observes, "The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain. . . . If the reader wishes to see shortly whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other."[2] The price of all life is death, and it seems that any animal with a nervous system, from the lowest crustacean all the way up the evolutionary ladder, experiences physical pain. Charles Darwin confesses in a letter, "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice."[3] The ichneumon wasp lays its eggs inside a living caterpillar. When the eggs hatch, the baby wasps eat their way out. A zoologist observes, "It is better for the genes of Darwin's ichneumon wasp that the caterpillar should be alive, and therefore fresh, when it is eaten, no matter what the cost in suffering."[4] Perhaps the best part of C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* is the penultimate chapter (right before "Heaven"), entitled "Animal Pain," where he admits that his careful theological explanation of human suffering doesn't really work for our fellow creatures. His ultimate answer to why animals suffer without the ability to make sense of and transcend their suffering? "We don't know."[5]

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The etymological root of the word "evil," according to the compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means primarily "exceeding due measure" or "overstepping proper limits." Because suffering is how we register such overstepping, "evil" has traditionally been used to refer to anything that does harm. To pluck just two examples from

the *OED*'s several pages of charming illustrations: Caxton in 1480 complains of "the yelow euyll that is called the Jaundis," and in 1655 Culpepper warns, "In a great Headach it is evil to have the outward parts cold."

As much as we lament jaundice and migraines, especially when our feet are cold, we're a lot less likely nowadays to call them "evil," at least not in earnest. For us, "evil" refers mostly to purposeful infliction of needless suffering. Evil is what Nazi-types do, and the Devil of our mythology is Hitler. An interesting transformation takes place in modernity, which we'll soon discuss, whereby the concept of evil is cordoned off from natural events and circumscribed to the sphere of human action. Jaundice and earthquakes are unfortunate, not evil. Nature just occurs. Shit happens, as we modernists say.

To return us to the more comprehensive idea of evil, one that encompasses human wrongdoing as well as death and misery, I've chosen to use the phrase "pointless suffering." I admit that the phrase is tricky, for this book is largely about how people have found a point in suffering: how artists have found in it the inspiration for our essential works of art, how spiritual seekers have found in it a road to God, how philosophers have found in it atonement with nature and training for our fundamental virtues. But I think the phrase "pointless suffering" works for two reasons.

First, I believe that a certain amount of suffering must appear pointless, at least on first glance. Though we all recognize that some rough spells in life are good things, it's impossible to be a human and not to encounter certain sharp difficulties that just don't seem to fit into any normal scheme of goodness or meaning. Maybe it's our task to see through the appearance of suffering's pointlessness to its ultimate resolution. Or maybe we're to endure its apparent pointlessness with a faith that a rationale exists even though it's hidden from our minds. Then again, maybe the suffering really is pointless in a cosmic sense, and we must figure out some other way of coping—or not. In any case, pointless suffering is where the journey of meaning-making begins.

Second, in the great philosophies of suffering, there's always a paradox, an aching ambivalence, at the heart of our experience of suffering. Yes, suffering is at the core of meaning-making, but some chunk of misery stubbornly opposes even our best efforts at acceptance and understanding. Thus, there's a strong air of mystery to the main concepts that we use to confront evil: God, nature, humanity, art. Just as these concepts and the practices associated with them help us to make sense of and live with suffering, they also contain a lightning-strike of the sublime, something that astonishes our understanding, something that makes them difficult for a contradiction-averse rationality to process. Perhaps certain instances of suffering, after being processed by the active human mind, are better called "undeserved" ("meaningful but undeserved") than "pointless" ("meaningful up to a point and yet still pointless at some level"). But I think it's good to emphasize that our most important cases of suffering, no matter how meaningful, remain in dialogue with pointlessness. For instance, my last chapter shows how the blues is, in part, an attempt to come to terms with slavery and its legacy. The affliction of slavery attains meaning, powerful meaning, in the blues, but it's still *pointless*—not just wrong, but mind-blowingly wrong. When we discover a point in suffering, our hard-fought understanding always contains an element of what we don't understand and can't accept—at least from our human vantage. Pointless suffering is where the journey of meaning-making begins, and it's where it ends as well.

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Roughly speaking, there are two important human responses toward suffering, which I'll call the fix-it and the face-it attitudes.

Well, actually there are three, if we don't forget to include the forget-about-it attitude. The forget-about-it attitude may not be philosophically significant, but it's probably the most common. As Blaise Pascal observes in his deadpan manner, "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy,

not to think about such things."[6] When our friend falls victim to an unexpected stroke, when our community is struck by a terrible crime or natural disaster, when we're diagnosed with some awful malady, it somehow shocks us. Doesn't the fact of our being surprised prove that we live in obliviousness to our surrounding suffering? Mostly we muddle through until our semi-blissful forgetfulness is restored. Sometimes we don't, and our name is added to the list of casualties. In the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, the wise hero Yudhisthira must answer a riddle posed by a divine crane, "Of all the world's wonders, what's the most wonderful?" His answer: "That people, though they see others dying all around them, never believe that they're going to die."[7]

In a viral clip from Conan O'Brien's late-night show, our great contemporary Pascalian, the comedian Louis C.K., claims that the main reason we're constantly dinking around on our cell phones is that it's hard to be alone with existence. "Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it," he says. Underneath all our plans and projects is "that Forever Empty . . . that knowledge that it's all for nothing and you're alone."[8] Rather than confront our anxiety at the sadness, we fidget on our tools of infinite distraction. The comedian's observation is perfectly in line with the wisdom of Pascal, who says, "The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us."[9]

Letting your troubles dissolve in a few drinks, or an exchange of text messages, or whatever your rituals of checking out happen to be, can be as coercive as the need to sleep. To forget about problems that pale in comparison to the really bad deals of the universe, I once watched, rarely getting out of my pajamas, the lion's share of the Little League World Series on television. Far be it from me to disparage the occasional forget-about-it attitude! But ultimately to forget about suffering is to lose our humanity. Louis C.K. goes on to relate an incident, sparked by hearing Bruce Springsteen's "Jungleland" on the radio, when rather than flee his anxiety he stood in its way and let it wash over him. He exclaims, "It was beautiful! Sadness is poetic!

You're lucky to live sad moments! . . . When you let yourself feel sad, your body has antibodies . . . it has happiness that comes rushing in to meet the sadness!" If we never turn off ESPN2 or power down our phones, this one-of-a-kind, tragic, lovely life slips through our fingers. Plants grow and die; animals suffer and ameliorate their pains according to instinct; but we humans must find a way to relate to suffering using our rationality—which brings us back to the fix-it and the face-it attitudes.

