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## **Suffering and the Emergence of Meaning in Life**

**Henry Khumtang Tikhir**

Research Scholar, Jnana Deepa, Pune 411014

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**Abstract:** Philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists pose deep and difficult questions about pain and suffering and try to provide answers to these questions: What is pain? Is pain in the brain? Is there meaning in suffering? What makes pain unpleasant? This article provides a rich and wide-ranging exploration of these questions and offers important new insights into the philosophy of pain. To complement the author's reflection on pain, suffering and the emergence of meaning in life, he has gathered information about the said topic from various sources that could enrich the article and have reflected some concepts that help us understand the topic better.

**Keywords:** Suffering and Pain, Meaning in Suffering, Nobility in Suffering, The Philosophy of Pain, Pain as Beyond the Physical Injury, Pain is in the Brain, Pain and Punishment

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“Pain demands to be felt” John Green (From the Novel, *The Fault in Our Star*)

“Suffering is to feel hurt; it hurts you, incapacitates your body and keeps you from living normally.” (Cocks, 2017)

## Introduction

Pain and suffering are very much part of everyone’s story. It is the part and parcel of our life. Suffering is universal. Pain has a long and venerable history from the time immemorial there has been suffering in the fallen World. Looking through the lens of a Christian Scripture, there is pain in the world because we are deprived of the perfectly blissful Godly Paradise due to our original sin and we are compelled to live in a *fallen World*. Thus, suffering was

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considered a punishment from God and we could hear God’s words re-echoing in our ears. “*By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food*” (Genesis 3:19.) The origin of many pains ranging from mild and momentary to severe and prolonged, are identifiable cause, often external sometimes as an outcome of our action rather than a purely exogenous event. It can be so intimidating to face pain especially if that’s what one is trying to avoid having the whole time. But the good news is that pain is temporary, there is remedy for pain and can be meaningful.

Nowadays, pain and suffering have received increasing attention as philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists try to answer deep and difficult questions about it. What is pain? Is pain only a tissue damage? Is there a nobility in suffering? Does suffering have a meaning? What makes pain unpleasant? Is pain

only in the brain? How is pain related to the emotions? This article provides a rich and wide-ranging exploration of these questions and offer important new insights into the philosophy of pain. The article is divided into clear sections – What is pain? The Nature of Pain, Suffering and Pain, Modelling Pain in Philosophy, Modelling Pain in Psychology, Modelling Pain in Neuroscience and Modelling Pain in Ethics. Though the title of the article is “Suffering and the Emergence of Meaning in Life” and despite distinguishing between pain and suffering, I have used these two words interchangeably. I have done my research on in pain exclusively pertaining to human beings.

### Understanding Pain?

A good place to begin is with the definition of pain proffered by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP in 1979): “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.” (Murat, 2019)

Despite its ambiguity and subjectivity, we have seen the objective definition of pain by IASP in 1979. It must be noted that the validity of its definition has been challenged and a new definition has been suggested. As obvious IASP’s definition of pain encompasses both sensory

Pain may be considered as “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage.”

and emotional aspects of pain it does not include ‘hurt-feelings’ or ‘broken heart’ or ‘feeling of loneliness.’ The

definition focusses much on physical pain due to “tissue damage” but it in fact emotional pain could be more excruciating. Thus, the definition betrays the actual meaning of pain. No definition embraces all that it wishes to embrace and this is true in this regard too.

The etymology of the word ‘pain’ comes from the Latin root *poena*, meaning ‘penalty’ or ‘punishment’. Romance languages use versions of the Latin *dolor* to talk about pain. The English word ‘pain’ originally referred to punishment or penalty for an offence, also meant an unpleasant bodily sensation and mental or emotional suffering. We still use the phrase ‘on pain of death’ to refer to capital punishment. But, in the past, pain meant punishment, and lawful punishments frequently involved the deliberate infliction of bodily pain. (Grant, 2017) But today deliberate infliction of pain even if it is sanctioned by the state is totally irrelevant. Many countries have now done away with the capital punishment.

## The Nature of Pain

Pain is a peculiar and weird phenomenon. There could be feeling of pain even when there is no visible injury or a ‘tissue damage’. “The pain in our left shoulder could be due to a shoulder injury, but it could also be a heart attack, in which case our pain is being referred from the chest to another location. Intuitively, we perhaps think that the pain is in our hearts – that is where the tissue damage is – but the sensation of pain locates the dysfunction in our shoulder. We are probably familiar by now with instances of phantom limb pain, an extreme example of this case. Folks missing a limb, an arm or a leg, often feel pain that seems to be located in the missing extremity. Obviously, there is no limb there, but the felt pain seems real nonetheless. It isn’t a delusion.” (Corns, 2017, p.19) One is not guaranteed to feel pain just because he got his finger cut (Leper,

for example) nor does she feel the pain because she got her tissue damaged (injury on a paralyzed had, for instance).

