

Towards Vice or Virtue:

An Ethical Inquiry into Suffering

Preface

My heart sinks as the grainy black-and-white ultrasound image of my unborn child flashes onto the screen. The image shows the undeniable shape of a child in the fetal position, only something feels wrong. Our child is small, much smaller than I had expected. Resting still at the bottom of my wife's uterus, the child looks strangely peaceful. Staring intently at the screen, I realize that our baby must be dead.

Two weeks prior to my wife's first ultrasound, I had seen a live ultrasound in one of my university's chapel services. That woman's child was definitely alive. There were "oohs" and "aahs" coming from the student body as the child sucked its thumb, kicked its legs, and, at one point, even seemed to jump for joy. The ultrasound that is now before me in the dimly lit clinic room displays no such signs of life. The ultrasound technician's somber voice trails off, "I'm sorry to bear such bad news this morning, but..."

The night before the ultrasound, my wife and I discussed the possibility of receiving sad news in the morning. Though my wife and I are 23 years old, we were aware of the unfortunate reality that our child could be lost at some point during the pregnancy. Other couples in our lives had received the exciting news that they were pregnant only to find out that they had miscarried weeks later. We hoped that we would not experience the same situation. Wanting to avoid the emotional rollercoaster that a pregnancy ended by miscarriage can bring, we had discussed maintaining an even keel demeanor throughout the pregnancy. Perhaps this approach could prevent the lows from feeling so low. Yet, in this dark ultrasound room, suffering coldly confronts me. The façade of a calm demeanor cannot prevent pain from tearing me up inside.

Looking to my right, I see that tears are gathering in my wife's eyes. The pain cuts deeper. Sure, we had discussed this possibility, but we did not think it would happen to us. Confusion begins to mix in with the unbearable sadness. As everything begins to blur together, a doctor enters the room with a medical student at her side. The doctor begins laying out the options for passing the child from my wife's body. Many questions move frenetically through my mind: What is healthiest for my wife? What is least painful emotionally and physically for her? What is the timeline for waiting to pass the child naturally?

Out of a desire to face the tragedy as soon as possible, we decide to induce the miscarriage with pills that can be taken at home. When we get home, my wife takes the pills. In the hours that follow, my wife courageously endures hours of intense physical pain; the pills essentially induce a home birth of our dead child. The pains of labor are coupled with additional sicknesses brought on by the strong medications. For almost 12 hours, my wife experiences waves of physical torment in our apartment bathroom. Her body cramps, heaves, and releases in a seemingly unending cycle. Exhaustion sets in. Each passing hour leaves us wondering, "Will this ever end?"

At around 1:00 in the morning, my wife passes the child. The culmination of the day's sufferings brings death. In a moment, the sum of the day's emotions overwhelmed me. In the toilet bowl, the dirtiness of death strikes me; I was not prepared for death to be so unfiltered and raw. Through the mess of blood and other tissues, I see the amniotic sac with my child's lifeless body inside.

Death, I thought, was sanitary. In America, a person dies, and their body is promptly preserved and beautified; the repulsive effects that death brings to the body are avoided. Obituaries claim that people die of "natural causes;" however, the concept of death being

“natural” is not an association I can make in this moment. My legs can no longer hold the weight of my heavy heart. With tears streaming down my face, I realize that death is unrelenting and destructive. It is jarring and undeniably disturbing. In the deepest part of me, I am convinced that death should not be a reality that we face as humans. I am empty, stripped, and defeated in the face of death and suffering.

He who has a “why” to live, can bear with almost any “how.”

-Nietzsche (quoted by Frankl)¹

There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.

-Dostoevsky (quoted by Frankl)²

Introduction

Like many others who have experienced deep grief, I wrestled through difficult questions in the days following the miscarriage. I wondered if the multitude of sufferings that humanity faces, including the dreadfulness of death, served any purpose other than simply to bring pain, sadness, and confusion. I felt haunted by the thought that the loss of my child might be meaningless. I could not move on with life as death seemed to suffocate all of life’s joys.

