How people deal with pointless suffering

Scott Samuelson considers seven responses to the age-old mystery.

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In Review

Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering

What Philosophy Can Tell Us about the Hardest Mystery of All

By Scott Samuelson
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There is both danger and benefit in addressing a philosophical problem from multiple angles of vision. The danger is the temptation to make lists without ever approaching a definitive conclusion. The benefit is the expansion of thinking that comes from entertaining a variety of perspectives. Scott Samuelson takes the latter approach in this compelling and highly readable assessment of modern and perennial responses to suffering

Seven Ways isn't a work of Christian theodicy, but it has plenty of applications for people who regard suffering in companionship with Christ as more than a philosophical option. The book is informed by both Christianity (whose central symbol is an instrument of torture) and Buddhism (which understands the necessity of converting suffering into compassion). Samuelson's most immediate context is Oakdale Prison in Coralville, Iowa, where he taught philosophy to inmates who were willing sounding boards for his discussion of "pointless suffering."

The word *pointless* is meant to trigger a response. The world of suffering is in-exhaustible: physical, spiritual, emotional, and cultural agonies touch us all in one way or another. Samuelson begins where considerations of suffering often begin, with the innocence of children. A child who is cruelly abused or trafficked, or who bears the burden of terrible and unexplained deficiencies, leads us ineluctably to ponder the pointlessness of such pain. In a masterpiece of understatement, Samuelson writes that "it's impossible to be human and not to encounter certain sharp difficulties that just don't seem to fit into any normal scheme of goodness or meaning."

Even in faith traditions like Judaism and Christianity, in which suffering has a redemptive character—the restoration of Job, the suffering servant, the cross and resurrection, the hope of eternal life—something of the misery of the suffering resists the meaning that lies at its core. Samuelson treats this rich material allusively rather than directly. I wish he'd given a closer reading of Paul's reflections on suffering, as well as those of later thinkers like Thérèse of Lisieux, Simone Weil, and Martin Luther King Jr. But Samuelson has a wider argument in mind, which culminates in his chapter on the blues as a response to slavery: even when we find meaning in undeserved suffering, that meaning cannot be concentrated into a single point.

Samuelson engages numerous arguments with a spirit of understanding and humility. He shows how John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt passionately crafted responses to the idea that suffering is a punishment for our sins against God. He addresses the utilitarian desire to do the greatest good and discusses the banality of technocratic expertise. He transforms iconic, iron-clad positions into genuine conversations in which he is the convener and his readers are the participants. The sheer quantity of human experience represented in his writing is both impressive and immersive. By weaving in his own experiences of living in a time whose anguish both echoes and transcends that of our predecessors, he keeps readers engaged.

The first three of Samuelson's seven ways are overarching strategies for responding to suffering: *fix it, face it,* and *forget about it*. He is hardest on the approach most of us are likely to favor: fix things and move on. Since the Enlightenment, the explosion of human knowledge in the sciences has produced a revulsion to all forms of pain and a visceral resolve to end human suffering. Medically, the improvements have been great; politically, in terms of war and weaponry, not so great; and ecologically, in terms of the planet's health, a disaster in the making. Personally, I am thankful for the fix-it response to human suffering. My surgeon's engineering approach to my body has certainly worked for me.

But Samuelson worries that the attitude that informs our technology has the potential to override the mystery of suffering and even threaten our humanity. He asks, What are the assured results of our attempts to wipe out suffering? The war on terror has led to mass surveillance and the curtailment of liberties. The war on crime and the war on drugs have led to the incarceration of 2.2 million citizens (and a recidivism rate of almost 70 percent). The war on disease has led to the prolongation of life beyond its endurable limits.

Samuelson identifies the face-it option with religion, art, and the humanities. "At our most inspired, we transform unjust suffering into profound art, culture, and knowledge, and elevate death and injustice into glittering places in visions of beauty, adventure, and salvation." His response to the two options—the technological *fix it* and the philosophical or religious *face it*—is the embrace of that which is constitutive of our very humanity, our suffering. This is the paradox at the heart of religion and life itself. What we cannot cure or solve, we absorb into a deeper truth about ourselves. This is not to sentimentalize suffering but to recognize it for what it is. Samuelson's students in Oakdale Prison seem to understand, for

they have come to view incarceration as their particular mode of facing up to reality.

The forget-about-it option is the unarticulated response of the indifferent majority. We have no control over the suffering of others (and perhaps no interest in it), so we simply ignore it. What can we do, really, for those upon whom a bridge collapses in Taiwan, or for the child soldiers in South Sudan, or for those whose homes, hospitals, and schools were obliterated on Grand Bahama Island? We simply visit other islands in the Caribbean, follow our favorites on Twitter and Instagram, and tend our own garden of grievances—and in so doing, Samuelson writes, we "lose our humanity."

Samuelson opens up fascinating conversations around four other ways of addressing pointless suffering. He finds in the book of Job the conclusion that human suffering sets God free to be God. Stoicism's brave embrace of the way things are, he suggests, is connected to the belief that true freedom comes from within. Confucianism understands suffering as the agent of our true humanity and thus a challenge to live empathetically.

Samuelson concludes that pointless suffering is often expressed in great art, with the life and music of jazz master Sidney Bechet as his chief exhibit. "There is no refuge from the human condition. Thou shalt face thy suffering with style." Samuelson asks: Does great art emerge from suffering or redeem it? The answer is yes.

The book's title initially made me think of other numerical works by artists: William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which is a classic of literary criticism; Wallace Stevens's mystical "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"; and my favorite, Paul Simon's *50 Ways to Leave Your Lover*. It's not a coincidence that these authors are all poets. They are not interested in a comprehensive solution. Each in his own way is riffing on some corner of the same mystery. In this light, Samuelson's Seven Ways is in good company.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Pointless suffering."