

Of Paradigmatic Suffering and its Place in Humanity

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Robert Andrade tackles the problem of human suffering in this first-year essay. Avoiding pat answers or generalizations, he explores the ways in which three very different works - an ekphrastic poem, a science-fiction short story, and a mirror or palindrome poem - variously tackle the difficult philosophical problem of the morality of experiencing happiness in the face of pervasive human suffering. The essay opens and closes with a philosophical discussion of our privileged situation in the world as Canadians, reminding the reader that these ethical dilemmas are not just 'out there' in a literary text, but ones that we ourselves have to reconcile - or ignore - in our daily lives.

—Dr. Kathy Cawsey

Most Canadians agree that daily life is routed in stark contrast to destitution: those who distress in search of nourishment, those too often victimized by bodily harm, unverifiable numbers of vagrants produced by international conflict; such examples only generalize the anguish that exists right outside our small community. Our country's environment for individual prosperity centralizes a privileged few that strive for well-being and universal opportunity. Unfortunately, this ambitious benevolence crosses reality paradoxically; reparation of suffering requires empathy with its victims. Our ongoing collective mission has a cost that money alone cannot cover; empathy requires an individual psychological commitment, an endurance of another's suffering. Members of our community are

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adequate once compassion has cost their freedom for mental peace. Thus, a national attitude is fostered: if one has not abandoned the pursuit of bliss, they have either hidden from reality or are uncompassionate, churning the world's despair for profit. Most respond by either submerging themselves in blissful ignorance for as long as possible, or resurfacing regularly for a sharp, painful intake of the world's truth; few would stomach the social ostracization of facing suffering constructively. From this, a new problem emerges: given the constant presence of suffering is it moral to be happy?

This problem is examined by W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts", Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", and Warsan Shire's poem "Backwards". Through diverse approaches, each respectively unravels two similar ideas about happiness: True bliss is subjectively and individually experienced by a guiltless bystander to suffering; and it is not criminal to experience joy, as one human cannot try to mend suffering without feeling pain themselves. Auden examines the inevitable physical peripheralization of suffering, Le Guin states that eternal suffering and bliss are complementary, and Shire elaborates that the only procedure for removing suffering is its omission from memory.

In "Musée des Beaux Arts", W.H. Auden's narrative reflects the coexistence between suffering and bliss, and the characters that observe suffering from distant, indifferent perspectives. Auden utilizes key paintings by

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the artist Breughel in examining the world's seemingly unfair peripheralization of suffering. In Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, the central example, a ploughman looks on from Icarus' catastrophic fall at midday, as it was "for him [...] not an important failure; the sun shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / Water" (17 - 19). A nearby ship does similarly, "[sailing] calmly on" (21) following the spectacular disaster. Though "Icarus" (14) is the only poem referred to by name, there are other famous Brueghel scenes, such as the "children who did not specially want [the miraculous birth] to happen, skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood" (7 - 8) from The Census at Bethlehem, and "the dogs [going] on with their doggy [lives] and the torturer's horse / [Scratching] its innocent behind on a tree" (12 - 13) in The Massacre of the Innocents. These displays of casual indifference in the face of portent events, where heavy suffering and death occur would seem, to the empathizer, very selfish or ignorant. If one were truly to care about happiness or joy and simultaneously shrug off the massacre or grave failure of Icarus, how could another not accuse them of conceit? Auden would maintain that, through examination of Breughel's depictions of suffering through art, one may morally solve for the blissful bystander's supposedly amoral position.

