

SUFFERING, MORALITY, AND SOCIETY*

Even if psychological hedonism is not an absolutely accurate description of human nature, it can be asserted as a fairly good generalisation that normal human beings do not consider suffering as a positive value in the sense that they do not wish to have it. In fact, it can be called a disvalue because it is one of the things which individuals as well as societies aim at minimising as much as possible. All this seems to provide a sufficient justification for the view that all suffering is an intrinsic evil. It is one of the main purposes of this paper to draw out some of the implications of this view which hopefully would show that it is not as innocent as it seems to be. But before I do that it would be necessary to discuss some other, general, issues connected with the concept or experience of suffering. Though suffering need not be necessarily human, I shall be concerned here primarily with human suffering and that too in the context of (human) society.

Every human being has experienced some kind of suffering, and even if there is one who has not, he must have the capacity to experience it. One of the features which distinguishes a conscious from a non-conscious being is the former's capacity and the latter's incapacity to experience sufferings. One can say, therefore, that human beings are human beings they can and rocks are rocks because they cannot have the experience of any suffering.

Sometimes we make a distinction between mental and physical sufferings. But this distinction seems to me really a distinction between the causes of suffering and not between the types of suffering. Every suffering is a kind of experience and therefore definitionally mental, though it can be caused by something mental or physical. It is logically true that only beings with some kind of mentality can have any experience and therefore the experience of suffering. However the degree of mentality required does not have to be of a very high order.

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This does not mean that the degree or level of mentality does not make any difference to one's capacity or proneness to suffer. What I mean to emphasize is the logical, or at least quasi-logical, link between mentality or consciousness and suffering. In fact, it makes no sense to say that I am not conscious or aware of my suffering. If I am not aware of my toothache, or mental tension, I do not have the toothache or the mental tension. Perhaps this is the reason why Freud does not talk of unconscious pains or sufferings though he does of unconscious desires.

But though every suffering is an experience and therefore mental, it can, as has already been said, be caused by physical or by mental factors. For example, my unhappiness may be due to my poverty, may not having the necessary *material* resources to keep me fit for work, or due to my *thinking* that my neighbour is more successful than I am. Unhappiness can be caused by mental things, such as fears, suspicions, anxieties, memories, envies, etc., by non-mental things, such as the loss of an arm, collapse of a house, divorce, etc. Very often both mental and physical factors combine together do produce an experience of suffering. But it is true that when one has any kind of suffering, the suffering itself is an experience and therefore a mental phenomenon, irrespective of its having been produced by something purely mental, say, an unfounded envy, or by something purely physical, say, the loss of a leg in an accident, or by both conjoined together, heightening the effect of each other, say, the fear of death when one's car collides with a rashly driven truck. We do not, therefore, have two kinds of sufferings, but sufferings caused by two kinds of causes, mental and physical. There is no other valid way to distinguish between what are called mental and physical sufferings.

There are some other methods of classifying the causes of suffering which seem to be more important from ethical and societal points of view. For example, the likely causes may be better called *personal or impersonal, moral or immoral*, making a suffering *personal or impersonal, moral or immoral*. We can call a suffering *personal* if it has been caused by something personal, i. e., something connected with the person who suffers, and *impersonal* when caused by something impersonal, i. e., something not connected with him. My suffering is personal if it has been

caused by my demotion and impersonal if it has been caused by Mr. A's demotion when there is no personal tie between him and me. My unhappiness due to my finding wide-spread favouritism and nepotism in my society, which does not hurt me personally but hurts many others, or hurts the values I prize, would also be impersonal.

A suffering can be called *moral* if its experience has been caused by the perception of some immorality or impropriety in what has been (or is going to be) done to someone, or in some social practice or phenomenon. For example, if I feel unhappy because of my undeserved demotion, or because of Mr. A's undeserved demotion, or because of corruption rampant in my society, my unhappiness would be moral unhappiness. Moral unhappiness is a natural ally of righteous anger and therefore it may also be called *righteous unhappiness*. There is some point in calling it moral because it is morally commendable, ennobling, or elevating. One's proneness to experience it makes him morally better than another person who is not so prone. Proneness to experience unhappiness (or anger) in response to one's perception of perpetration or prevalence of immorality is a morally right response and can be treated as a moral virtue. On the other hand, a suffering can be called *immoral* if its experience has been caused by something admitted to be morally right. For example, mine will be an immoral unhappiness if it has been caused by my having been denied the promotion I admittedly do not deserve, or because Mr. A has been given the promotion he admittedly fully deserved. The point in calling such an unhappiness immoral is that it is of a kind one ought not to feel, an unhappiness he has no moral reason to experience. It has characteristics opposed to those of moral unhappiness and consequently proneness to it is generally taken to be a moral vice or deficiency.