When we adopt the fix-it attitude, suffering appears as a grievance to be resolved: we'd be better off if we could minimize, even eliminate, it. Thanks to our fix-it energies, we've used our creative fire to forge all sorts of inventions to better our lives. A large portion of civilization arises out of the fix-it attitude, including a fair amount of science and politics, and nearly all technology.

But there's also the face-it attitude, which characterizes much of religion, art, and the humanities, as well as a certain significant portion of science and politics. This attitude regards nature as something that we must suffer to become who we're meant to be. Confrontations with pain, misery, and death are necessary initiations into a deeper way of being. With our face-it energies, we go through tough times, often not wanting to deal with them at first, and they become a crucial part of our story. Our spiritual antibodies rush in. We tingle with pleasure in contemplating the universe as it is, not as we wish it were. We stand up for liberty, a volatile source of potential suffering, to live together in dignity. At our most inspired, we transform unjust suffering into profound art, culture, and knowledge, and elevate death and injustice into glittering places in visions of beauty, adventure, and salvation.

The fix-it and the face-it attitudes are basic to the human condition. On the one hand, we'll always fight against death, injustice, and misery; on the other hand, we ultimately must accept them as the conditions on which the wonder of existence is given to us. The overarching point I explore in this book is that to be human is to embody a huge paradox: the paradox of having simultaneously to accept and to reject suffering; the paradox of both facing and fixing the same troubles.

Simply to face suffering while renouncing any effort to fix it is heartless: we shirk our wonderful power to better our condition; we become complacent, personally and politically, in the face of injustice. But simply to fix suffering without any effort to face it is shallow: we lose our ability to enrich ourselves through the difficulties, tragedies, and vulnerabilities at the heart of all meaningful things, at the heart of life itself; moreover, we run the risk of unleashing tyranny by refusing to accept freedom in ourselves or uncertainty in the world. What's the balance between fixing and facing suffering? There's no perfect formula. This book is my attempt to examine how our most penetrating thinkers explore and embody the immense paradox at the center of human life.

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Part of why I've written this book is that our current age seems to have lost its way with suffering. For several centuries we've been slowly but surely forgetting the mystery itself. In short, our problem is that we've begun to see suffering primarily in fix-it terms. Because the medicines, machines, and political systems that we've traditionally used to combat and correct nature have never been terribly effective, the sheer magnitude of death and suffering has long made the face-it attitude necessary. We've spent so much time having to grin and bear nature, the checks on our fix-it energies have never had to be very strong. Prior to modernity the most serious ways of confronting suffering involved the face-it tools of religion. Our power to modify nature, though it's still limited in what it can accomplish, has suddenly been given a long leash. For the last few centuries our radical technological innovations have changed the terms of our relationship to the world. Long accustomed to taking nature for granted and regarding the sphere of history as the sole space of action, we've now begun to "act into nature," in the words of Hannah Arendt.[10] In Auschwitz and Hiroshima, to take the most dramatic examples, we acted not just as humans but also as gods; in fact, what we did outstripped even the

most heinous natural disasters that were once described, in horror and awe, as "acts of God." What's the Lisbon earthquake next to the Holocaust? What's Ebola compared to the atom bomb? We now negotiate the terms of birth and death through biotechnologies, play at omniscience with mass surveillance, design "smart" technologies, and spend our time navigating the virtual worlds that we've created for our amusement. Our power is such that we've begun, however irrationally, to believe that we can—or soon will be able to—dictate the terms of suffering. When we can't fix a problem, our impulse is to ignore it, lock it away, or even destroy those who have it. A surprising number of people in the developed world now go through life not just hoping but seriously believing that they'll be able to acquire and enjoy the uninterrupted goods of a comfortable existence, overcome their diseases and pains, and cruise into a ripe old age. How does their luxurious retirement end? Well, let's not worry about that right now: the Little League World Series is on.

Our increasing commitment to fix-it techniques makes it difficult for many people to accept the face-it basis of institutions like religion, institutions that were once pretty much all we had to confront the onslaught of suffering. Now, when religion is more than an hour-a-week social-club commitment, it's often seen as an impediment to technoscience. According to certain prominent atheists, God is a fairy tale standing in the way of progress. Consider the famous theological conundrum called "the problem of evil," the difficulty of trying to reconcile a belief in an all-good, all-powerful God with the abundance of pointless suffering in creation. Throughout its long history, the problem of evil wasn't so much a problem as it was a fundamental mystery to be wrestled with. Theologians, philosophers, poets, and everyday believers conceived of the world not just as a site of creation but as a site of salvation. They saw in the mysterious personality behind the universe both fix-it and face-it characteristics. But a new way of thinking about suffering was invented in the eighteenth century and has gained steam through the subsequent centuries. Ethics has been increasingly conceived—explicitly by philosophers and often uncon-

sciously by the populace at large—as utilitarianism, which basically holds that suffering is flat-out bad and that the amelioration of pain and death is the basis for all sound moral reasoning. Thus, the problem of evil has been widely used as a clear-cut reason not to believe in God at all, for it seems absurd that a nice, all-powerful biotechnologist would be responsible for a world where children die of cancer. This conception of God as biotechnologist shows just how hard it is for us to imagine the world as anything but a utilitarian construction site.

While I'm grateful for many achievements of modernity's fix-it quest, our society's relationship to suffering can often be unhealthy. We have a tendency to regard grief, old age, bad memories, and even death as foreign invaders of our souls; thus, medicine is inclined to anesthetize all trying conditions, keep us young, and put off our deaths beyond even the point when our lives are meaningful. We have a tendency to envision happiness as the ability to buy stuff and the identities marketers have associated with that stuff; thus, work is conceived as an evil, a treadmill for the sake of consumption, something better done by robots. We have a tendency to believe technology can fix every problem; thus, nature is seen as a mere resource for our enhanced power, or else as a pet we keep locked up in a park. We have a tendency to see politics as simply keeping people safe and making sure the economy is humming; thus, we're increasingly fine with jettisoning democratic practices and striking Hobbesian bargains with our government for security and prosperity. We have a tendency to see education as the mere downloading of future bankable skills and problem-solving knowledge; thus, we're apt to turn away from the face-it disciplines of the arts and humanities insofar they just aren't efficient fixers of problems (in fact, some fear that the harshness of their subjects may trigger traumatic experiences), or else to turn these disciplines, these jewels of human life, into tools for fixing our social problems. Interestingly, the more we see our lives as a ball of grievances to be untangled, the more our entertainment is filled with spectacular dreamlike appearances of death and violence, from zombies to Mortal Kombat. We're forgetting what it means to exist.

