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The Role of Suffering in Theories of Emotion

Joseph de Rivera

Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology

Clark University

There is a good deal more suffering in human life than there is in our theories of emotion. One reason for this appears to be that our theories tend to focus on individual emotions or moods. Thus, we focus on terms such as anger or anxiety without considering that their common root is anguish. Another reason is that we want to ground our theories in our evolutionary heritage, so we focus on emotions that we share with other animals and that are clearly observable, such as the Big Four of anger, fear, happiness and sadness. Yet while animals certainly appear to experience pain, and show the effects of loss, they do not anticipate pain and loss in the way we do when we consider aging, sickness, death, and the loss of those we love.

Hence, in addition to examining specific emotions and relating emotion to our animal heritage, it is important to contextualize emotion in our broader human being. When we do this we must come to grips with emotional experiences such as suffering and mysticism. When we begin with such experiences, rather than with facial expressions, we find that they are focused on our relationship with something that is radically Other than ourselves. Today, in our secular culture with its scientific parlance, we may speak as Jim Averill has, of our “system of cognitive constructs,” but these cognitive constructs are beliefs about the World in which we live. And reflect a relationship with that world. Today, we consciously think that we have an impersonal relationship with an impersonal world, we have secular beliefs and our “myth” is the theory of evolution. However, there are times, particularly when we suffer, that we behave in ways that suggest religious beliefs. We find ourselves to be in relationship to a world that is a personal Other or, at least, an Other that is quite unlike what we rationally conceive. Usually, these relationships are masked by our rationality, and to grasp the basic human emotions involved in suffering we do well to begin by studying the experience of our human ancestors, of so called

“primitive man.” Later, I will attempt to show how the emotional relationships revealed in their “myths” are still quite operative today, masked by the veneer of our rational civilization.

While there are some important differences in the summary accounts of how our ancestors emotionally related to the world they inhabited, all agree that for most of the history of civilization persons have felt themselves to be dependent on something Other than themselves. Dennison (1928), following the work of Marrett and Preuss, suggests that all, or at least most, early cultures believed that this dependence was on a mysterious impersonal force, a “*mana*” that permeated all of nature but was concentrated in certain sacred persons, animals, places, and was essential for wellness, fertility, and the success of any human endeavor. He suggests that, perhaps universally, this force was contrasted with a “miasmatic,” destructive, force that caused sickness, famine, death. Societies created taboos against the impurity of objects associated with miasma, often blood and strangers, because the “stain” of such contact brought its curse into the group and exposed it to disease, famine, defeat in battle. Of particular interest to us, the people of these cultures believed that the beneficent force, the *mana*, was so good and powerful that it abhorred miasma and destroyed anything impure that came into its presence. Thus, just when one most needed to approach the Source-of Goodness, to become cured, fertile, powerful, one had to first purify oneself, removing any trace of miasmatic stain. In different cultures, kings or priesthoods developed who specialized in remaining pure so that the source of Goodness, which often became personalized as a god could be approached, and as civilizations developed these forces became attached to moral laws. Ricoeur (1967) shows how this occurs in the Old Testament, as the idea of stain gradually becomes transformed into sin and then into guilt, quite different ways of conceiving the nature of evil.

By contrast with Dennison's account, Eliade (1959) suggests that early humans attempted to be as close as possible to sacred objects, to live in the sacred in order to be, to exit in objective reality rather than subjective illusion, participate in the reality of the sacred and be saturated with its power. In his account, all peoples create a world for themselves, whether it is a hut, a village, or a nomadic center, by situating themselves as close as possible to a sacred space and having a mode of access to that space, by an opening in the roof, a central lodge pole, an altar, that communicated directly to that Other space. He asserts that all peoples create their world, fashion a cosmos out of chaos, by imitating the creation of the world. For some peoples this involves the establishment of a central point and the demarcation of the four horizons, for others it involves a bloody sacrifice akin to the primordial sacrifice that gave birth to the world in their account of the creation. Rather than stressing inanimate destructive forces, and stain, as the source of evil and suffering, Eliade stresses the agony of being apart from the sacred. He states, "Religious man thirsts for being. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness...profane space represents absolute nonbeing" (p. 64). Outside this created space is chaos, peopled with ghosts, demons, foreigners. He emphasizes rituals that represent the recreation of the cosmos from chaos.