Almost everybody is disposed to feel unhappy when something affects adversely his own welfare, and most people are disposed to do that even when they know that they deserve the curtailment of their welfare. But not many are disposed to feel unhappy when the welfare of someone else, with whom they are not closely connected, is even undeservedly curtailed. In a morally decadent, unprogressive, society, the propensity to feel unhappy when one's own welfare is curtailed, rightly or wrongly, is very

strong and it is very feeble when that is done, even without any justifying reason, to someone else. One becomes spitefully malevolent when he develops a disposition to feel happy when someone else is made undeservedly unhappy, and to feel unhappy when the latter is made deservedly happy.

Both personal and impersonal sufferings can be moral or immoral. If I am unhappy because some punishment has been unjustifiably given to me, my unhappiness is both personal and moral, and if I am unhappy though the punishment given to me is justified, my unhappiness is personal but immoral. On the other hand, my unhappiness occasioned by the undeserved punishment of someone else is both impersonal and moral, while my unhappiness occasioned by his deserved punishment is impersonal but immoral. The maturer a society, the stronger will be the disposition in most of its members to experience impersonal sufferings, and morally the more developed it is, the stronger will be their disposition to experience moral sufferings.

Someone may mention what is called compassionate suffering as a counter-instance to the above mode of distinguishing between moral and immoral impersonal sufferings. Compassionate suffering is one which a kind person experiences when he finds someone else being subjected to some suffering irrespective of the fact that the latter does or does not deserve it. It may be said that it is morally commendable to be unhappy when someone else is unhappy even when there is some good moral reason for the latter's being unhappy, and that one is really a kind-hearted, merciful, person when he is disposed to be unhappy in such circumstances. It is true that kindness is taken in almost all cultures to be a moral virtue and the disposition to be unhappy on account of someone else's unhappiness a virtuous disposition. Not to feel unhappy at the sight of a murderer being put to the gallows would, one can say, be an exhibition of kindness, if not of cruelty. As a *personal experience* the experience of unhappiness on account of someone else's well-deserved unhappiness may be considered commendable, but in a societal context it cannot be considered to be worth encouraging. We underline this truth when we describe such experiences as examples of misplaced kindnesses or sympathies. One who is kind to everyone without distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserv-

ing is undoubtedly a kind person but is also indiscriminate. Kindness when made indiscriminate does acquire an element of immorality and ceases to be the kind of social value it is when it is accompanied with discrimination and judgment. Moreover, indiscriminate kindness cannot be used to guide social policy or action. Rather, one's propensity to be kind to everybody may result in the increase of the sum—total of evil in the world. An instructor who, out of kindness, awards good grades to students of very poor merit, or to all students without making the grades commensurate with their merits, contributes to increasing the evil of unfairness.

It is, or should be, one of the primary goals of any good social and governmental planning to create conditions which may help people to become prone to experience moral sufferings and to minimise their proneness to experience immoral ones. If some members of a group are prone to feel unhappy when some others of the group are unjustifiably made unhappy, it is reasonable to hope that they will make, if possible, some efforts to mitigate the unhappiness of the latter.

That suffering is an evil generally accepted by many to be an obvious truth. But, as the above discussion shows, in a societal context, some suffering may not be an evil. For example, it will not be an evil if there are reasons which morally justify the sufferer's experience of suffering. A man who takes bribe does add to his income and thereby to his happiness, and when he is stopped from taking bribe, he does suffer a lot. He may consequently develop some mental or physical ailment as well. But even then we would say that his suffering, the curtailment of his happiness, is morally justified because his happiness was the effect of an immoral practice, and nobody would like to recommend the continuance of the practice of giving and receiving bribe on the ground that it adds to the happiness, or curtails the unhappiness, of the concerned individuals. In fact, even if the practice makes no one unhappy, adds to the happiness of both the receiver and giver of bribe and its discontinuance causes suffering to either one or both, many would say that it should still be stopped. The point is that it does make good sense to distinguish between morally justified and morally unjustified sufferings. It is also quite reasonable to say that the moral person ought to be

happy and the immoral unhappy because the happiness of the former and the unhappiness of the latter would be justified or well-deserved. Common sense, or ordinary moral consciousness, would consider both 'The moral person ought to be happy' and 'The immoral person ought to suffer' as obvious moral truths.

A world in which it is not considered right for any one to experience any kind of suffering would not be a morally good world because it is not morally right to exempt the morally vicious from experiencing the suffering he deserves.