It's noteworthy that we often speak of dealing with various troubles in terms of war: the War on Terror, the War on Drugs, the War on Poverty, the War on Crime, the War on Cancer. I can envision a time when we'll mobilize behind the War on Death, a campaign already envisioned at the beginning of modernity by Francis Bacon. It's not enough for us to fight these problems; we talk as if we must conquer them once and for all. In Deuteronomy we read, "The poor shall never cease out of the land."[11] The same can be said about drugs, crime, disease, terror, and death. It's not just that I oppose the hyperbole of talking about our attempt to reduce suffering in terms of war; it's that waging such wars threatens to undermine our humanity and to generate whole new forms of suffering. We must accept immorality, pain, and death as part of the human package, or else we imperil our freedom.

Please don't misunderstand me. Our forgetfulness about the paradox of both accepting and fighting suffering makes calls for the acceptance of cancer, terrorism, and poverty sound like defeatism. I make no plea for complacency. Not to fight against suffering would be as wrongheaded as only fighting against it. Yes, the poor shall never cease out of the land, but we must also remember the next line of Deuteronomy: "Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother." Acceptance doesn't entail complaisance. While we should respect the backdrop of pointless suffering against which our lives play out, we must work for human goals that are by their nature opposed to pointless suffering. If we're diagnosed with cancer, it makes sense that we submit to chemotherapy. But we should realize that there may come a time when the next level of therapy is no longer worthwhile for the sake of our quality of life. We should also realize, regardless of whether we've been diagnosed with cancer, that suffering is at the core of being alive, that openness to disease isn't simply a glitch, and that we're going to die someday, for such realizations are critical to leading meaningful lives.

My main problem with our superpowered fix-it-ism is that it deprives us of the unique adventure of human existence. It splits us

into employers and laborers, marketers and consumers, biotechnicians and patients, entertainers and the entertained, managers and subjects, fixers and the in-need-of-fixing, elites and riffraff, philanthropists and beggars, gods and beasts, when we should be workers, doers, inventors, caregivers, artists, teachers, students, citizens, and human beings—roles that involve an embrace of mutual risk and suffering. We should be people who understand our own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of others, and who can respond creatively to the human condition. To wage war on suffering is to separate us from what makes us human: it inevitably generates abuse and meaninglessness. The War on Terror compels us to curtail our liberties and to torture people, including innocents. The War on Crime compels us not only to incarcerate ungodly numbers of people, including innocents, but to pressure police forces to adopt the equipment and demeanor of occupying armies. The War on Disease has led many to die hooked to bleeping machines rather than holding the hands of friends and family, or to waste away mentally and physically among strangers in old people's homes. These wars also lull the powerful into believing that it's other people who must suffer. We forget that we're of one substance with the waterboarded suspect, the desperate junkie, and the suicidal schizophrenic. Most fundamentally, when we structure our lives exclusively around the fix-it mindset, we spend our days at a remove from what endows them with value: our relationships lack depth, our food lacks savor, our music lacks beauty, our justice lacks mercy, our work seems burdensome, and our leisure activities kill time rather than enliven it. As Michel de Montaigne says of trying to combat the conditions of life itself, "Other wars act outward; this one acts also against itself, eats and destroys itself by its own venom . . . What have we come to? Our medicine carries infection."[12] In short, the attempt to fix all suffering generates its own unique kinds of suffering: the devastation of unintended consequences and, more fundamentally, the deprivation of human value.

The goal of this book is to revive the paradox of accepting and opposing death, misery, and injustice—in short, to recover the mystery

of suffering, which is also the mystery of being human. The following chapters are essays on seven different ways of looking at the great paradox of pointless suffering. I begin where we are, or at least where many of us are, by examining the emergence of modernity and the turbulent ways we try to make sense of suffering as we achieve our staggering technological prowess. This first section ends with the idea that we need to rediscover what Hannah Arendt calls "the human condition," even as the traditions that once oriented us within our condition have become imperiled. Thus, in my second section I scour our inheritance to update perennially valuable ways of occupying the human condition in our confrontation with pointless suffering. I see how much meaning still crackles in key terms of confronting the mystery: God, nature, humanity, and art.

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After I'd given a reading of my book *The Deepest Human Life* at Prairie Lights Bookstore, Mike Cervantes introduced himself to me and, because I'd mentioned my instruction of ex-cons, asked if I'd be interested in teaching philosophy at the nearby Iowa Medical and Classification Center, a.k.a. Oakdale Prison, where he coordinates educational programs and helps to publish a newspaper. I took him up on the offer and have now been teaching there, off and on, for the past few years. Because the work is pro bono, I've been blessedly free from institutional mandates. I've just gotten to teach philosophy. It's been marvelous!

As a philosopher whose North Star is Socrates, I don't examine ideas as simply historical artifacts or theoretical models, even though history and theory are important. I try to find what's living and dead in great ideas by putting them into conversation with real lives. For all its horribleness, prison has always been a wonderful laboratory for philosophical thought. Immediately I began testing out the guiding figures and ideas of this book among the "guys." (That's what I call the inmates collectively. Though some good-hearted folks object to

what they consider the dehumanizing language of "inmate" or "prisoner," I use these terms too, because they're common and clear, unlike politically correct circumlocutions like "persons in prison" or "transitioning citizens." Also, I don't want to soft-serve the fact of the matter. I've been a person in prison; trust me, it's different from being a prisoner.) I figure that prisoners are in a good place to evaluate what Job says about keeping faith in an unforgiving world, or what Epictetus says about maintaining freedom under desperate conditions, or what Nietzsche says about punishment. I hope that my study of philosophy has equipped me to teach the guys something worthwhile for their journeys through this unmerciful, miraculous life of ours. I know for sure that they have something to teach me about how the soul is illuminated or distorted by religion and philosophy. The way I see it, we form an ensemble that enlarges all of us, an invisible republic that includes the ghosts of long-dead philosophers, prophets, and poets—one that includes you too.

