

The Uses and Advantages of Pain

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*Like the human body, the body politic depends for its survival
on its sense of pain—that is, its capacity to identify danger.*

Ask a biologist why there should be such a thing as pain. Why should the more advanced living things, who suffer tremendous demands on their abilities and resources, have “invested” a large portion of these resources in an elaborate neural system, one of whose essential functions is to convey pain—that is, to create in the individual a subjective feeling of misery?

The answer is this: The central nervous system is responsible for action and initiative, and has control over the movements of the body; as such, it is prone to error, to self-destructive action and harmful motion. Were it not for the consideration of pain, the nervous system would have no problem extending a hand directly into the fire to retrieve a potato or a pot. The pain which follows overwhelms the nervous system and demands that all other considerations and plans be shunted aside to deal with the emergency. Only this pain allows the destructive nature of such actions to become evident in time to avert catastrophe.

Pain is what protects creatures from harming themselves; it coordinates and constrains the subjective feelings of the center, aligning them at least minimally with the reality at the periphery. There may well have been creatures before us not as capable of pain as we are—pain is an *ability*—but those creatures were sufficiently prone to harming themselves that they are no longer among us.

The suspicion of the center, which is in evidence in the functioning of the body, is present also in economic theories of the market. If some commodity or good is sufficiently necessary that many individuals seek to acquire it, this demand puts an upward pressure on prices, which in turn create an awareness of this need and an incentive for suppliers to increase their output. The increased price generally has some subjective misery associated with it, since consumers may find the item difficult or impossible to afford. But this pain has an essential function; without it, the message that bread or winter coats are urgently sought cannot be accurately transmitted to their manufacturers. If some well-intentioned social doctor were to act to halt the price increase, he might succeed in alleviating the pain inflicted on many consumers and their bank balances. But he would also thereby prevent the message of need from getting out to the market, and would prevent the alleviation of the problem which could otherwise have come about naturally.

What is true of social doctors is true of physicians as well. If one administers enough medication, the subject will feel no pain—and thereby imagine himself invulnerable and capable of anything. Such a deadening of the senses is highly dangerous, both to the individual in question and to others around him, for now nothing stands in the way of truly self-destructive behavior. Nevertheless, under extreme circumstances such desensitization can become necessary. In cases of mortal danger, the body can achieve such a senselessness deliberately, and under the influence of adrenaline, the brain produces its own painkillers far more effective than codeine or even heroin.

But ordinarily, pain is needed to prevent damage, and extreme pain is needed to prevent extreme damage—just as an extreme increase in prices is the only truly effective expression of an extreme increase in demand and need. The

possibility of degrees of pain is crucial, for they inform the center of the degrees of urgency associated with particular dangers. The center has to balance among competing demands: Hunger and thirst, a sore throat, a fractured forearm. Without proportionality in the degrees of pain, there would be no way to distinguish a minor irritation from a life-threatening emergency.

In addition to its proportional character, the pain mechanism also needs to be broad-based, with its neural wiring extending throughout the body. The gradations allow for effective competition among needs, but this is useless if the needs are not all heard. As outdoorsmen and mountaineers know well, the point at which to get most worried about frostbite is when your foot does *not* hurt. The deliberate suppression of a particular pain, like “stabilizing” a particular price, deprives the center of the information required to assess which need is most urgent.

What is true of the body and the economy holds good for the body politic as well. As long as we imagine that the good of the public is at least to some extent related to the needs and hopes of individuals, then we must allow some way for their needs to be felt, for pain to be given voice so that attention can be drawn to it and remedy provided. Universal suffrage reflects the ideal that every individual is a good, an end in himself—so that his own perspective on needs and hopes is genuinely and rightly part of the vast public calculus of goods.

But to give each man his one vote every specified number of years is insufficient for guaranteeing that government will feel the pain of its citizens. When the framers of the American constitution created a center for the states of the Union, they strove to make it a center capable of feeling pain, of noticing and thereby responding to needs that are not fully accounted for in the “one man, one vote” formula. The freedoms of speech, press, assembly and petition granted by the First Amendment are, in increasing order, the basic tools needed for a public sensitivity to private pain. The various gradations of social pain thus can be transmitted through more and more potent means, and public attention to potential harm can be guided by individual statements and opinion polls, as well as by outraged editorial columns, inflamed public gatherings and protests.

But in addition to proportional sensitivity, the political center must have a broad-based sensitivity capable of receiving all signals of pain from the full range of society's diverse parts, not merely those signals of its own choosing. A center which uses censorship or other coercion to prevent some pains from being expressed—or which becomes insensitive to them—is one which, like a mind in narcotic stupor, feels nothing. In such a condition, it is capable of every harm in the world.

For a healthy political organism this conjunction of breadth and proportionality is crucial. If every minor nuisance were to express itself in the same manner as a true catastrophe, the center would be inundated with claims to attention, each indistinguishable from the next, and would be incapable of judging among them. Without such a mechanism, there would be nothing to correlate the subjective feelings of the center with the various dangers society objectively faces. In fact, the need to express social pain beyond the bounds prescribed by the simple text of the First Amendment has gradually gained currency in the free countries since these freedoms were entrenched in the United States more than two centuries ago. Civil disobedience, the violation of the laws of the state as an expression of extreme social distress, is a means for society to express pain so pressing that immediate attention is demanded.

There is, of course, no reason why non-violent disobedience should exhaust the range of expressions of misery, just as there is no limit to the possible menace a society may face. Beyond civil disobedience is rioting, and beyond rioting are terrorism, insurrection and open warfare. Each expresses a greater price that one is willing to pay, and—if we can rely on the responsibility of the public—a greater social threat that only a foolish or malicious government would be prepared to ignore.

But must not there be some limit, some degree of pain and danger beyond which the very existence of the state is threatened? Extreme action may indicate a true and mortal threat, or it may be a sign of irresponsibility and malicious provocation. So how to tell the legitimate extremes of social pain from the spurious, or when the expression itself is a danger?

One can never know for certain, yet there are telltale signs that the state ignores at its peril. One of these is proportionality: A complaint that finds expression first and only as an extreme must be suspect, whereas a gradual escalation from words, to writing, to gatherings, to protests, to the limits of the law and beyond, is more likely a genuine danger being expressed. Similarly, responsiveness to attention is a useful test; if attention reduces the urgency of the complaint, this is a sign that its spokesmen are responding to an objective menace. If attention only produces more complaint, then the complaint must be suspect.

Again, social pain expressed by individuals who recognize that they are dependent on society, and who are prepared to restrict their own expression in consideration of what society needs to hold together—these are likely to be responsible people, and the threat to which they respond is likely to be all too real. Complaint that sees its own pain as more important than society as a whole may sometimes be legitimate, but more often it is itself a threat that must be eradicated.

The center must judge; this is its role. But a truly responsible government recognizes that social pain exists, not to annoy it and deflect it from its right course, but to guide it in its search for an understanding of society's true needs. For only in the conscientious effort to identify and provide for these needs does the state acquire and retain its legitimacy.

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