In the position taken above one may read a very strong retributive theory of punishment or suffering, implying that the morally vicious ought to be made to suffer in all cases simply because he has committed a moral vice. In a sense it is a retributive theory, but it does not have to imply that the morally vicious ought to be always made to suffer. Rather, it only asserts or implies that the suffering which one experiences on account of his having done something morally wrong is not evil but something desirable and a world in which vicious people suffer a good and not an evil world. The experience of suffering for having done something wrong may be self-generated, i.e., generated by one's realisation of having done something wrong, as it happens, for example, in the experience of repentance, shame, or guilt, in what we metaphorically call the bitings of the conscience. Or, it may be the result of something done to the person by some external agency, some other individual, group, or institution. The question of *making* him suffer will arise only when he does not, or is not likely to, have the self-generated experience of the right kind of amount of suffering. It is not, however, easy to decide when one's, say, feeling of repentance is intense enough to exempt him from being made to suffer by external agencies, and when it is not. But the dispensation of reward and punishment is very seldom an easy affair. The intensity of suffering, however, does not depend always upon the source it ensues from : a self-generated experience of suffering may be more or less intense than one generated by some action of an external agency. Therefore, it cannot be maintained as an obvious truth that the morally vicious can be given the right amount of suffering only if he is *made* to suffer by an external agency. But if he is made to suffer deservedly, by whatsoever an agency, internal, or external, his suffering

would not be a wrong, or an evil, thing. Therefore, *every* suffering cannot be called evil.

But, one may argue, if the guilty who deserves to suffer is not likely to do anything wrong again, or can be prevented from doing anything wrong again, without making him undergo any kind of suffering, there would be no point in making him experience what is considered to be his well-deserved suffering. This may be true, but if true, it would only show that infliction of suffering is neither a necessary nor the only means to prevent further wrong-doing. I do not intend to question it, nor is it contrary to the thesis I wish to defend. All that the letter asserts is that if the wrong-doer gets his appropriate kind of suffering, as the result of his self-reflection over what he has done or as that of some action taken by any external agency, his suffering would not be anything evil or undesirable.

The claim that suffering is an evil, therefore, has to be taken in a qualified, cautious, sense. For a conscientious social planner, every suffering cannot be unconditionally evil. In a progressive society the affairs of the society are managed in such a way that the guilty generally suffer and the virtuous generally do not. In a decadent society, on the other hand, the reverse holds good, and a society in which both suffer or both are happy, without any discrimination, is in no way less decadent. In fact, a society can really prosper only if it ensures, or at least makes it highly probable, that the guilty will and the virtuous will not suffer.

Almost all religions consider suffering as an unqualified evil and that is one reason why they appeal to many people. If any suffering whatsoever is an unqualified evil, the obvious implication is that nobody should be let to suffer; it would be an evil thing if anyone suffers. It would therefore be wrong for any agency to cause any suffering to any one and right to lessen anybody's suffering. A criminal has as much the right to ask for the mitigation of his suffering as a saint has for his. It is as appropriate for God to alleviate the sufferings of a sinner (when he genuinely prays for it) as those of a saint. In one sense such an approach to suffering may not be objectionable because it gives some hope of being helped out even to the most fallen individual. But for social stability and progress it would create

serious problems, since no society can preserve itself or grow if it considers every suffering to be an unqualified evil. Every society will have some criminal, vicious persons, and it would be wrong not to apportion to them the suffering they deserve.

A person, who believes that it is wrong to cause any suffering to any one, can consider it a good reason for his claim that he should not be punished even when he deserves it. And, if he is made to suffer some punishment, in spite of his pleading that he should not be, he would be justified in feeling wronged because to inflict an evil on any person would amount to doing something wrong to him.

The acceptance of the above position by a person is sure to have some serious effects on his motivation. For example, suppose it is morally wrong to do X and I am likely to suffer some punishment if I do it. Now, if every suffering is an evil, the suffering accruing from my doing X would also be an evil and therefore unjustified. It would then be quite reasonable on my part to argue that I ought not to be made to suffer, and my trying to be helped out would not be wrong. I can therefore both do X and try to avoid the consequential suffering without committing any moral impropriety. This kind of thinking is very likely to weaken my desire, if I have one, and to stifle its arousal, if I do not, to avoid doing X. In any case, the probability of the motivating force or power of the desire (to abstain from doing X) getting greatly reduced would be very high. Nay, even the feeling of moral propriety or bindingness, which may be accompanying the desire, is also likely to be similarly affected. Feeling morally obligated or bound to avoid doing X is almost logically or conceptually linked with the belief that it would be morally improper to try to be spared of the consequential suffering. The absence of this belief would, therefore, tell upon the strength of the feeling of obligation. If I am morally bound to, if I ought to, avoid doing X, then if I do, I ought not, I have no moral right, to seek exemption from the resulting suffering. Therefore, if I happen to believe that it is morally right for me to seek exemption, which it would be if all suffering is evil, my feeling of moral propriety accompanying my desire to avoid doing X, the power (or authority) of my feeling so obligated, is very likely to get thereby very much enfeebled.

