Suffering & Utility: What Tragedy Gives and What Tragedy Takes

Ryan C. Gimbel

Weber State University

Abstract

Experiencing tragedy may broaden our ability to understand the suffering of others, and further our ability to endure future suffering. In the work of stoic philosopher Epictetus, he proports one should practice premeditatio malorum, preparing for the tragedies to come so that when they do occur one will be less disturbed. Through the stories of those that have survived tragedy and great suffering though, we can grow to understand the choices people make that lead to suffering are often the lesser of two evils. When man sees a reason to suffer, he will choose to suffer, it is possible to understand and explain what experiencing suffering causes. The writings of philosophical professor Michael Brady, Susan Feagin, and others explain that the virtues of suffering are enough so we should not avoid the experience of it. We study history so that we may avoid repeating it, and just the same we experience the suffering that comes naturally throughout life so that we may avoid repeating it.

Keywords: Suffering, pain, tragedy, function, goal, consciousness, compassion, virtue, philosophy.

Suffering and Utility: What Tragedy Gives and What Tragedy Takes

# Introduction

In the short story *To Build a Fire* (1902) by Jack London, an unnamed male protagonist travels through the frozen Yukon to meet up with his camp. At every opportunity, the man disregards the idea that he could die here, the narrator warns; “The trouble with him was that he was not able to imagine.” (p. 2). In analysis of this story, I have come to question why he would choose to hike the uninhabitable Yukon alone at all. Even his modest estimate of 50º below zero, while way off, would be too risky to hike in for most. While one answer may indeed be lack of imagination, there’s more to the actions of man than that.

The only way to discover the relationship between man and suffering is to partake in self-reflection and contemplate on ideas you may at first rebuff, doing so cannot eliminate suffering but will limit the negative affect it has on your life. To better understand this concept of a sought out suffering we will be taking a close examination of a work by one of the great philosophers of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as the work of other researchers and philosophers in order to explain why someone would choose to suffer, and what the results of experiencing suffering are.

#### Suffering and Pain

I would like to start off by explaining a necessary distinction in this dialogue. There is a common misconception among people that suffering, and pain are one in the same, this is not accurate. The primary distinction between suffering and pain is where it is localized; while pain occurs in a specific part of the body, suffering is a reaction to pain and occurs without a specific location (Massin, 2019). According to professor of philosophy Oliver Massin (2019) “Suffering can be expressed, pains cannot. As a consequence, we can have compassion for the suffering of others, not for their pains.” This conclusion makes us question the duty of those who experience suffering, as Massin goes on to say from a Utilitarian perspective you should always attempt to reduce the amount of suffering someone experiences.

# Analyzing *The Birth of Tragedy*; Suffering Understanding

While I will do my best to explain *The Birth of Tragedy* for the purposes of this paper, but I would highly recommend reading this on your own if you haven’t already. A brief synopsis is well enough to understand the ideas that apply to suffering, but Nietzsche touches on a great many ideas and philosophies of art as to how it can be viewed, so if you have the time, it’s a worthy read.

That being said, we may start out by acknowledging the two principals of art Nietzsche formed from two Greek gods: Apollo and Dionysus. The Apollonian is the visual, aesthetic, in Nietzsche’s words “[the] plastic arts”, the Dionysian is the opposite, it is the non-visual, intoxicating loss of self.

The relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is one of constant conflict, and occasional but brief reconciliation. What I mean by that is that art as a whole of what a society produces has a certain balance of form and function. The Apollonian aesthetic beauty of art while possessing value must at times be subservient to the emotion, and disorder of the Dionysian. This is better understood in the well-known quote by poet and activist Cesar A. Cruz “To comfort the disturbed, and to disturb the comfortable.”

The birth of the Dionysian allowed for a painful examination of suffering, and in turn the destruction of one’s conceptual self. This destruction of the self allows empathetic examination of the troubles of others, and separation from societal individuality in favor of a more unified society.

# The Choice of Tragedy

There are many reasons one may choose to experience some sort of suffering, in the example mentioned earlier Jack London’s story we don’t know the protagonist, but we know he is hiking to a camp where his friends are, that is his motivation to experience the chosen suffering. In order to better understand the reasons, one may choose to suffer I reached out to the head of philosophy at the University of Glasgow, Dr David Bain (personal communication, March 30, 2022). His response was greatly insightful, the answer he provided was simpler than I was expecting. Upon mentioning theological motivations (meaning religious beliefs) which we will look more into later in this paper, he explained that “In some cases, one might not aim for suffering, but tolerate it as a side-effect of the means to something one is pursuing.”

The following example he provided was of Sir John Franklin’s failed mission to explore an unnavigated portion of the Arctic in 1845. According to David Bain the reason Sir John choose to go on this expedition despite the risks was to please his wife, unfortunately his ship became icebound and him along with around 120 of the officers on board eventually perished. In this case we can’t say if Sir John would consider this expedition worth the risks we may only speculate.

Another similar story that can better elaborate the first-person experience of great suffering in the same realm is the autobiographical book *Alone (1938)* by Richard Byrd. Byrd was a researcher who had previous experience in the Antarctic would once again brave the cold but this time it would be for six months in the Antarctic winter to gather weather data, and he would be entirely on his own. In one account he explained this decision by claiming that three people would be a crowd and two would just annoy each other, and while that may be true it can more be attributed to Byrd’s desire for accolades under his own name. We have now briefly covered a few stories of those who choose possibly indirectly, choose to suffer. The next step is to consider what the changes experience of suffering may create in one’s life.

# What Suffering Reaps

As we have seen previous, philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche had his own idea of what happens to people when they experience suffering but now, we will touch on some other academic’s ideas. While the impact will always be based on past experiences and extenuating circumstances there are some basic throughlines. When someone attempts to escape some suffering, they will occasionally find themselves involved in another, this is best exemplified in the phenomenon of addiction.