My prison teaching, which began with my selfish desire to explore philosophy with interesting folks, soon led to an essential revelation: how we deal with crime is a powerful expression of how we think about suffering. The philosophical problem of suffering is largely about trying to square the seemingly irreconcilable concepts of suffering and justice. What is prison but our practical attempt to reconcile suffering and justice? Punishment is the infinitely mysterious idea of inflicting pain for an idea of the good. The guys are anything but insulated from injustice and misery. Though all of us have inflicted suffering, they're paying a price for doing so. Some of them have inflicted great suffering, including rape and murder. Most of them have also suffered greatly—in their pre-prison lives as well as in prison. As I was working through various philosophers in preparation for this book, I was surprised at how many of them deal with punishment as an integral part of their discussions of the meaning of suffering. I was also surprised at how many of them, from very different perspectives, come out against systematic punishment! The problem of evil is deeply linked to the problem of prison.

Prison is also a clear place where the horrible problems with not

thinking seriously about suffering manifest themselves. The War on Crime and the War on Drugs have resulted in 2.2 million of our fellow citizens behind bars—nearly a 1,000 percent increase over the past half century! The United States has under 5 percent of the world's population; we house close to 25 percent of the world's prisoners at the cost of $80 billion a year. What's the success of our extensive "correctional" facilities? A recidivism rate of almost 70 percent. (May these statistics soon prove relics of the bad old days.) In other words, in the name of justice and safety, we're ruining lives, tearing up families, and generating crime! If we want to lead good lives and have a healthy society, we need to take a good long look at what we're doing. We should strive to see injustice as part of us rather than as something that can simply be walled off and reprogrammed. What we do to prisoners is what we do to ourselves. If we want to lead good lives, we must rethink our relationship to suffering. If we want to live in the land of the free, we must rethink the land of prison.

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By far the most common response when I tell people I'm writing a book called *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering* is something to the effect of "Well, that's grim!" One academic even chastised me, "Philosophy should be about showing people joy and not wallowing in suffering." These responses strike me as symptomatic of our profound forgetfulness of the mystery of suffering. Suffering and joy are not separable. Real joy exacts from us a confrontation with death, misery, and injustice—and not just pleasant death, a little pain, and the occasional moral failing, but the razor-sharp way that all these forms of suffering cut into us. James Baldwin traces what he calls the "double-edged" power of the blues—that most joyous, heartbreaking form of music—to a kind of sensuality, a way of being fully alive in this skin of ours. He says:

> To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of

> loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it. And I am not being frivolous now, either.[13]

I have no desire to be grim. I just don't want to eat tasteless foam rubber.

My hunch is that the endorsement or rejection of philosophical theories is largely determined by temperament. You have a personality such that, when you're inclined to wisdom, you're inclined to the transcendence of Plato, or to the empiricism of Aristotle, or to the peacefulness of Daoism, or to the humaneness of Confucianism, or to the honesty of pessimism, or to the hopefulness of idealism. To study the great expressions of your temperament, to read the best books sympathetic to your ruling pattern, is to become more you. It's one of the most gratifying things about teaching philosophy to see students catch fire and exclaim, "I've always been a Stoic but never known it until now!"

I think that temperament particularly determines how we relate to suffering. Just as a desire for self-control in the face of misery makes Stoicism a necessity for some, an inner drive for righteousness rules it out for others and sways them toward hope in a justice beyond our blood-soaked realities. When I set out to write these chapters, I fully expected to present seven largely incompatible perspectives on suffering.

But as I delved into my various guiding thinkers, hailing from different cultures, working with different temperaments, I found that they alight on the same central paradox of fixing and facing suffering, and differ only in how they manage it. I found myself singing the same song, with admittedly big variations. My last chapter deals head-on with the blues, which, among other things, refers to a repeating chord progression—utterly simple, yet capable of being endlessly freighted with human complexities. I don't want to underplay the differences between Job and Epictetus—or, for that matter, Blind Willie Johnson

and Muddy Waters—but I've come to think that there's a deep blues that emerges whenever anyone is serious about coming to terms with being alive and having to die.

Plus, the study of philosophy isn't exhausted by learning only those ideas that ring down the grooves of our peculiar rationality. We become richer selves, more musical souls, when we're able to enlarge our temperaments by challenging our ruling pattern and enhancing those smaller voices also in the ensemble of our selfhood. I'm a philosophical pluralist. To paraphrase William James, I believe that our overall consciousness of truth would suffer if a Platonist were forced, logically or otherwise, to be an Aristotelian, or a Daoist a Confucian, or a Christian a Nietzschean.[14] Each great philosophy articulates a syllable in humanity's never-total message. The more we discover, the more we spell out. Though there are certain fundamental coordinates that should guide us all, I'm primarily interested in expanding our sense of what's possible and enlarging our sympathies. I hope not to solve our moral problems (has a philosopher ever successfully done that?) but to expand our moral imaginations. In my view, the most philosophical philosophers are those who embody humanity so expansively that they stubbornly refuse to be reduced to "a philosophy"—Socrates, Zhuangzi, Montaigne.

Why only seven ways of looking at pointless suffering? In my defense let me point out that the prestigious philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty in *The Many Faces of Evil* comes up with just six! I admit that there are more than six or seven ways of embodying the mystery of suffering. Some of you will be disappointed not to see chapters devoted exclusively to the nuances of Christianity and Buddhism, the first of which takes as its central symbol an image of torture, and the second of which states as its initial truth that life is suffused with suffering. Though there is occasion here to discuss both these traditions (moreover, they guide implicitly much of what I say throughout the book), I figure that the Christian idea of converting pointless suffering into charity and the Buddhist notion of converting it into compassion are relatively well-known, and it's more interesting to wander

down related pathways. I'm superstitious enough to think that seven, a lucky number, is plenty of ways to look at what's hardest to look at. Wallace Stevens found thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. If I found thirteen ways of looking at evil, I worry the last would be that of the Devil himself!

PART ONE

Three Modern Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering

Busy cutting down human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

My former neighbors had a daughter named Ashley who was born with a "broken brain," to use the medical description of one of her sisters. With her extremely severe mental and physical handicaps, the doctors didn't think Ashley would last more than a few days on this earth. When I knew her, Ashley had made it to puberty and was closer to six feet tall than I'll ever be. But she possessed no abilities beyond those of a newborn baby. Bound to a wheelchair, she couldn't talk, walk, crawl, control her hands or legs, or use language whatsoever. She spent her day slumped in her wheelchair, occasionally being fed, frequently screaming.