On the contrary my acknowledgement that the suffering likely to result to me from my doing X would be well-deserved and therefore not an evil would imply that I ought not to try to avoid getting it. Such a thinking is likely to strengthen the motivational force as well as the moral authority of my desire to avoid doing X. When I am likely to suffer if I do X and I ought to suffer, then the obviously justified way of avoiding the suffering is to abstain from doing X, since if I do it and also try to avoid getting the consequential suffering, I would be doing what I ought not to be doing. But all this is possible, or sensible, only when my suffering for doing X is not an evil, i. e., only when all suffering is not evil.

Fear of being punished for doing X can have motivational force when doing X is wrong as well as when it is right (or just not wrong). One may abstain from telling a truth, or a lie, if he is afraid of being punished for doing that. But if X is something wrong, then the fear of being punished for doing X can be called a moral fear and the motivational force so generated a moral force. On the other hand, if X is something right, then the fear of being punished for doing it can be called an immoral fear and the motivational force so generated an immoral force. Perhaps it is this fact which is responsible for our calling a man coward if he does not, for example, tell the truth fearing that he would be punished if he does for our treating cowardice as a moral vice. The moral force of the fear is very likely to strengthen, or at least give some support to, its normal motivational, action-guiding force.

A society, or any organisation for that matter, which admits that everybody's suffering is an evil, would have insurmountable difficulties in keeping alive or unweakened in its members their natural propensity to do, or avoid doing, something out of fear. It would also not have any rational justification for imposing any suffering on any one, or for taking any step to generate a feeling of fear in its members to make them do or avoid doing something. Whether or not fear is a laudable motive is out of place in the present context. What is important is that one must not lose sight of the too obvious human fact that fear of punishment or suffering is a common, natural, human motive and that it does influence human behaviour, moral, immoral and non-moral.

Though every suffering is an experience, every suffering need

not be the result or effect of the sufferer's, or someone else's, action. Some suffering can be caused by some event for which neither the sufferer nor anyone else is responsible. Suffering caused by an event is neither moral nor immoral, neither justified nor unjustified. It is neither right nor wrong for me to have the sufferings caused to me by an earthquake. Such sufferings are evil and they arouse rightly the sympathies of benevolent people and institutions. Here the question whether or not I deserve the sufferings caused to me by the earthquake does not arise. This question meaningfully arises only if my suffering is believed to be due to someone's action, if, for example, it is believed that the occurrence of the earthquake is an action, or the effort of an action, done by me or by someone else. But to entertain such a belief will not only be empirically indefensible, but will also involve the categorical error of blurring the logical distinction between the concept of event and the concept of action.

The fact that some sufferings are caused by events, e. g., an earthquake, a cyclone, etc., small or big, is not an insignificant empirical truth, since a large part of man's efforts are directed towards stopping such events from happening, or towards supplying relief to their sufferers when they happen. Further, the question of one's being responsible for his own, or for someone else's, sufferings can arise only when some action of his is the cause of the sufferings. No sufferer nor anybody else is responsible for the sufferings caused by an earthquake, nor is a sufferer responsible for the sufferings caused to him by someone else's action. The fact that an action of one human being can make another human being unhappy is also an obvious but not at all an insignificant empirical truth, a truth which no society can afford to ignore. A large part of our legal, administrative, and moral institutions are directed towards bringing into existence or strengthening mechanisms for stopping one human being from doing something which may cause some unjustified suffering to someone else.

To conclude, some amount of human suffering can be accounted for as the effects of some omissions or commissions made by the sufferers themselves, some as the effects of actions done by others, and some as those of some natural events or calamities. To base social planning on this aetiology would not

be an unsound policy. In principle, an empiricist would not need to posit a fourth cause. But a theologian, on the other hand, for whom everything is to be ultimately accounted for in terms of some divine action, would not consider the three types of causes mentioned above sufficient to explain all sufferings. The suffering of every sufferer, for most of theistic religions, is in effect a punishment given to him by God for some fault of his. But if taken to mean an empirical assertion such a view cannot be accepted as wholly true. One can mention numerous examples of people suffering for no obvious faults of theirs, and the surplus of suffering not accountable in terms of human faults would pose a great threat to such a theistic explanation of suffering. If there is any amount of unaccountable suffering in the world, then it would entail, as Hume said, that God is either not benevolent or not omnipotent, and either of the two alternatives would prove fatal to the theistic mode of explanation, since almost all varieties of theism consider God to be both benevolent and omnipotent. There is no need to discuss in detail the various aspects of the problem which the fact of suffering poses to theism because it has been discussed at great length in the history of philosophy. However, it is worth mentioning that reference to divine causation of suffering does not seem to be of much importance for any programme of social development. The latter can quite successfully be planned and executed by taking into account only the human and natural, physical, causes of suffering, i.e., actions and events, which can in principle be empirically ascertained.

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