It may be noted, that both accounts of our ancestors emphasize a dependence on a Source-of-Goodness and the chaos that results from its loss, but in the first, suffering, is accounted for by humans contacting something evil, while in the second, it is due to a failure of maintaining contact.

It is interesting to observe that these different accounts of the beliefs of "primitive man" can be related to the different myths that are present in the literature that has influenced Western Civilization. Ricoeur (1967) has examined the myths which attempt to account for the evil to

which we humans are exposed, to the suffering we undergo. He argues that there are four essentially contrasting myths. The two major ones are the Adamic myth of the fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Babylonian creation myth.

In the Babylonian myth, the world is created in the process of a power struggle between the gods. The mother Tiamat, chaos, is defeated by the god Marduk, who creates the cosmos from her body. Latter, humans are created from the blood of one of the gods:

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.

I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name....

He shall be charged with the service of the gods

that they may be at ease! (p. 180, note)

As Ricoeur (1967) notes, "... violence is inscribed in the origin of things, in the principle that creates as it destroys" (p. 183). People are the slaves of the gods. The myth is one of domination, of the use of violence to create the order that prevents the agony of chaos. At each new year, the whole people united in recreation of the drama of the victory of order over chaos, a recreation of the world in the manner emphasized by Eliade, a reenactment that Ricoeur observes, "...relives the fundamental emotions of the poem-the cosmic anguish, the exaltation of battle, the jubilation in triumph" (p. 192). During the festival the King binds the people to the gods; he is made the master and owner of the lands to ensure the service of his subjects and the conception of the cosmos as state. The Babylonian kings dominated their subjects and they, and especially the Assyrians that followed, decimated surrounding peoples because other people were Enemies, representative of the evil chaos that had to be subdued by violence.

By contrast, in the Adamic myth, a Holy God creates a fundamentally good universe without the use of violence. Evil or suffering is not inherent in being, or in the nature of

humankind. Rather it enters the world when people do what they are not supposed to do. It is not that God is “nice.” Yahweh is as terrifying as Tiamat or Marduk. But here, a beneficent *mana* is now personal and its wrath against the evil of sin is as striking as *mana's* electric abhorrence of stain. This God is the Holy Presence whose non-rational aspects are so well described by Otto (1923) in his capturing of the experience of the Holy, a terrifying, awful majesty and mystery, before whom Abraham, feeling his insignificance, says, “I am but dust and ashes.” However, Abraham *does* speak and even pleads for his people. He is not a slave, but enters into an agreement. The Other has chosen him to do his will and he will be blessed. Order is established by covenant rather than violence. Of course, there is still suffering, and this fact constrains the myth that is told. But there are other ways to lead one's life without being a king's slave. One can attempt to scrupulously follow the laws and attempt to discern how God would want one to act, or one can decide that it is impossible to completely follow the will of the Other, repent and accept the human sacrifice provided by Jesus in his understanding of the violent will of the Other. Thus, Saint Paul called Christians to identify themselves with suffering to cleanse themselves from guilt.

The two other myths described by Ricoeur are the tragic myth of wicked gods and the myth of the exiled soul. In the tragic myth the divine is the cause of suffering working through the weakness of man, originally as a divine possession. Strong emotions such as blind rage were conceived as the work of outside agents. We still have vague intimations of this in our language. For example, “enthusiasm” derives from the presence of God within us, and Arabic still has a number of emotions that can only be translated into English with language such as “divinely inspired,” and Hillman (1989) argues that we would do well to return to the idea of the Greek Gods and how they may possess us. The anger of Greek tragedy is not the growl of a dog over a

bone or the road rage of a cut off driver. It is an anger that manifests divinity. As Gould (1990) describes it, Sophocles' heroes are not just angry the way any of us might be angry