Pain and suffering cannot be treated exclusively in naturalistic, scientific terms, at least under a certain view of what science is. Medicine became a science at the end of the eighteenth century with the emergence of clinical, evidence-based medicine.

## Suffering and Pain

Leper and paralyzed people may not have pain because they got their fingers amputated but that does not mean they are not suffering. In fact, we actually suffer the pain. They could suffer the loss of their fingers. This is a simple way of distinguishing between Suffering and Pain. While suffering could be mental and emotional, pain could be referred to as the physical pain. However, the effect of this two is one and the same - it “incapacitates your body and keeps you from living normally” (Cocks, 2017) Pain and suffering are one within the other. There is pain in suffering and there is suffering in pain.

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Suffering is referred to as indulging in the experience of pain but as also including vulnerability, dehumanization, a lost sense of self, lack of control over time and space, and an inability to find meaning or purpose in the painful experience. In short, the term “suffering” attempts to convey the experience of pain beyond sensory attributes. In this accepted, I have used the term pain and suffering interchangeably.

## Modelling Pain in Philosophy

The concept of Pain and the very act of pain itself puzzles philosopher who want to comprehend the true nature of pain. The very fact that pain has a privacy of experience – I cannot see the pain of others who are suffering excruciating pain is one of the thought-provoking philosophical questions. Pain is both a sort of subjective experience, but also the object of our experience and this is what Philosophers want to sort out. For philosophers’ pain is something that is ‘there in the world’ very much part of our experience. Besides location, we also experience pains as having such properties as shape, spatial extent, intensity, temporal duration, as well as various qualitative features, such as those which differentiate burning pains from stinging pains, aching pains from smarting pains, jabbing pains from shocking pains, and so forth. (Corns, 2017)

Pain is very much part of me and it teaches me that I am existing. Descartes’ “I think, therefore I exist” (*cogito ergo sum*) could be enriched with “I suffer, therefore I exist” because the (feeling of) pain conveys my existence more than my thoughts. I become someone who suffers my pain therefore my existence is real. It also gives us information about our world, just as our (other) perceptual systems do. Philosophers are not only interested in finding out what pain is and what it is not. They speculate and question the very presence of pain and are keen on finding the answer to the problem of pain. Though Buddha was very much

a practical man he too went on to speculate what really causes pain and through enlightenment brought out spectacular answer to end the suffering, advising his disciples to follow the Four Noble Truths. “I teach suffering, its origin, cessation and path. That’s all I teach”, declared the Buddha 2500 years ago (cited by Hertenberg, 2019)

## Modelling Pain in Psychology

”A man is not so much hurt by what happens as by his opinions of what happens” (Michel De Montaigne)

“Pain represents a complex psychological phenomenon that cannot be objectively measured nor directly observed”

Kate Naud believes that “Pain is so much easier to understand when we can see it. But pain is more than that.” It is obvious from our experiences too that there is pain even without a tissue damage (Migraine, for instance.) and the pain in the absence of tissue damage or disease is assigned to undefined “psychological reasons” (Williams, 2017: 143). Is pain an emotion or a sensation? This question is answered in the studies of pain from psychological perspective. “Pain represents a complex psychological phenomenon that cannot be objectively measured nor directly observed” (Hadjistavropoulos, 2017: 154).

In 1995 British Medical Journal published an astonishing report about a twenty-nine-year-old builder who accidentally stumped his foot on fifteen centimetres (15. cm) nail that pierced right through his boot. He was in such an agonising pain that even a slightest moment could cause him excruciating pain. But when the doctors took of his

boot, they were unbelievably surprised to see that the nail had never touched his foot at all but penetrated between the toes. (Williamson, 2017) Then the question is: What causes pain?

