



# A Theory of Suffering and Healing: Toward a Loving Justice

Michael J. DeValve<sup>1,2</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is the creation of a theory of suffering and healing. This “ontological” theory is intended to serve as a foundation for the development of justice-related responses to harm (i.e., crime and victimization, inter alia) as part of the author’s broader writing on justice as love. Drawing on Buddhist and Christian theological wisdom along with the author’s own contemplations of self, this ontological model is offered without any assumption of applicability to anyone; readers are invited to assess its usefulness for themselves and to use or discard accordingly. The model consists of several moving parts: at the core of the model is a troika of ideas: the child within, the ocean of bliss and the theater analogy. In addition, four interrelated courses of concerns work tidally and percussively within and around the troika. If this endocosmic model resonates with readers, the hope is that it would inspire its use for the creation of other ideas and practices related to the granular, concrete, dyadic endless, endless and skilled realization of a loving justice praxis.

## It was an Impossible Thing, After All...

Wasn’t it? Incipient criminology was tasked (or tasked itself) with revealing the *whys* of crime so that we may be free of it, or at least to diminish the amount of it we were made to suffer. Investigation into why some humans do horrible things and why others do not has followed an ambagious if organic path over the course of the past two-and-a-half centuries. Such a barometer as this, it would seem, only stands to reason; from a scientific perspective, any theory worth its salt should be able to predict both positive and negative states of the phenomenon of interest (e.g., Habermas, 1974). It would be natural, perhaps, to begin such an inquiry into self: contemplate the times we have harmed and times we have been hurt, and then go from there. But such a thing would be both meaningless and unscientific. Anything discovered within would not be generalizable science, of course, but clearly, we are not the problem. Only those who are above reproach can have insights into crime. No, the clear choice is to externalize inquiry and focus on seeking to reveal that which is hidden within *them*, even if doing so is as sound as studying Mars to make statements about Venus.

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✉ Michael J. DeValve  
mdevalve@bridgew.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Criminal Justice, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA, USA

<sup>2</sup> 131 Summer Street, Bridgewater, MA 02325, USA

For theory to be a worthy companion to empirical pursuits, it should be able to account for variations in observed phenomena. Empiricism is king, and theories that unify more observed phenomena are, by definition, better theories. But therein lies the issue, at least in criminology, because concern about empirical referents is and could only ever be an interim step toward a truly foundational and *verstehen* grasp of the vast and nuanced topography of human harm and healing, and what wisdoms can facilitate the transformation of harm into healing (see, e.g., Young, 2011). It would seem the king has no clothes.

The *why* we seek will reveal itself when we cease the pursuit of the *why* altogether (DeValve, 2020; Dogen, 1985; Watts, 2018). The grasping itself for insight all but ensures calamity. The truest and deepest currents of harm and healing are, or should be, the overriding concern of criminology, but the seeking of a concrete *why* often reifies the thing itself; we become ossified when limberness is essential, and the thing we seek so earnestly escapes, fleet of foot, into the underbrush.

And *of course* it does; is it altogether cynical to smile at our folly? That collateral path mentioned above, the one traced by criminologists, is not without its partial insights, not without wisdom worthy of celebrating. Beccaria (1764/1986) proclaimed that ineffective punishment was the definition of tyranny. For all his madness and “homespun commonplace,” (e.g., Geis, 1955) Bentham (1789/1948) understood that people do things that seem to them to serve perceived interests and that it pays to understand their valuations. Sutherland (1947) saw wisely that crime is in essence like any other human activity. Merton (1938) paid homage to the pain that arises from promises broken. Matza (1964; see also Currie, 2010) recognized that conventional culture was struck through with veins of subterranean complexities and that formative intelligence tends to strain at set boundaries. It takes the least modification to turn some kinds of strain theory (e.g., Agnew, 1992, 2013) into theories of suffering; substituting the word “pain” for “strain” points the way (see DeValve, Garland, & Wright, 2018). For all these insights, though, we remain on the far bank from a justice worthy of our children.

## A New (?) Polaris

My aim here is to offer the core of a theory of human suffering and healing as an enlargement upon earlier theories related to justice and love (DeValve, 2015, 2017; DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018) and on the thought of others (e.g., Buber, 1970/1996; Merton, 1972; Nhat Hanh, 2001, 1987/2005, 2005; Pepinsky & Quinney, 1991; Quinney, 2006, 2008; Tillich, 1967, 1957/2009; Weil, 1962, 2015). This theory is not a theory of crime in the same sense that so many others are monological treatments of an aspect of criminology. It is not intended to be tested empirically in the same fashion as theories of crime from the twentieth century have been tested. It is a glimmer of an ontology of a kind, but not one that seeks a place behind and below Being. Neither does it seek to insist on a universal immanence; it arises from my own contemplation of self and my contemplation of the contemplations of others, offered here to you, for you to determine whether it resonates with you. It is intended to offer a nucleus for inspiration and a framework for interrogation that can lead to the crafting of wise, meaningful, effective and compassionate interventions against suffering and for the facilitation of healing and wisdom. Any other use, successful or not, is unintended. This theory must reckon, as Habermas (1974) charges a project like this must, with the topography of what is concrete and real in terms of how humans currently live and think and act, and it must also rise to point toward what can be, to what our

children urge of us for the sake of *their* children. The purpose of this theory is to provide fodder for others' thinking, to give even more of a place for others to pick up and take over the justice-as-love line of thought, to craft for future generations practices and systems and institutions that *heal and emancipate*, in sharp contrast to the systems and institutions over which we have taken stewardship.