Upon examination of the painted scenes, it is clear that each blissful person, whether having acknowledged feelings of empathy or not, is physically separated from the "the dreadful martyrdom [such that it] must run its

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course / Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot" (10 - 11). Even if the ploughman, for example, were to recognize and empathize with Icarus' plight, taking on the sufferer's role, there is no action that could aid the situation. Auden keenly uses examples of paintings that show a visual separation between the 'ignorant non-sufferer' and the "dreadful martyrdom" (10). The theme of distance, that which exists between the ploughman and Icarus, children and the elders, and martyrs and the dull pedestrians of the 4th line, reflects the "human position" (3) of suffering. In the real world, one may walk dully over a hill or through a bush and, from there, they could not possibly help the tortured, sick and starving. One may also tend to their work, improve their locality or aid those in need of a very minor service; a well-known, less fortunate community would still be elsewhere, likely toiling more for far less reward. A self-fulfilling prophecy emerges: what one cannot accomplish with their behaviour, one need not think about accomplishing. Each appearance of blissfully calm individuals in Auden's poem represent the Western, or Canadian position in the world; we replace the ploughman, the expensive ship, the skating children, and the people that open a window, walk dully along or "[scratch their] innocent behind[s] on a tree" (13). Through these representations of non-suffering, indifferent individuals, the reader may learn there is no physical use for empathy towards suffering. Despite the close, inaccurate horizon of a serene mind, "the sun [will shine] / As it [has] to" (17-18) upon each reality, the prosperous

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and the bleak, regardless of their respective generalizability.

Ursula Le Guin argues through "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" that happiness can only exist when one is made aware of empathy for suffering; through the realization of the latter connection, it is understood that universal bliss cannot be. The town of Omelas is populated by the most happy people ever described; they coexist in a seemingly carefree manner. "They [are] not simple folk" (Le Guin, 1), however; a notion that is finally brought to light through the conclusion of the story. For all the cheer and bright humour that is displayed in the town, there is an opposite reality immediately below the surface. The foundation of every beautiful building, generous thought and lamenting art is a child who, by the individual wills of people living in a humanitarian collective, is left to live miserable and mute in his own rotting excrement. "[The Omelasians] all know it is there [...and] they all know it has to be there [...] they all understand that their happiness [...depends] wholly on this child's abominable misery" (Le Guin, 130). The relationship between this foundational suffering and the prosperity of the town are reflected in the singular major law that binds each respective citizen: "there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child" (Le Guin, 131). Le Guin's Taoist, yin-yang approach is vehemently rejected, even within her own work, by believers of the power invested in an individual to influence their own world:

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“They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed [...] But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy.” (Le Guin, 131).

To the fortunate reader of Le Guin’s story, the idea that happiness and suffering are in equilibrium may seem discouraging, as if begging the question: “Is the ideal societal form one where everybody is equally happy, whereby they are also equally miserable?”. Not quite; the town’s happiness only exists because the child’s does not, and attempting to restore the child will introduce toil in the lives of people that were previously happy. Le Guin has long taken a Taoist approach to moral conflict (BIL, 126); her yin-yang between bliss and pain reflects this. Initially, one may demand that the Omelasians take it upon themselves to continue experiencing joy, rather than cause misery in the life of a child. However, one lucid reflection upon our own lives as Canadians reveals why this approach could never work. If one agrees with the first sentence of this paper, then our lives are dependent on the existence of suffering as well. The vision which our

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country holds as a standard for universal living is only successful when exceeding the worldly conditions which we would hope to banish. If the worldly condition for life were at a perfect equilibrium, then the prosperous vision for exceeding of that condition is a failure. Paradoxically, if the ultimate mission of benevolent fortune were to end in success with “universal opportunity”, regardless of that success, all institutions and ways of life constructed for our country-turned-mission would, all at once, fall through their individual disuse. Consider for a moment the bleak implication of the simultaneous crumbling of every institution used to strive for wellbeing, prosperity and happiness. Happiness does not sustain itself by existing beside suffering; rather, its movement toward banishing suffering ensures its own existence.