In an effort to make meaning out of my suffering, I began an inquiry into suffering that began with the assumption that if there is meaning in life, there must be a purpose for suffering because every person will face suffering. After examining my own tendency to avoid suffering and reading Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, I came to realize that every suffering that comes to a person is a special occasion to cultivate virtue or vice. Additionally, I concluded that those who embrace suffering as a type of sacrifice for a higher aim are the ones who will be called “worthy sufferers.” In this essay, I will unpack how I came to a more well-rounded ethic of suffering, and, hopefully, my conclusions will give hope to others who are struggling with sufferings of their own.

¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasche, Pocket Book edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), xi.

² Frankl, 105.

I

To begin my inquiry into suffering, I considered a common disposition towards suffering that I saw in my own responses to the miscarriage and through the consolations of others. This disposition was that distraction is the best way to handle grief. A direct example of this type of response that my wife and I received came from a family member shortly after the miscarriage. This family member suggested that my wife and I go shopping and take a few days to “spoil ourselves.” In this family member’s mind, a shopping spree was the antidote to the pain that we were facing.

I knew that a momentary foray into the world of consumerism and materialism could only give me temporary healing from suffering. I had tried to cure other smaller pains in my life by distracting myself, and the initial surge of pleasure that I received from these things eventually wore off leaving me feeling empty. I had watched people who were facing the loss of a family member seek comfort in the things that money could buy. I had also watched divorcees spoil their children with the newest video games and shoes. When I followed these cases to their end, I saw that nobody was able to find lasting happiness by responding in this way.

Yet, the idea of escapism still sounded appealing to me. I found myself thinking that if I bought myself something new, I could find relief. Or, even more deceptively, I thought that if I could scroll mindlessly through a social media feed, I might receive some respite from my sufferings.

Why is it that distraction is often our first response in times of trouble? One answer to this question is that we, as human beings, are fundamentally addicted to distraction. Blaise Pascal, in his work *Pensées*, describes humanity’s universal draw towards distraction:

The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves. Without this we should be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death.³

When we encounter suffering, we naturally exchange the difficult reward of quiet reflection for the instant gratification of momentary escapes. The American emphasis on consumerism has only served to increase this sad phenomenon. We are trained by our television advertisements, billboards, and social media accounts to seek out the latest thing because it will bring us the happiness we seek. When we are hurt by some pain in our lives, we are reminded by our culture that there are still things to be bought that might ease our pain. However, we know that these things cannot ultimately cure what ails us because they waste away just like we do.

The desire to be distracted from suffering is also encouraged by the mechanistic worldview that has pervaded the American psyche. Where truth, beauty, and goodness were once held up as ideals that humanity should strive for, these ideals have now been thrown into the attic storage bin labeled “Useful Fictions.”⁴ We pull out these ideals when we need them to move society along, but we do not embrace the consolation that the honest pursuit of these ideals can provide. We do not press into them and desire to see what benefit they might bring to us and to society. Our job has become to drive society along for the sake of “science” and “progress,” for these are the ideals that truly matter.

Unfortunately, suffering has been lumped in with the other “over-the-hill” ideals. As a result, we do not attribute any real meaning to suffering, and we are also not prepared to suffer

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, Revised edition (London: New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), 120.

⁴ Nancy R. Pearcey and Phillip E. Johnson, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, 1st edition, 2nd edition (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2004), 110.

well. It has become our goal to erase suffering from the world, making its existence almost shameful to the perceived progress that we are making. Despite being told that we are merely cogs in a machine, encounters with suffering remind us that this could not be true. Though we may make scientific “progress,” we have not been able to eradicate suffering. So, in my inquiry into suffering, I concluded that I could not stop at distracting myself from suffering’s haunting reality. The only way to deal with suffering is to go through it; there is no way around it or away from it.

II

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) wrote a book called *Man’s Search for Meaning* that I read shortly after the miscarriage. The book further convinced me of the importance of fully embracing suffering. It also revealed to me the importance of maintaining hope during suffering. Frankl began each of his therapy sessions with the question, “Why do you not commit suicide?”⁵ He believed that this question could uncover the answer to another important question: “What gives your life meaning?” It was these questions that Frankl had asked himself many times as he endured the terrors of the Holocaust while a prisoner at Auschwitz.