A baby's cry, however irritating, has the seed of language in it: you know it will someday become articulate. Ashley's cry was a pure siren

of misery: it wasn't going anywhere. Though it contained within it the frustrations of birth, growth, and puberty, it wasn't exactly a protest. Her voice gushed out in a flat, constant sound, somewhere between a shriek and a moan: a long vowel of suffering without anger or resentment, like the tuning fork of misery itself. In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus says, "Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;/ Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;/ The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away."[1] I generally have a hard time taking those lines as anything but interesting hyperbole. But Ashley made me confront them in all their horror. Would Ashley be better off dead? Was her life genuinely and completely a mistake? Since her life is part of the life we share, is life itself something of a mistake?

One of our most iconic images is *The Scream*, the name given to various paintings and pastels done by Edvard Munch between 1893 and 1910 of a sexless figure crying out on a bridge under an orange sky, with two shadowy figures walking nearby, unfazed by the despair. On certain prints of the image it reads, "*Ich fühlte das grosse Geschrei durch die Natur*" (I felt the great scream through nature). The image is supposed to embody pointless suffering itself, the scream emanating from nature's core, which we try to disregard as we walk across our bridges. Whereas images of suffering from premodern times invoke myths that give meaning to misery (the Crucifixion is an obvious example, with the Resurrection just a few days off), *The Scream* is simply the scream—no story, no past, no future, no redemption, no hope. Frankly, I have mixed emotions about Munch's expressionist masterpiece. I'm not immune to the visual power that makes it one of the rare cultural objects almost everyone knows. But something about the shrieking figure's face and hands strikes me as diluting with exasperation what's meant to be pure despair. It's no surprise that the image lends itself to parodies. In any case, if you want to picture Ashley, imagine the great scream through nature. Munch's iconic figure has nothing on my former neighbor.

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In November of 2012 the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel argued in the *New York Review of Books* that "whether atheists or theists are right depends on facts about reality that neither of them can prove."[2] A month later, Galen Strawson, another prominent philosopher, wrote in response a brief letter to the editor that shocked me:

> This is not quite right: it depends on what kind of theists we have to do with. We can, for example, know with certainty that the Christian God does not exist as standardly defined: a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly benevolent. The proof lies in the world, which is full of extraordinary suffering. . . . It may be added that genuine belief in such a God, however rare, is profoundly immoral: it shows contempt for the reality of human suffering, or indeed any intense suffering.[3]

I wasn't surprised to encounter what philosophers call "the problem of evil" used as an argument against God. I'm aware that many intellectuals believe a good God is incompatible with the suffering in the universe. But I was taken aback by Strawson's dismissal of a foundational tradition of Western civilization as "profoundly immoral." I get that it's the job of philosophers to disagree with each other—and everyone else, for that matter. But it flabbergasted me to think that simply name-checking the problem of evil would be sufficient for an otherwise sensitive thinker like Galen Strawson to write off Thomas Aquinas, Dante Alighieri, John Milton, and Dorothy Day as not just mistaken but wicked in their theism. In the midst of his great struggle, Martin Luther King Jr. says,

> My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. . . . If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these

last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."[4]

Are such convictions "profoundly immoral"?

Charles Taylor begins his marvelous intellectual history *A Secular Age* by noting that in the 1500s it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, while in the 2000s "many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable."[5] After reading Strawson's letter, I was haunted by a related issue: How is it that through numerous centuries of Western history, despite the fact that unmerited suffering has always been common, it was considered profoundly immoral to disbelieve in a good God, whereas now the fact of suffering makes many regard the belief in a good God as profoundly immoral? What I came to realize is that a certain daring belief has taken root in modernity; in fact, this belief is almost the essence of the forward-driving momentum of modernity—namely, *if one can eliminate suffering, one should.* Notice I say "eliminate," and not just "ease" or "remedy." You see, for most of our history we've taken suffering as a given, as ineliminable, as something we must work with. Suffering was part of *nature*—nature in the old sense of a fundamental limit, what we either can't or shouldn't exceed. We tried to help and heal as much as we could, but we mostly assumed that disease, pain, and death were ultimately nonnegotiable rules of the earthly game. There were also "natural" moral laws, fundamental principles about who we were and how we were to use our freedom. To be in violation of these moral and natural rules was to put our souls at risk.

This background assumption about the permanence of suffering was probably built on the simple fact that we didn't have the power to make any serious changes to nature. Our medicines, though not without effect, were relatively weak. To be healed was to be restored to the

human condition, not to be delivered from pain and death. Famine, plagues, death, and injustice were going to happen, no matter what. Don't get me wrong: there were always fierce protests against suffering, at least since the days of Job; there were also alchemists and explorers who dreamt of fundamentally modifying nature or discovering a fountain of immortal youth. But these protests and wild-eyed projects were relegated to the margins. Primarily our job was to figure out ways of coming to terms with suffering in such a way that we could make it through our difficulties and maybe even find some meaning in them. A common hope was that in a transcendent realm, somewhere beyond this vale of tears, there would be freedom from suffering, at least for the just or the blessed.

In this premodern way of looking at suffering (maybe I should say supermodern way, for it predates modernity and runs through it), the realities of God, nature, humanity, and art all appear as essential mysteries. Christianity—to take the worldview that Strawson finds immoral—is committed to the idea that God, the highest possible object of worship, is good. But Christians simultaneously recognize that God's creation is full of evil. Is nature a testing ground? Did we bring suffering on ourselves through a primal act of sin? Humanity is strangely out of joint with nature. In this world but not of it, the faithful long for a home beyond this earth, the kingdom of God, where suffering will be overcome and perfect justice will hold sway, even as they naturally fear death and cling to their earthly lives. Crafts, medicine, politics, and the fine arts are to embody the fundamental mystery of remedying the troubles of earthly reality while simultaneously affirming the divine justice from which they descend. "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair," as Thomas Merton says, "is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."[6] On this religious view, we should strive for a human order of health, justice, and beauty but prepare our lives for the heavenly order that at once sustains and punishes us. Humanity needs faith, for reason can take us only so far. For those who still subscribe to some version of this worldview (Ashley's mother is among them),

Ashley appears as a profound enigma to be simultaneously lamented and honored, someone whose soul will be unbroken in paradise.