...because the established order is being disturbed... or rights and functions are being thwarted... the anger of one who assumes the crisis is temporary. (Rather, he) feels himself to be the victim of an injustice so deep that it threatens his confidence in himself, mankind, and the universe. (p. 156)

The myth of the tragic is like the Babylonian in that the principle of evil is primordial. The dancers in Agamemnon say, "Look with complete honesty... at the central power in the universe. What you will see is that violence is of its essence." However, rather than polarizing the gods into cosmos vs. chaos, Ricoeur argues that, in the tragic myth, there is no real distinction between the divine and the diabolical. The gods can be both a source of good counsel and lead astray; good and evil are identical. The evil wrought by the gods is not punishment, not a rejection of badness. Rather, we might say that stain has become fate. Death is as fateful as birth and humans are impotent against the possession of the gods. Woe to the person who is so blinded that he demonstrates a greatness that may offend the jealousy of the gods. Gould (1990) points out that the Greek term *pathos* actually meant an undeserved occasion for suffering caused by the gods. He points out that it was this essential point that made Plato ban tragedy from his ideal Republic. For Plato had a mystic vision, the gods, or a Reality beyond this world, are good, and persons are responsible for their happiness. Hence, he opposed the corrupting influence of spectacles that led persons to think of the gods as irresponsible and implied that persons were not responsible for their fate. He was particularly concerned because he felt that the lowest third of our psyche, our appetite self, desires to see ourselves as the victim of unmerited suffering.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that Gould sympathizes with Plato's concern and rejects Aristotle's defense of tragedy as a purging purification. (He points out that Plato had a much better grasp of the poetic imagination than did Aristotle.) However, Gould loves tragedy and defends it by arguing that it is a defense against the self-suffering caused by an overly strong superego, a defense against the tendency of victims to blame themselves. He argues that, "tragedy permits us to forgive ourselves" (p. 224). Thus, although he appears to be in agreement with Lerner (1980) fundamental idea--that we have a belief in a just world--he argues a sort of reversal of the just world hypothesis: because we cannot believe that our suffering is completely unmerited a part of us wants to believe in the possibility of unmerited suffering. Hence, the catharsis of tragedy is not a purging of negative emotions but a clearing from an irrational guilt. While Gould does not present any evidence for this conjecture I think it may be a fruitful path to pursue. Might tragedy provide such relief? In my own investigation of those believed-in imaginings in which persons feel they are the victims of satanic cults, there is some evidence for an attack of conscience that is projected out on the supposed perpetrator, a projection that might not have occurred if the tragic view were more available in culture today. I am unsure about the exhilaration that tragedy provides for some, but it seems clear that the mix of horror and compassion that is engendered by tragedy is a defense against the imposition of a rigid belief in a just world, encourages humility and would be a fruitful area for future research.

Plato's quest for goodness, and the mystic quest in general is clearly opposed to the tragic myth. Mysticism appears most closely related to Ricoeur's fourth myth, the Orphic myth that we really are an exiled soul who, imprisoned in the body and this world, has forgotten our divine reality. In its extreme form this myth may lead to a gnosticism that seeks to unity the self with the divine by completely rejecting the body, the actuality of the world and the reality of

suffering. In a sense, the purification of stain needed to unite with mana, requires a complete rejection of the profane. However, this is an extreme and it seems to me that Socrates, like most gurus and saints, does not reject the body or the pleasures of the senses, but rejects slavery to the body and irrational passions that prevent humans from uniting with divinity. The mystical vision that is offensive to many devout Christians and Muslims is not so much that the body is evil but that we can overcome the gulf between ourselves and God, that we *are* God rather than creature. For Socrates and Plato are arguing that that if we can overcome the polluting madness, fear, and attachment that are embodied in us, we can be good, will not suffer, will possess the goodness of God, will be happy, and this is our responsibility. Chance, nature and tyrants, not the gods, may impose pain and misfortune but we are responsible for how we meet it, for whether we suffer or are happy. In this sense, Plato is close to Kushner's (1981) analysis in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. However, for Kushner operating within the Hebrew myth' system, the suffering is real, and God as Other is available to help us deal with it.

Note that the mystic vision of union with God, and the mystical experience itself does not appear to involve the negative energy of an Other. The negativity is left behind with that part of ourselves that is irrational and that we must recognize if we are to achieve liberation. Otto remarks how this absence of terror is what appears to distinguish the mystic experience from the experience of the numinous or the prophetic. Of course the mystic may experience the painful longing for, and loss, of heavenly experience. However, there is a striking absence of the experience of the wrath of God, the abhorrence of miasma, the violence of chaos or its domination. The bliss of the mystical experience, the ecstasy of the loss of self in an ocean of nectar, a bountiful inexhaustible love that calls for simple adoration of a positive energy that is beyond a distinction between good and bad, has no room for negativity.

Of course, this unambiguity is purchased at the price of the ego; but this “dying to self” does not mean the loss of individuality. Most saints seem to have a very distinctive character. It may, however, mean a loss of a sense of justice and the will to create a just world in the “actual” world. Gould observes how there is, an unreconcilable difference between... the philosophers rage to believe in justice and the poets rage to believe in the existence of injustice. Is human happiness really in human control? Macmurray (1961) charges mysticism with a withdrawal from pragmatic life, a loss of the tension between ideal and actual, the peace of a visionary ungrounded in the gravity of this world.

It might be objected that these myths have little relevance to our contemporary understanding of human behavior in a secular society that is dominated by the story of evolution, at least apart from our understanding of a relatively few people still trying to comfort themselves by attempting to live a religious life in a secular time. I believe that nothing could be further from the truth because it seems to me that these myths are very alive today. First, consider the story portrayed in perhaps 80 % of our television and films. Whether it is Popeye, Batman, Superman, Ninja Turtles or Pokemon, whether the hero is James Bond, Rambo, or Blade, Wink (1992) points out we have the same story. The good guy uses violence to defeat evil, restore the evil disrupted by the chaos of the Enemy, and this ritual repeats itself ad infinitum. The violence of chaos, the use of violence to dominate chaos and restore order. And of course this myth is not just in our TV programming. Consider our criminal justice system. Consider Kosovo. Consider how the United States is responding to drugs in Colombia, to the continued use of the threat of nuclear weapons and the current missile program. Do not be fooled by the idea of a missile “defense” system against the Enemy, or think that the expenditure of billions of dollars is merely a sop to the military-industrial complex. It is quite clear that the United States is in the process of

creating a system to dominate space. Is this really a rational policy or is it an enactment of the Babylonian myth. Are not the Good forces of order hard at work, preparing the violence that will restore order to the chaos that will be created by the Enemy?

Yet the Adamic myth is alive too. First, consider its degraded form in the myth articulated by Lerner (1980) as the belief in a just world. Lerner and others have repeatedly shown how often we denigrate the victims of an injustice when we are unable to help them. For example, Lerner and Simmons (1966) demonstrate that those observing a woman who is about to learn word associations rate her less favorably when they believe that any wrong answers will be punished by shocks. Lerner shows that when we blame a victim we are apparently maintaining our belief that we live in a just world where people get what they deserve. He shows the many defenses we utilize to maintain this belief. They include isolating our “world” from the worlds of the very rich and the victimized and taking advantage of the myth that all persons are basically self interested. However, it seems to me that the just world myth may be based on the primitive myth systems we have discussed. Of course, when we are dealing with enemies the Babylonian myth applies and there is no question of justice, or we might say that enemies simply get what they deserve. However, where the victim is not an enemy, even those subjects who do not denigrate the victim (about a third of the subjects) feel that the subject *should* have gotten a better deal. Rather than denigrate the victim they are angry at the experimenter. But why should they? I doubt that any of the Babylonian citizens objected to what would appear to us to be the injustice of their domination. In spite of our use of the Babylonian myth system our culture is still largely based on the Adamic myth and this assumes a just God and implies a world that *should* be just even if at times it is not. The strength of this belief is particularly shown when we ourselves are victims. We know how often rape victims blame themselves, and Kushner (1981)