For so many years scientist thought that pain was a direct response to ‘tissue damage’ going by that logic the more severe the injury, the more pain it should cause. But as we learn more about science of pain, the pain and tissue damage do not always go hand in hand. Pain is experienced even without an injury like the builder. There are two phenomena at play; the experience of pain and the biological process called nociception. Nociceptors often referred to as “pain receptors,” are free nerve endings located all over the body, including the skin, muscles, joints, bones, and internal organs. They play a pivotal role in

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how we feel and react to pain. The main purpose of a nociceptor is to respond to damage to the body by transmitting signals to the spinal cord and brain. The brain at times produces pain if it decides that the body needs a protection. Psychological factors play a vital role in pain by influencing the nociceptors and by influencing the pain directly. A person’s emotional state, beliefs about pain, expectation about treatment and memories can influence how much pain he or she experience pain. Studies show that children those who believe they have control over pain experienced less pain than those who do not. (Pate, 2019) Another instance that helps us understand that pain is also psychical in nature is the Phantom limb pain, referring to

ongoing painful sensations that seem to be coming from the part of the limb that is no longer there. The limb is gone, but the pain is real.

## Modelling Pain in Neuroscience

“Pain is defined as an unpleasant feeling that is conveyed to the brain by sensory neurons” (Farlex, 2016)

Last decade or two our understanding of brain mechanisms of pain has been revolutionised.

Brain mechanisms involved in nociception and acute and chronic pain. Pain as we have discussed is subjectively perceived – direct experience. However, “a comprehensive scientific explanation of the Central Nervous System (CNS) processes that generate the subjective experience of pain still remains elusive...the question of how the brain generates the subjective experience of pain can be seen as the quintessential mind–body problem of how subjective experience arises from matter...Although pain

Pain is like a birth right we cannot avoid it is something that we have to struggle with throughout our life. However, it is humanly possible to make meaning out of it. Pain and suffering nourish us, they enlighten us and serve as a wakeup call. Acceptance of suffering not only alleviates the pain but also paves the way to the emergence of meaning out of it like a mother sacrifices and suffers for the good cause of her children.

cannot be ontologically reduced to any one state of neuronal activity, it may be causally reduced to neuronal activity... that all pain is caused by nociception.” (Roy and Wager,

2017) What they try to drive home is that pain is caused by the Central and Peripheral nervous system.

Neurologically speaking, pain is in the brain (not in the mind, because pain is real). Studies have shown that pain changes the brain functionally, structurally and chemically which they term it as “centralization of pain.” According to David Borsook, “Chronic pain induces abnormal function in brain circuits, including circuits involved in cognition, autonomic responses, and other more complex integrative behaviours (e.g., fear, anxiety, interoception, reward and aversion).” (Borsook, 2012) Pain is in the brain and the nervous system signals us that we need to take care of our body.

## Conclusion

“Those who have a “WHY” to live, can bear with any “HOW” (Friederich Nietzsche)

According to Greek tragedy-drama there’s nobility in suffering. The three great playwrights of tragedy were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and they produced such dramas that would evoke ‘pity and terror’ the tool that serves to purify the characters. This literary device, Aristotle called this experience, “*Catharsis*” – way of purifying. He argued that tragedy cleansed the heart through pity and terror, purging us of our petty concerns and worries by making us aware that there can be nobility in suffering. In Greek word, pain means penalty. Plato said that pain arises from within the body and indicating that pain is more of an emotional experience. This experience of pain and suffering purify us, they serve as a tool to awake us from our dormant state. And like the mother in pangs of giving birth they say suffers alot but that suffering becomes meaningful when the child is born, she forgets her suffering and rejoices in her new born baby. When we suffer for others, our suffering

becomes meaningful. In this light Christians understand their Scripture better. The passion of Christ to save humanity from the clutches of sin is an epitome of meaning in suffering. Christian saints like St. Alphonsa or St. Faustina had always offered their suffering for good of others thus finding meaning in their sufferings.

There is always *silver lining in the dark clouds*. At times there are pain and sufferings in life but they refresh us, and act as a wakeup call to be vigilant in life. Sometimes suffering also catapults us to heights from our lowly state. Suffering really makes us come in touch with ourselves. It also illumines us and we begin to reflect, contemplate and try to find our own answers to live good life. We understand that suffering is real and therefore we keep ourselves agile to avert the sufferings in the future. Pain and suffering are a constant reminder for us to take care of our body. “Pain is bearable if we know it will end not if we deny it exists,” affirms Victor Frankl

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**Henry Khumtang Tikhir**, a passionate learner is a seminarian in the Diocese of Kohima, Nagaland. He is aspiring to become a priest in the same Diocese. He is currently doing his Second Year Mater of Philosophy interfacing Science and Religion at the Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune. He also holds his post graduate degree in English literature. Email: [htikhir@gmail.com](mailto:htikhir@gmail.com). ORCID: 0000-0003-3932-2827



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