The central forces of modernity challenge the limits of our acceptance of suffering and press us to eliminate it. God, nature, humanity, and art no longer seem mysterious to those who wholeheartedly embrace the momentum of modernity. In fact, these concepts begin to vanish altogether. With our great technological and scientific advances, we increasingly wield the power of God, so what's the point of religion? The problem of evil redounds on us. The question of why God allows a natural disaster seems outdated in comparison to the question of why humanity is guilty of Auschwitz. The old idea of nature as a fundamental limit is progressively liquidated. Nature is simply what we start with. It's increasingly up to us how much we should keep of it, and how much we should modify. Every day immutable givens fall by the wayside. Even genes seem up for grabs. For some, death itself looks like a disposable nuisance. The concept of humanity is widely believed to be a biological starting point, something to be reconfigured with drugs, surgeries, and social engineering. Our arts—especially our biomedical arts, but also our industry, education, and politics—are ever more directed at solving problems, not grappling with mysteries. The fine arts, traditionally powerful tools for making meaning out of suffering, are seen as "cheesecake," to use the metaphor of Steven Pinker—that is, as pleasant but unnecessary luxuries accidentally concocted from otherwise important problem-solving drives.[7]

On this view, we no longer must take pain or disease as built into the system. Power is meant to correct nature. *If we can eliminate suffering, we should.* Nothing in nature should block us from doing so, except for anything that would cause us more suffering. If we happen to conclude that death and illness can sometimes be good, why not have them on our terms? We shouldn't have to suffer at all. Admittedly, this utopian view rarely appears in its pure form, but it drives our culture for good and ill. The more we embrace this pure principle of eliminating suffering, the more the whole concept of the Christian

God seems like a contradiction in terms. If you insist on clinging to this God, thinkers like Strawson argue, you're clinging to a Biotechnologist in the Sky who actively generates suffering or, at best, stands idly by while it happens, even though He has the means to cure it. To those who subscribe to this worldview, Ashley appears as a horrible mistake. Either we should repair her brain, or, if that proves impossible, there's no reason for her to exist.

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On the morning of All Saints' Day in 1755 an earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal, a city largely composed of hardworking, prosperous Christians. Thousands of people immediately perished, as fifteen-foot-deep fissures ripped through the town center. Survivors ran to the docks. The ocean bizarrely receded, revealing all the wreckage on the floor of the harbor, and then, to multiply its destruction, returned with a vengeance in the form of a tsunami. The little of Lisbon that wasn't engulfed in water broke out in flames. Earth, air, fire, and water: the four elements teamed up to decimate the population. Historians conservatively estimate that between 30,000 and 60,000 of the city's 200,000 citizens died that day. Lisbon's culture was also laid low. Homes, palaces, libraries, and galleries were left in rubble, to say nothing of its houses of worship.

As Susan Neiman shows in her eye-opening philosophical history *Evil and Modern Thought,* the edifice of thinking about suffering in 1755 was already compromised, and the Lisbon earthquake demolished it as thoroughly as it did the city's churches. The lingering medieval view held that an earthquake was part of the mysterious moral plan of God. In the first half of the eighteenth century Gottfried Leibniz famously argued, in a last efflorescence of the old worldview, that ours was the best of all possible worlds. It was a straightforward deductive conclusion. If God is all-knowing, He must have considered every possible world prior to creation. If God is all-good, He must have wanted to create the best possible world. Since God is all-knowing

and all-good, this world must be the best possible world. Insofar as evil exists, it must be necessary for the good to be maximized. By the middle of the century, when the Lisbon earthquake struck, Leibniz's premise that God wasn't an underachieving creator had begun to strain credulity. Our burgeoning new scientific powers emboldened us to think that we could radically improve what God had made. We should no longer accept suffering as a given. Voltaire responded to the Lisbon earthquake first by composing a stinging poem that criticized Leibniz's optimism and then by writing the satire *Candide* in which the splendidly named Dr. Pangloss peers at horrific natural disasters and declares them wonderful.

Leibniz adopts an age-old distinction between natural evil and moral evil (traditionally called *malum poenae* and *malum culpae*). Natural evil refers to the suffering we experience as a matter of course, independent of our choices—for instance, the Lisbon earthquake. Moral evil refers to the abuse of our freedom—for instance, the theft of forbidden fruit. Resting uncritically on an old piece of theology, Leibniz in his *Theodicy* asserts that natural evil is the punishment for moral evil. It might seem trivial—even "profoundly immoral"—to believe that our moral infractions, let alone a distant ancestor's nibble of an outlawed apple, can be justification for the untold death and destruction of nature, from plagues and earthquakes to smallpox and cancer. But, as Neiman says:

> Something trivial is precisely appropriate. What counts in the first instance is not the justice of the connection between what they did and what they suffered, but that there be a connection at all. Why do bad things happen? Because bad things were done. Better to have some causal explanation than to remain in the dark. To connect sin and suffering is to separate the world into moral and natural evils, and to create thereby a framework for understanding human misery.[8]

The belief that natural evil is the consequence of moral evil does a lot of work. It keeps us plugged into the world, upholds the idea of

God as good, gives our suffering meaning, and maintains the idea of a universal moral order.

Alexis de Tocqueville observes, "Evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable, become intolerable when once the idea of escape from them is suggested."[9] By the mid-eighteenth century the new sciences and their accompanying technologies had begun to suggest to Europe the idea of escape from evils that had long been patiently endured. Voltaire voices the initial frustration. As Neiman shows in *Evil and Modern Thought*, he's just the beginning of a great tradition that completely rethinks the concept of evil. Leibniz's uncritical connection between moral and natural evil is severed, and a new concept of nature emerges. The old view was that an earthquake is an "act of God," part of a designed plan. The new view, which takes a while to materialize fully, is that nature is a neutral starting point. Things like sunshine and rain and earthquakes just happen. Neither "evil" nor "good," they're the products of cause and effect, of a nonmoral physical order that we can understand through science. Since we don't always like the outcomes of nature, we should, insofar as it's possible, modify our lives or intervene in the causal order to promote better outcomes. We should structure our cities so that the residents are secure from predictable earthquakes. We should seed the clouds when drought comes. We should stamp out disease. We should eliminate crime. This world is, at best, a good start; it's our job to fix it up.

According to this quintessentially modern view, the only place left for evil is human choice. An earthquake is the result of the determinism of plate tectonics, but murder and rape are the results of the free will of humanity. Interestingly, as modernity progresses, even the existence of "moral evil" is challenged. Behaviorists and social engineers hold that human activity, like that of the rest of the natural world, is no more than the product of external forces. Perhaps we too should be diagnosed, arranged, and fixed like any other glitch in nature.

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In the *Genealogy of Morals* Friedrich Nietzsche observes, "What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering: but neither for the Christian, who has interpreted a whole mysterious machinery of salvation into suffering, nor for the naïve man of more ancient times, who understood all suffering in relation to the spectator of it or the causer of it, was there any such thing as senseless suffering."[10] As the "mysterious machinery" of finding meaning in pain and death becomes decreasingly credible to many in the modern world, philosophers confront suffering on new terms, often inventing their own mysterious newfangled machinery. The three thinkers I examine in this section—John Stuart Mill (1806–73), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Hannah Arendt (1906–75)—are passionate about discovering how to lead a meaningful life in relationship to the misery that's increasingly seen in modernity as pointless. What I particularly admire about them is their refusal to settle for easy answers. They doggedly pursue the messy questions of meaning and value that seem like a waste of time to modernity's technocrats and dogmatists, optimists and pessimists, doe-eyed progressives and sourpuss conservatives.

Modernity's relentless drive to improve the human lot is crystallized in the philosophy of utilitarianism, the central principle of which is that we should ignore outdated ideas of "natural laws" and try to maximize satisfaction and minimize misery for everyone. The philosophers I examine in this section all deal with the difficult legacy of this seemingly straightforward idea. Mill, raised with a strict utilitarian education, never renounces the philosophy of his father, but he seriously complicates utilitarianism with the ideals of freedom and meaning. Nietzsche, by contrast, never misses an opportunity to savage utilitarianism. He insists that life inevitably involves suffering. Not only do we deceive ourselves when we dream of trying to liberate ourselves from pain and misery, we end up tranquilizing our adventurousness and venting our cruelty in sneaky ways. In fact, Nietzsche stands utilitarianism's main idea on its head, arguing that instead of trying to minimize suffering we should embrace suffering, even pointless suffering, including cruelty. Though it would be a bit misleading to say that Arendt is the synthesis of Mill (the thesis) and Nietzsche (the antithesis), the problems recognized and partially generated by the extremes of Mill and Nietzsche do indeed blend together into the great problem of modernity that Arendt spends her philosophical life trying to understand.

Essentially, the problem is that we're tempted to see ourselves as gods rather than as subject to what Arendt calls "the human condition." The utilitarian idea is that we should play the role of a good god and readjust nature to produce our maximum satisfaction. Nietzsche's comparable idea is that we must become the superhuman (*der Übermensch*) by showing that we're spiritually strong enough to be able to embrace whatever happens, even the worst forms of suffering. Both Mill and Nietzsche struggle to find the most life-enhancing forms of their respective philosophies, and I think we learn necessary lessons from each of them about how to think about ourselves in modernity. But the extremes in human nature that they so powerfully articulate—trying to fix the morally chaotic world and trying to embrace the morally chaotic world—threaten to destroy what's meaningful in life. We see the worst of those extremes in the technocrats and terrorists so characteristic of our time. Arendt insists that we must relearn the basic coordinates of being human, even as our technologies and social systems tempt us to into acting like gods or behaving like beasts.

Thank God—or at least thank goodness—for the Enlightenment idea that the human lot can be improved! For all the horrors of modernity, including the earth-threatening perils of technology, few of us would want to trade our lot with a fourteenth-century peasant for whom serfdom and bubonic plague were necessary links in God's great chain of being. But modernity, particularly in its relationship to suffering, poses far-reaching problems. Think of antibiotics as a synecdoche of modernity itself. Antibiotics are a wonderful thing, a life-saving and life-improving triumph of human ingenuity for which we should be deeply grateful. Nevertheless, antibiotics can be overprescribed and overused. We run two big risks: first, rendering the

antibiotics useless; second, creating superviruses. Likewise, modernity—of which antibiotics are a part—is a wonderful achievement, an achievement worth embracing and advancing. Yet it can get out of hand. We run two risks: first, meaninglessness; second, inadvertently (or advertently!) unleashing more harm than we set out to remedy.

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Peter Singer, the most prominent contemporary utilitarian, notoriously argues that certain forms of infanticide are morally permissible. In *Practical Ethics* he argues:

> When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second. Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him.[11]

It's interesting that Nietzsche, the opposite of a utilitarian, comes to a similar position. In *The Gay Science*, in a section called "Holy Cruelty," he writes:

> A man who held a newborn child in his hands approached a holy man. "What shall I do with this child?" he asked; "it is wretched, misshapen, and does not have life enough to die." "Kill it!" shouted the holy man with a terrible voice; "and then hold it in your arms for three days and three nights to create a memory for yourself: never again will you beget a child this way when it is not time for you to beget."—When the man had heard this, he walked away, disappointed, and many people reproached the holy man because he had counseled cruelty; for he had counseled the man to kill the child. "But is it not crueler to let it live?" asked the holy man.[12]

Harsh as these quintessentially modern proposals may sound, I confess they're not alien to me when I think of my former neighbor Ashley. It's next to impossible to imagine a utilitarian argument for her existence. I get why someone might think that, since we can't fix her, keeping her scream around is crueler than silencing it forever.

But fundamentally I bristle at the idea of taking her life. As I mentioned, Ashley's mother is religious. She converted to Mormonism shortly after Ashley's birth, in part because of the charity her Mormon neighbors showed her as a new parent in her time of greatest need. I don't think Ashley's mom is under any illusions about the pleasure-pain balance in dealing with her daughter. I also think that incessantly having to care for her disabled child takes hidden psychological tolls on her and her family. Yet she persists in seeing her daughter as sacred, as a soul. What does it mean to see Ashley not simply as a flaw of the universe?

One afternoon I was supposed to help Ashley get off a bus (for a while the special education room at the local public school took her off her parents' hands). I was to take her in the house and wait as her mother got back from an appointment. After wheeling her up the ramp, I found that I couldn't quite finagle the wheelchair into the house. She started to scream. It was cold outside, and she was wearing only an afghan for warmth. Quickly deciding that I needed to carry her over the threshold, I worked my arms under her tall, thrashing frame and hoisted her up into an awkward pietà. I could smell the shit in her diaper. She was moaning so violently that drool frothed at the corners of her mouth. Did she know I was her neighbor? Could she distinguish me from her stepdad, or even her mom? Did she imagine I was kidnapping her? Or was my awkward rescue just one more indistinguishable passage from pain to pain?