The Holocaust distilled suffering into its most concentrated form. It stripped each person of their worldly possessions and dignity while dangling them over a chasm of death every day. In these conditions, men and women were forced to face suffering. Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, noted how every man he encountered in the death camps was struggling daily to maintain meaning. As Frankl reflects, this decision to face suffering was actually more like a demand for the prisoners of Auschwitz:

⁵ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, vii.

It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

For a man to will himself to make right decisions, he needed a goal to suffer towards which transcended the death camps. Those who had set their sights on something valuable outside of the death camps were able to survive because they had hope; those who dwelled on the suffering that they faced or the things that they had lost were not able to bear the unrelenting suffering of the Holocaust.

Frankl tells a compelling story about a friend who failed to find an enduring hope outside of the camp and faced deadly consequences as a result.⁶ This friend came to Frankl in an excited manner and told him about a dream that he had recently experienced. In this dream, the man heard a voice which told him the date that he would be liberated from the death camp. The voice proclaimed that March 30th was the date of the camp's liberation. Sadly, March 30th came and went with no sign of liberation, and the toll that this diminished hope had on the man was fatal. On the day that the voice in his dream told him that he would be liberated, the man became delirious and lost consciousness. Hours later, he was dead. Frankl says that the cause of death was listed by the doctor as typhus, but he suggests that it was actually the man's crushed hope that killed him by severely lowering his psychological ability to resist illness and causing his body to yield to suffering.

Frankl's suggestion that hope is vital to enduring suffering is supported by another story that he tells about the effect that the week following Christmas of 1944 had on the prisoners of

⁶ Frankl, 118–20.

the death camps.⁷ According to the chief doctor at Auschwitz, the week between Christmas 1944 and New Year's Eve 1945 saw the death rate in the camp rise to a number that was unseen in the camp both before and after. The doctor did not believe that the reason for the increased death rate had to do with an abnormally strenuous work week or a limited food supply. Instead the doctor concluded, "It was simply that the majority of the prisoners had lived in the naive hope that they would be home again by Christmas."⁸ With nothing to hope for beyond their present circumstances, the prisoners' endurance quickly faded.

Like the person who seeks a way out of suffering through the momentary pleasure of happiness that is found in material possessions, the people in these two examples had put their hope in something that could not sustain them throughout the entirety of their suffering. To continue living in the face of suffering, these people needed a hope that could carry them beyond the camp and its sufferings.

Frankl attributed his own ability to survive the camps to two factors: 1) his commitment to finishing a manuscript that he was working on prior to his arrest and 2) his contemplation of his wife. Even after his initial manuscript was taken from him upon his admittance to the camp, Frankl continued to rewrite his manuscript from memory on small slips of paper throughout his time in the camp. This practice gave him sturdy hope during his days in the camp and something to look forward to after his liberation. Additionally, Frankl spent time visualizing his wife who had been separated from him during his arrest. Frankl reflects on a realization that he had during his time in the camp, "I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved."⁹ Though he did not

⁷ Frankl, 120–21.

⁸ Frankl, 121.

⁹ Frankl, 59.

know if his wife was still alive, he had hope that they would be reunited after liberation day. Sadly, Frankl found out after his liberation that his wife had been killed in an extermination chamber that was adjacent to where he was staying. It was Frankl's commitment to his manuscript that allowed him to continue living with hope after he received the news about his wife.

Frankl's situation raises a compelling question that must be answered: how secure must the object of hope be for a person to endure unrelenting suffering? Even after his liberation from Auschwitz, Frankl was not immune to the fatal loss of hope that had crushed others in the death camps. What if he had found out that he had lost his wife and his manuscript had not turned into a successful method of psychiatric therapy that earned him acclaim until his death? What if every worthy earthly pursuit he had was taken away? These questions showed me that a truly enduring pursuit of meaning in the face of all earthly suffering must be anchored to a hope that is found outside of the world.

III

Frankl notes that, though only a minority of the prisoners made it out alive from the camps, an even smaller minority could be said to have suffered well. In reflecting on this special group of men, Frankl marveled that they could exist in such conditions at all. Yet, they did. Frankl writes, "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of

circumstances, to choose one's own way."¹⁰ Where did these men find the strength to choose virtuous actions in a place where virtue had seemed to have been abandoned completely?