#### Addiction and Escape

Professor for Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics Karl-Ernst Bühler (2005) previously published a paper as an analysis of addiction and was able to find 3 different kinds of dependence or reliance on addiction. You can think of the first kind he describes; Psychological Dependence, as an attitude or personality that is highly dependent. It of itself can be pretty common so often in addiction it can turn into one of the other two forms.

The second one described is Psychosomatic Dependence, and looks from the outside in terms of behavior, far more like addiction that Psychological. All of us seek to escape the inevitable pain of life, and yet its suffering people are truly attempting to avoid. The psychosomatic form of dependence relies on a craving or dependence.

In the case of suffering this urge we all have to feed into desires or to make ourselves happy is called the will, and the will is always in need of something. If the desires of the will are not met, we experience suffering, and yet when they are met, we get bored and also experience suffering. If it’s possible to acknowledge this, and accept it as a part of life, one may be able to escape in some sense suffering. This is of course what the religion of Buddhism teaches, to see the pains of life and accept them as inevitable releases your dependency on the desire to escape pain.

While this philosophy is not universally accepted it is another idea of how long people have tried to resolve suffering. Moving back to the paper by Bühler (2005), there is one other form of dependence that is: Somatic Dependence. While this form is interesting, as it is a physical and biological dependency, it can pretty simply be relayed in terms of suffering as a need to survive no matter how bad things get. In some of the stories previously mentioned men survived for long durations under great physical stress because at least in that moment to suffer was better than to die.

#### Moral Competency

While this kind of brings us back to questioning why some may choose to suffer, we have an opportunity to discuss our reaction to suffering and tragedy. In the moment we may feel pleased in some way by own on reaction in some way, in moments we react to tragedy appropriately our own morals are reasserted (Feagin, 1983). This can kind of be equated to the idea that people enjoy when they are able bring the image of themselves, they have in their head into relief.

It might be easier for you to think of the bad affects suffering has on people. Some of these affects are “decreased individual well-being…” “and symptoms that have destructive consequences for interpersonal and societal relations” (Vollhardt, 2009). They are well documented and depending on their severely most have experienced them, so it may be difficult to imagine the positives outweigh the negatives.

Though the debate of if suffering is worth it in the end is still hotly contested and dependent largely individual factors, prosocial behaviors such as altruism can be easily understood as a consequence of experiencing tragedy/trauma. What that means is that people who experience suffering are more likely to practice the selfless concern for others. We can see this proven in the paper *Altruism born of suffering and pro-social behavior following adverse life events* by professor of psychology Johanna Ray Vollhardt (2009).

This behavior is visible in an example given by Vollhardt; “in an interview study of 100 Holocaust survivors in the United States (Kahana, Harel, & Segal, 1985), providing help to other victims in concentration camps was indicated by an overwhelming majority (82%) of the sample” (Vollhardt, 2009). And it makes sense, when an individual knows what something feels like, they know better how people who are going through the same thing feel than someone who hasn’t.

While throughout life no one truly seeks suffering, we can see when under extreme circumstances humans will do whatever they can to keep themselves and others alive. It cannot be said that suffering is worth it in order to have empathy for others, the hope of individuals in our society today is that they may possess the ability to possess empathy beyond their own experiences.

# Conclusion: The Possibility of Progress

When we stop and think for a moment on all of the awful things in our lives it easy to fall back on what others have told us we should think of our actions, what I would urge you it to instead examine how you have reacted to tragic events in the long run. Reading the stories left behind by people who have been pushed to their limits in one way or another and for one reason or another, we can see that sometimes humans just make bad decisions.

We don’t know if when Richard Byrd chose to travel alone to the Antarctic in order to gain research, he knew or even cared if he died out there. We do not know if the protagonist from *To Build a Fire* (1902) was willingly disregarding his safety when he decided to hike the Yukon alone, and when you think about it, it doesn’t really matter. We know what goals these people were reaching for and, at least for those who have survived great tragedies, we know some of what they experienced afterward.

For David Byrd, we know that despite all of the pains he suffered while in the Antarctic, he would still write about missing the feeling of isolation. The feeling of being humbled by the weight of the universe stuck with him; “In the senseless explosion of sound you are reduced to a crawling thing on the margin of a disintegrating world; you can't see, you can't hear, you can hardly move. The lungs gasp after the air sucked out of them, and the brain is shaken. Nothing in the world will so quickly isolate a man.”

By no means do I believe that the promise of wisdom should be enough to encourage suffering. I will only reiterate that experiencing tragedy may heighten our ability so have empathy and possess virtue for the people in your life, and act as a declaration to ourselves that we are far stronger than we know so that we may be prepared when pain and occasionally suffering appears to us once more.

Bibliography

London, J. (1902). *To Build a Fire*. Century Magazine.

Nietzsche, F. W. (2008). *The Birth of Tragedy* (D. Smith, Trans.). Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1872)

Massin, O. (2019). *Suffering pains. Philosophy of Suffering: Metaphysics, Value, and Normativity*, 75-100.

Byrd, R. E. (1938). *Alone*. Garden City, NY: International Collectors Library.

Vollhardt, J. R. (2009). Altruism born of suffering and pro-social behavior following adverse life events: A review and conceptualization. Social Justice Research, 22(1), 53-97. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org.hal.weber.edu:2200/10.1007/s11211-009-0088-1>.

Buhler, K. (2005). *Euphoria, ecstasy, inebriation, abuse, dependence, and addiction: A conceptual analysis*. Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy, 8(1), 79-87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-004-6411-6>.

Feagin, S. L. (1983). *The Pleasures of Tragedy*. American Philosophical Quarterly, 20(1), 95–104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20013989>.