

From *The Body in Pain:* The Making and Unmaking of the World

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The Inexpressibility of Physical Pain

When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. Or alternatively, it may seem as distant as the interstellar events referred to by scientists who speak to us mysteriously of not yet detectable intergalactic screams or of "very distant Seyfert galaxies, a class of objects within which violent events of unknown nature occur from time to time."

Vaguely alarming yet unreal, laden with consequence yet evaporating before the mind because not available to sensory confirmation, unseeable classes of objects such as subterranean plates, Seyfert galaxies, and the pains occurring in other people's bodies flicker before the mind, then disappear.

Physical pain happens, of course, not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of persons who inhabit the world through which we each day make our way, and who may at any moment be separated from us by only a space of several inches. The very temptation to invoke analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies)

is itself a sign of pain's triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons.

Thus when one speaks about "one's own physical pain" and about "another person's physical pain," one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is "effortlessly" grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot *not* be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is "effortless" is *not* grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and, finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the "it" one apprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual "it"). So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiable present is it that "having pain" may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to "have certainty," while for the other person it is so elusive that "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is "to have doubt." Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. "English," writes Virginia Woolf, "which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache. . . . The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry." True of the headache, Woolf's account is of course more radically true of the severe and prolonged pain that may accompany cancer or burns or phantom limb or stroke, as well as of the severe and prolonged pain that may occur unaccompanied by any nameable disease. Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

Though Woolf frames her observation in terms of one particular language, the essential problem she describes, not limited to English, is characteristic of all languages. This is not to say that one encounters *no* variations in the expressibility of pain as one moves across different languages. The existence of culturally stipulated responses to pain – for example, the tendency of one population to vocalize cries; the tendency of another to suppress them – is well documented in anthropological research. So, too, a particular constellation of sounds or words that make it possible to register alterations in the felt-experience of pain in one language may have no equivalent in a second language: thus Sophocles's agonized Philoctetes utters a cascade of *changing* cries and shrieks that in the original Greek are accommodated by an array of formal words (some of them twelve syllables long), but that at least one translator found could only be rendered in English by the uniform syllable "Ah" followed by variations in punctuation (Ah! Ah!!!!). But even if one were to enumerate many additional examples, such cultural differences, taken collectively, would themselves constitute only a very narrow margin of variation and would thus in the end work to expose and confirm the universal sameness of the central problem, a problem that originates much less in the inflexibility of any one language or in the shyness of any one culture than in the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is. [. . .]

Pain and Interrogation

Torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation. The first rarely occurs without the second. As is true of the present period, most historical episodes of torture, such as the Inquisition, have inevitably included the element of interrogation: the pain is traditionally accompanied by "the Question." Ancient history, too, confirms the insistent coupling; strangers caught by the *yaksha* cults in India, for example, were sacrificed after being subjected to a series of riddles. The connection between the physical act and the verbal act, between body and voice, is often misstated or misunderstood. Although the information sought in an interrogation is almost never credited with being a *just* motive for torture, it is repeatedly credited with being the motive for torture. But for every instance in which someone with critical information is interrogated, there are hundreds interrogated who could know nothing of remote importance to the stability or self-image of the regime. Just as within a precarious regime the motive for arrest is often a fiction (the egg-seller's eggs were too small – Greece), and just as the motive for punishing those imprisoned is often a fiction (the men, although locked in their cells, watched and applauded the television report that a military plane had crashed – Chile), so what masquerades as the motive for torture is a fiction.

The idea that the need for information is the motive for the physical cruelty arises from the tone and form of the questioning rather than from its content: the questions, no matter how contemptuously irrelevant their content, are announced, delivered, *as though* they motivated the cruelty, *as if* the answers to them were crucial. Few other moments of human speech so conflate the modes of the interrogatory, the declarative, the imperative, as well as the emphatic form of each of these three, the exclamatory. Each mode implies a radically different relation of speaker to listener, and so the rapid slipping and colliding of these voices and the relations they imply – the independence of the declarative, the uncertain dependence of the interrogatory, the dominance of the imperative, each as though unaccompanied and unqualified by the others, raised to its most absolute in the urgency of the exclamatory – suggest a level of instability so extreme that the questioner might seem involved in the outcome to the very extent

of his being. In fact, when this kind of conflation occurs in private, nonpolitical human speech, and where it is unaccompanied by physical brutality, when, say, a jealous lover or a terrified parent asks questions and asserts the answers in a way that rocks between utterly self-sufficient conviction and a pleading need of the listener's crediting or confirmation, the person may well be involved in the response to the very extent of his or her being. But as the content and context of the torturer's questions make clear, the fact that something is asked *as if* the content of the answer matters does not mean that it matters. It is crucial to see that the interrogation does not stand outside an episode of torture as its motive or justification: it is internal to the structure of torture, exists there because of its intimate connections to and interactions with the physical pain.

Pain and interrogation inevitably occur together in part because the torturer and the prisoner each experience them as opposites. The very question that, within the political pretense, matters so much to the torturer that it occasions his grotesque brutality will matter so little to the prisoner experiencing the brutality that he will give the answer. For the torturers, the sheer and simple fact of human agony is made invisible, and the moral fact of inflicting that agony is made neutral by the feigned urgency and significance of the question. For the prisoner, the sheer, simple, overwhelming fact of his agony will make neutral and invisible the significance of any question as well as the significance of the world to which the question refers. Intense

pain is world-destroying. In compelling confession, the torturers compel the prisoner to record and objectify the fact that intense pain is world-destroying. It is for this reason that while the content of the prisoner's answer is only sometimes important to the regime, the form of the answer, the fact of his answering, is always crucial.

There is not only among torturers but even among people appalled by acts of torture and sympathetic to those hurt, a covert disdain for confession. This disdain is one of many manifestations of how inaccessible the reality of physical pain is to anyone not immediately experiencing it. The nature of confession is falsified by an idiom built on the word "betrayal": in confession, one betrays oneself and all those aspects of the world – friend, family, country, cause – that the self is made up of. The inappropriateness of this idiom is immediately apparent in any non-political context. It is a commonplace that at the moment when a dentist's drill hits and holds an exposed nerve, a person sees stars. What is meant by "seeing stars" is that the contents of consciousness are, during those moments, obliterated, that the name of one's child, the memory of a friend's face, are all absent. But the nature of this "absence" is not illuminated by the word "betrayal." One cannot betray or be false to something that has ceased to exist and, in the most literal way possible, the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one's self and one's world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist.