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## Suffering (ethical considerations)

Is suffering a bad thing? The answer is 'yes' according to the eudaemonists, who regard happiness as the highest good and suffering as its counterpart. But are they right? To answer this question, we must examine certain definitions and distinctions. What is suffering? Let us first agree that it is an experience – more precisely, a feeling – and that only conscious beings suffer; a stone does not suffer, nor does man suffer when he is unconscious. It is possible to make a distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. Physical suffering is based on pain as a sensory impression, coupled with a specific unpleasant emotional quality of great intensity; the combination of these elements constitutes what is known as a sensory feeling. Moral suffering, on the other hand, arises when we are unable to achieve some good that we ardently desire, or when we lose a good that was very dear to us. The basis of moral suffering is the conviction of the absence of a desired value, and this conviction is accompanied, as with physical suffering, by an unpleasant emotional quality; the whole thus formed is a feeling of value. Physical suffering is an intense negative sensory feeling; moral suffering is also an intense negative feeling of value.

Inflicting suffering is not always wrong; we know this from everyday life. It is good when it serves a good purpose, cures illnesses, prevents transgressions, and fosters courage (think of Prus's beautiful novella *The Dream*, where the most beautiful flowers spring from tormented human souls – the very same idea expressed in the form of a poetic metaphor). It is bad when it results from evil motives, aims at an evil end, or is inflicted upon anyone as violence. Suffering imposed by fate is a test of

fortitude, which the afflicted person demonstrates by overcoming it. In all these cases, suffering has the value of a means or an instrument for the achievement of something else of positive or negative value; accordingly, we shall also ascribe a positive or negative value to suffering; this is a relative, dependent or instrumental value, as it is also called.

However, when we ask whether suffering is bad, we have something else in mind, namely the value of suffering as such, in its own right – that is, its absolute value. For it may be the case that, although suffering is an evil in itself, we nevertheless choose it in order to protect ourselves from an even greater evil; it then acquires a positive instrumental value, even though it remains evil in its nature. I mentioned that suffering is regarded as an evil by eudemonists, specifically as an absolute evil. But alongside eudaimonism, there is another school of thought in ethics known as perfectionism. Proponents of this school of thought regard, not happiness, but self-improvement and the all-round development of the personality as the highest good. Perfection may also be variously understood: the eudemonist sees the ideal of perfection in a life free from suffering; yet such an ideal of a perfect life, developed particularly in ancient ethics, may raise doubts in the mind of a perfectionist. Let us juxtapose two people: one, in accordance with the eudaimonistic ideal, led a happy life full of success, achieving his life goals without overcoming adversity or the suffering associated with it; the other, striving for perfection, suffered whilst overcoming hurdles along the way, and only after surmounting these sufferings did he achieve what he sought. Undoubtedly, the latter had a richer life; his development was more comprehensive; he was closer to the ideal of perfection, as understood by perfectionists. He achieved this through the suffering he experienced and came to know, which remained alien to that happy man. But isn't the value of suffering merely instrumental? If that were the case, suffering, having fulfilled its role in personality development, would cease to have any significance in one's future life; yet this is not so; it remains a positive component of life experience and preserves its value permanently as an element of personality; and this is already more than an instrumental value; it is the value of suffering as such, in its own right.

Perfectionists are not the only ones to defend the absolute value of suffering: they are aided by another line of reasoning that falls within the scope of general axiology. There is a well-known principle: *omne ens est bonum*, meaning that everything that is real is good by virtue of its very existence; evil is always a kind of lack, a lack of reality. Now, suffering cannot be understood as a lack; it is not merely a lack of happiness, good fortune, health, or love; these deficiencies are the causes of suffer-

ing, but suffering itself is a real experience possessing its own distinctive characteristics. And as something real, it is a good, just like everything else that constitutes reality. A further argument along the same lines points out that suffering willingly taken upon oneself redeems evil and atones for committed crimes, and is therefore undoubtedly a good in itself. Here, however, a new difficulty arises. After all, suffering often manifests itself as a destructive force, inflicting physical and spiritual harm, and sometimes leading to death. That which causes evil cannot be good. Perhaps, however, it is not suffering itself that produces these evil effects, but rather the physiological processes of which it is also a consequence: pathological changes in the body during physical suffering, and during moral suffering, stimuli that induce changes in the nervous system. After all, as they say, even joy can kill when joyful news proves too strong a stimulus for the heart's activity.

Thus, two perspectives are at odds with one another; according to one, suffering is an evil; according to the other, it is a good; yet a third position is conceivable: suffering has no intrinsic value; it is in itself value-neutral; it assumes only an instrumental value, becoming an evil or a good depending on the circumstances in which it is embedded. Let us not seek a resolution in the theoretical realm. We have here an example of a situation similar to that in many other philosophical issues: *Res ad principia venit*. What we choose is a matter of assumption; at stake are the fundamental differences in worldviews – optimism or pessimism – and we must choose between them. The theorist is content with the statement that there are different positions and that each has its merits. As Henryk Elzenberg once wrote (*The Trouble with Existence*, p. 355): "Philosophy is not about achieving a specific and definitive result, but rather the exact opposite: to keep all reasonable possibilities for understanding the world open, in defiance of the one-sided pressures inherent in every era. To avoid suffocating, a person needs these perspectives, which are open in all directions".