Once I got her situated on the couch, she calmed down to her usual steady moan. We looked at each other. At least I looked at her; I wasn't sure if she was processing my face. It occurred to me that she was pretty despite her features' awkward puffiness, which was probably the result of her never having imitated other people's expressions. A

few teardrops hovered on her cheeks, and I wiped them away. Her sister's expression "a broken brain" was going through my brain. Ashley wasn't just a problem. She wasn't just a scream. She was also a human being. She was a broken brain, a cracked potential, a shattered human being. She was broken, but she was something of value too—of unfathomable value. Some part of my own broken humanity was being solicited. I thought of a line from Montaigne's essay "Of Cripples," "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself."[13] In that moment, an admittedly fleeting moment, I understood what it means to see Ashley as family, to regard her as one of us, even if she represents the furthest border of our mystery. I understood how fragile my higher identity is—how my thoughts and memories come undone every night in sleep, how they could be totally canceled by a blow to the head or a bite from an infectious mosquito. I'm also constituted by the great scream through nature. I understood why seeing Ashley exclusively as a problem is itself a kind of problem.

ONE

WE SHOULD ELIMINATE POINTLESS SUFFERING

On John Stuart Mill and the Paradox of Utilitarianism

It was granted me to derive from that evil my own greatest good.
J. S. MILL

According to William Carlos Williams, "The pure products of America go crazy."[1] Let's modify that observation slightly: "The pure products of modernity go crazy." In the fall of 1826, one such pure product, a twenty-year-old by the name of John Stuart Mill, sank into a suicidal depression.

James Mill, John Stuart's father, was devoted to modernity. Dismissing religion as superstition, he gravitated to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. James Mill believed that he understood human nature well enough to redesign education from the ground up. Under his rigorous tutelage, his son was proficient in ancient Greek by the age of five; by the age of nine, little John Stuart was reading Latin fluently and making sense of the highest levels of algebra. He celebrated his eleventh year by writing a history of Roman law. When he was

thought of Pops's booming "huzzah!" The next album in the pile was *The Quintessential Billie Holiday, Volume Four*, which features her collaborations with Lester Young, not that his name meant anything to me at the time. Stand back! This stuff isn't just for grandpa!

In my chapter on Sidney Bechet I've tried to pay homage to an art form that has plugged me into the fullness of being alive and has shown me that such aliveness is possible in the wide-open craziness of America. In acknowledging the shapers of this book, I tip my hat to jazz. And to the music that sent me to it hungry.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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12. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Physiognomy," in *The Complete Essays of Mi-*

chel de Montaigne, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 796.

13. James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 311. The quotation is from "Down at the Cross" in *The Fire Next Time*.
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PART I

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7. "I suspect music is auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of . . . our mental faculties." Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), 534.
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9. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. John Bonner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 214.

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12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 129; section 73.
13. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cripples," in *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, 958.

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1. William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie," in *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 53.
2. Isaiah Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 220.
3. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 112.
4. Ibid., 117.
5. Mill, *Autobiography*, 50–51.
6. Ibid., 67.
7. John Stuart Mill, "Nature," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 374.
8. Ibid., 385.
9. John Stuart Mill, *Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 11.
10. Ibid., 18.
11. Ibid., 27.
12. The quotation comes from Bentham's *The Rationale of Reward*. The statement is popularized by J. S. Mill in *Utilitarianism*. See Ross Harrison, *Bentham* (London: Routledge, 1983), 5.
13. Mill, *Basic Writings*, 241.
14. Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009), 56.
15. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2.

16. Jeremy Bentham, "The Utilitarian Theory of Punishment," in *An Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: Athlone, 1970), 158.
17. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, 222
18. Mill, *Basic Writings*, 247.
19. Ibid., 248.
20. Mill, *Autobiography*, 184.
21. Ibid., 147.
22. Ibid., 187–88.

CHAPTER 2

1. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 16–17; *Genealogy*, "Preface," section 3.
2. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 767.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 255; section 325.
4. Ibid., 211; section 225.
5. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 326; *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am a Destiny," section 1.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66; section 113.
7. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181; section 125.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), 18; "Zarathustra's Prologue," section 5.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 153–54; section 225.
10. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 17; "Prologue," section 5.
11. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 17; "Preface," section 3.
12. Ibid., 85; essay 2, section 16.

13. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 216; section 250.
14. Ibid., 185; section 129.
15. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 65; essay 2, section 6.
16. Ibid., 67; essay 2, section 7.
17. Ibid., 81; essay 2, section 14.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 403–4; section 769.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 224; section 556.
20. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 99; Second Part, "On the Tarantulas."
21. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 121; section 202.
22. "For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so." Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 45; essay 1, section 13.
23. Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: Norton, 2002), 233.
24. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 309; *Ecce Homo*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," section 3.
25. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 272; section 341.
26. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 130.
27. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 113; section 48.
28. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 87; "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," section 17.
29. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 532–33; section 1032.
30. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 222; *Ecce Homo*, section 1.
31. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 33; "Maxims and Arrows."
32. "The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live dangerously. Build your cities on the

slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!" Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 228; section 283.

33. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 36; "Maxims and Arrows," section 33.
34. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 268–69; section 337.
35. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1999), 99.
36. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 220; section 271.
37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), 128; *The Anti-Christ*, section 7.
38. "The overcoming of pity I count among the noble virtues: as 'Zarathustra's temptation' I invented a situation in which a great cry of distress reaches him, as pity tries to attack him like a final sin that would entice him away from himself." Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo*, 228; *Ecce Homo*, section 4. Cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part 4, "The Cry of Distress."
39. James, *Writings: 1902–1910*, 149–50.

CHAPTER 3

1. Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 7.
2. Ibid., 58.
3. John Stuart Mill, "Nature," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006, 386.
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013), 34–35.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1976), vii.
6. Arendt, *The Last Interview*, 21.
7. Ibid., 15.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954* (New York: Schocken, 1994), 198.

10. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 459.
11. Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), 396.
12. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 247.
13. Ibid., 322.
14. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 152.
15. Richard Wolin, "The Banality of Evil: The Demise of a Legend," *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2014. An online version is at https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/1106/the-banality-of-evil-the-demise-of-a-legend/?print.
16. Quoted in Telford Taylor, *Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 363.
17. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 279.
18. Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 134.
19. Ibid., 67.
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21. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1970), 56.
22. Philip Larkin, "Aubade," in *Collected Poems* (London: Noonday Press, 1989), 209.
23. Arendt, *On Violence*, 76.
24. Ibid., 81.
25. Ibid., 80.
26. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 136
27. Quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 57.
28. John Berger, "Fellow Prisoners," *Guernica*, July 15, 2011, https://www.guernicamag.com/john_berger_7_15_11/
29. Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 26.
30. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), ix.