points out that one of the major problems many have when bad things happen to good people is the belief that we must have done something wrong, and that God is punishing us. Kushner rejects the idea that God makes use of suffering to either punish or teach. He believes that God is available to help us get over a suffering that for which God is not at all responsible. However, his God stills wills justice even if S/He has not the power to insure it. The secular isolation of the belief in a just world, the treatment of it as a myth in its own right, appears to be related to a slip in Lerner's usually precise language. When he deals with how victims handle their own suffering he points out that most "justify" the suffering. However, this use of "justice" is much broader than his use of justice in the sense that persons get what they deserve. Rather, it has to do with giving meaning to the suffering and this must necessarily occur within the context of some myth system. We must all do this. We must give meaning to suffering if we are not to fall into despair.

The emotional dynamics that appear to be at the root our human being is that suffering threatens to turn our cosmos into chaos. As I consider Louise's distinction between two different formulations of suffering: a reactive passivity in which we are the victims of violence and externally oriented towards blame, versus an active passivity that maintains agency by accepting and transforming suffering, I find myself wondering if this is a way of describing the behavior of individuals who are working from within the Babylonian versus Adamic myth system.

In the Adamic myth system, the turning of cosmos to chaos is equivalent to the loss of our relationship to an Other whose goodness and power we are dependent upon. The restoration of meaning (the repair of our system of cognitive constructs) depends on a restoration of the relationship with the Other.

In considering how this may be achieved it may be worthwhile to contrast the bliss and ecstasy of the mystical experience, and the conceptual model we need to understand those

emotions with the faith implicit in the Adamic myth and how that emotion may be understood. While bliss and ecstasy imply dissolution of the boundary that separates the self so that the self is not separate and is merged in a greater oneness, faith implies a self that is separate from an other. By "faith" I do not mean a belief in something that cannot be proved, but an emotional relationship that things are fundamentally okay, that one doesn't have to be afraid, doesn't need to have defenses to provide security, can be open. In Macmurray's model (see de Rivera, 1989) we exist as persons only in our relations with others. These relationships always have two motivational components, a love for the other and a fear for the self. While both these components are always present one is always dominant and fear for our self becomes dominant when we are hurt, abandoned, betrayed, by the other. Then we either become individualistic (because if the other is bad we have to care for ourselves) as conformist (because we are bad we must do what the other wants, be good, to get them to care for us). If, however, we can restore the dominance of our love for the other, and this can be accomplished by acceptance, forgiveness, compassion, we restore the knowledge of our own inherent lovability and can drop our defenses. Unlike defensive beliefs to give us security, for example, the belief in a just world, beliefs that attempt to assure us that what we fear won't happen. The emotion of faith allows us to remain open. That is in spite of the fact that bad things will happen we need not really be afraid because we are loved by the Other.

Today, we have a choice of myths.

We may refuse emotional involvement in this imperfect world and unite ourselves with the absolute Goodness.

We may observe the tragic spectacle, refusing to extort evidence by believing in a just world, purifying ourselves with the horror and compassion we feel, emotionally involved but impotent to act.

We may adopt the Babylonian, submit to the power of the state and ward off suffering by using violence to insure order.

We may feel the responsibility of the Adamic myth and live in the paradox that injustice is commonplace yet must never be accepted, being willing, as Gandhi was, to suffer rather than accept injustice or use violence.

Our examination of human suffering and the myths we have invented to deal with it suggest that the basic human emotions are as follows:

1. The terror of stain, our rage at injustice, and the horror and compassion we feel for those who suffer from it.
2. The agony of chaos and its suffering, the exaltation of our violent battle against it, and the jubilation of our triumph.
3. The painful longing for the Other and the bliss and ecstasy experienced when union is attained.
4. The fear for ourselves when we perceive ourselves as abandoned by an Other on whom we are dependent, and the love that restores our ability to have faith.

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