Frankl explains that it was common for these extraordinary men to view their sufferings as sacrifice, and this motivation often came out of a deep, inner commitment to their religious beliefs. Their religious commitment transcended all earthly desires and was firmly grounded outside of the world. No amount of suffering could drag these men away from a belief that their sufferings were actually sacrifice. To this, Frankl remarks that, "In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."¹¹ When a person firmly grounds their hope in something outside of the world, he or she has freedom to act virtuously in the face of immense suffering.

The ability to view suffering as sacrifice is the principle which allows people to suffer virtuously. Dwelling on suffering itself and the things that have been lost leads people to waste away. Merely gritting one's teeth and surviving suffering may sustain a person for a time, but eventually suffering will wear that person down. Only a sacrificial disposition guided by an otherworldly pursuit of truth can create virtue in the face of suffering. Essentially, there are two paths for the sufferer: a worldly pursuit that brings vice or an otherworldly pursuit that brings virtue. According to Frankl, "In the concentration camps... in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends

¹⁰ Frankl, 104.

¹¹ Frankl, 179.

on decisions but not on conditions.”¹² Each man that surrounded Frankl in Auschwitz made decisions that gradually destroyed him or purified him.

The men and women that surround us are faced with these same decisions. Sure, Auschwitz was the testing ground, an exaggerated version of our everyday circumstances, but we live in a world full of suffering where our decisions are also creating saints and swine. This transformation happens more gradually than it did in Auschwitz, but it still happens. In reflecting on my own suffering, I realized that all sufferings come as tests where we decide whether we will become like animals or like gods; the side that we end up on depends on the inclination of our hearts. Where we are inclined, that is where our trajectory will point. Many are inclined to lower things. When they suffer, they turn to things that cannot deliver them through suffering. As a result, their suffering eventually leads them to a loss of hope. In an opposite fashion, a rare few will have their trajectory pointed towards a goodness so far beyond this world that they will be delivered and refined through suffering. The goodness that they look towards turns suffering into sacrifice and sacrifice into glory. Those who pursue virtue with the hope of a future glory, even in the face of suffering, will appear to the rest as saints.

Conclusion

*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*¹³

At the end of my inquiry into suffering, I concluded that humanity bears a weighty responsibility to embrace suffering. Essentially, all of life is preparation for suffering. The

¹² Frankl, 212–13.

¹³ 2 Cor. 4:17–18 ESV

decisions that we make each day are setting us up to be crushed by suffering or refined by suffering. Furthermore, I began to understand the value of looking toward a worthy goal when suffering so that my suffering could become sacrifice. This ability leads to one of life's greatest honors: to be counted as one who is a worthy sufferer.

The months following our miscarriage were transformed by this new pursuit. As my wife and I continually trusted in God, our ability to find meaning in our sufferings grew. We continued to look upwards despite feeling pulled down under the weight of grief. Fighting doubts, we trusted that our sufferings one day would be counted as a glorious sacrifice. However, there were many days where we could not believe this. When new waves of grief came and doubts piled up, we needed other people alongside us; we needed others to grieve with us and also to hope with us.

For this reason, community was an essential component of maintaining hope while suffering for my wife and me. Initially, having to face other people was awkward. We experienced the uncomfortable existence that accompanies grief described by CS Lewis in his work *A Grief Observed*, "I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll 'say something about it' or not. I hate if they do, and if they don't."¹⁴ However, it was other people who helped us sort through the confusion that suffering can bring, encouraged us with comforting words, and sacrificed for us when they did not need to. When friends provided gifts and meals for us with tears in their eyes and encouraging smiles on their lips, we were reminded that we were not alone in suffering. The hopeful pursuit of virtue in the face of suffering became a community project, and it was necessary that other people would grieve with us during that time. This process of grieving is uncomfortable, but it brings healing. Though my

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1st edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 10.

wife and I are not free from the pains that suffering has brought, we are facing suffering while looking upwards with the help of others; it is with this posture that we seek and find meaning in suffering.

*In memory of my unborn child,
"I will go to him, but he will not return to me."¹⁵*

¹⁵ 2 Sam. 12:23 ESV

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