“Backwards”, Warsan Shire’s work, follows the author’s retrogressive dive into old memories as she uncovers events and their relative themes which have caused past and present suffering. She begins the process of “[making she and her relative] loved” (7) by retracing traumatic childhood events in her mind and poetry. In her mind, “the blood [runs] back up [her] nose [... she and her sister] grow into smaller bodies, [her] breasts disappear [...] / Step - dad spits liquor back into [a] glass, / Mum’s body rolls back up the stairs” (4 - 11). Shire’s thoughts are locked in an ongoing state of suffering, despite her temporal estrangement from the events which she blames for her trauma. Interestingly, she begins her work by dedicating it to whom one must assume is a close relative. “*for Saaid*

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Shire". The memories retold by Shire are not only her own, making this poem seem less like self-reflection and more like therapy. "I'll rewrite this whole life and this time there'll be so much love, / you won't be able to see beyond it." (14 - 15) This work is not only a personal response to ongoing pain; it is simultaneously Shire's most instinctive way to respond to a pain so long felt by her relative. In treating another's suffering, she offers the insight and experience of someone having suffered themselves. Of any perspective offered by the three works so far examined, Warsan Shire's lives closest to the first-hand effects of the sympathetic mind. What, then, does this poet prescribe to mend suffering in the mind? Take a close look at the title and format of the poem; it begins as does a mission statement: the plan for therapy begins with "The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room. / He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of his life; / that's how we bring Dad back." (1 - 3). Our author is meticulously underlining the necessary procedure to cure her subject of suffering; she underlines each traumatic event and prepares an operative method. Her method is reversal; take every event and go backwards. This "operation" and the promise made immediately before it, "[y/Y]ou won't be able to see beyond it" (15/16), begin proceeding upon reading stanza two. Then, every event that requires deletion is told inversely, beginning with the promise of happiness and ending with a time before suffering, when "[he walks] backwards into a room" (30). The inverse direction of the first traumatic event becomes

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truth to Shire's patient, and she remains blissful. Happiness in this poem is not ignorance of suffering; happiness is to psychologically undo suffering, consequently also undoing any associated memory.

The themes of acceptable blindness and disparity between the paradigm and reality are touched upon by Shire, who maintains that happiness only exists inversely to memory. Her poem is reflective of her own memory; if she writes a misrepresentation, then her recollection of the event changes, erasing it from her reality. The rewriting of memory, incidentally, is the final frontier for someone wishing to distance themselves from worldly suffering; first, Auden rationalizes that distance must exist between the observer and suffering, then Le Guin poses the inevitability of suffering for happiness, and, finally, Shire necessitates the erasure of suffering from the mind entirely.

A reliable mental model that may be used for understanding this dialogue's thesis: a small, isolated, calm or perhaps gently rippling tide pool sitting a variable distance away from a ravenous, ravaging ocean. The tide smashes the rocks, spraying unfeasibly many droplets toward the shore. The proximal, miniscule pool, representative of the serene mind, is inevitably being exerted upon by the sea and yet has no power to return said influence. That small well of water; could one suggest that its individual stillness, its isolated joy, when mingled with the current, will provide solace to much as one person, or stabilize the world's flow to any fathomable

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degree? Given the fortune of most Canadians, one may be expected to watch the news often, to frequently glimpse into the existence of the gravest misfortune: trauma and poverty inflicted upon people no less innocent than we are; such a realization may condemn the lawful and moral to guilt of and fear for existence. Though, societally, we aim to mend all worldly suffering and champion globally equal opportunity. Auden, Le Guin and Shire elaborate on terms for living with others' trauma so that the mind may find peace. Auden proposes that we are doomed to the observation of peril from a distance, regardless of where or who we are. Le Guin summarizes that suffering is an eternal condition that is hopelessly felt by those hoping to heal the traumatized, and Shire recounts her own experience with suffering, stating that the only therapy for individual pain is the complete omission of its memory. In regards to the prosperous life and its coexistence with peripheral suffering, bliss may only exist with respect to two truths: happiness is built on a lie of bystanding suffering, and such a lie is moral on an individual, paradigmatic level.

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