The offered theoretical core is not something wholly new or even all that creative. It is a reorienting, a rejustification, really, of our ideas and efforts in unison. It is, at bottom, little more than a course correction toward a new Polaris, albeit a significant course correction that, incidentally, also redefines the very idea of the ship in which we ride. That new Polaris, of course, is love (DeValve, 2015).

## The Nature of the Task

There is a project before us: to reflect and to act in ways that reveal and observe suffering and that seek to transmute the suffering seen into insight, healing and wisdom. This grand project I understand to be the national project of zemiology, but such a project is a land with many varied territories, peoples, discourses and perspectives. The corpus of theory that informs it pays homage to myriad discourses, cultures, times, and the epistemics must be likewise agile, but also remain untethered to misguided thinking about causation in the sentient compass. Musing about where zemiology might best be located in the larger scholarly landscape, Pemberton asserted that “[i]f the social harm perspective is to offer a broader and more holistic approach to harm, then it must develop a rigorous notion of the human essence. Otherwise it will provide only partial and incomplete analyses of harm” (Pemberton, 2008: pp. 75–76). The location of the zemiological project should not be rooted to a home discipline, but instead must live in all of them: the arts, faith, sciences, humanities, engineering, social sciences and the rest. Without the broadest possible intellectual, artistic and spiritual footprint, our capacity to confront and transform pain into wisdom will remain incomplete, and in this, it will retain a jot of the old brutality.

The topography and nuance of human suffering is vast and expansive, but our first essential (in both meanings of the word) task is to agree on the meaning of suffering. I take as axiomatic the Buddha's observation about the ubiquity of suffering, or *dukkha* in Buddhist thought (e.g., Dogen, 1985; Watts, 2018; Nhat Hanh, 1999, 2001) from appearances, it seems that we hurt in a thousand and more ways from a thousand and more affronts. Our suffering appears to change subtly even as we watch. Our suffering results from energies without and from choices made and voices that reside within. We are co-creators of our suffering. Shit happens, as they say, but at least as often we are our own cruelest oppressor.

Suffering, though, is not wholly and incontrovertibly a thing to be militated against, mostly because such a thing as eradicating sentient suffering is an absolute impossibility (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1999). We, each of us, will hurt; each of us will die. None of us, as they say, is getting out of here alive. But suffering can be a gateway into insight when we choose so. We are co-creators of our suffering, but just as surely, we are co-creators of insight, healing and emancipation. The attachments that generate *dukkha* are not always to be eschewed; as humans, attachments are essential, even defining and transforming (e.g., Chodron, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 2001). As social beings, the others around us make up our house of mirrors, revealing self as understood from without. Indeed, the very attachments to others, themselves also nodes in the Net of Indra, are themselves key to insight and the wisdom and healing that lie beyond (Nhat Hanh, 2008). The transformation of suffering into wisdom must be our core aim. The *eradication* of suffering is not a thing to be

sought, as such a thing is not possible. Understanding suffering, tilting with it perhaps and minimizing it all are noble if incomplete endeavors. Learning from suffering specifically with regard to emancipation, though, is the center lane of the path to sentient flourishing. A first shift in scholarly focus, then, must be from a consideration of harm's etiology (i.e., its correlates, effectiveness of preventive strategies) toward a consideration of harm's lived experience, its honoring and the nurturing that transmutes that hurt into fertile insight and robust healing. We must learn to forget the search for emancipation from pain on pain's terms; the emancipation from partialness, from hindered actualization and from meaningless suffering beckons in every instance of hurt, grand or tiny, and it is to such emancipation that we must turn our concerted attention. Meaningless suffering buckles ribs like straw and should impel us to higher and yet higher striving for insights that enable us to snatch healing from the ether by insisting on loving meaning after the fact.

We do ourselves good service to recognize two distinct streams to this shift in scholarly focus. The first stream is concerned with the responses to harms; understanding how humans can answer the cry of pain to which Simone Weil so ardently points (e.g., Bell, 1998; Weil, 1962): "Why am I being hurt?" This first part is informed by a considerable amount of extant thought and research that treats in detail how humans can confront the pain experienced by other humans and by non-human sentient beings. Doing *something* is not always better than doing nothing. The response to a cry of pain is, if founded on the actors' need to feel engaged (e.g., DeValve, 2020), at best inert and at worst revictimizing; sometimes simply being present with a hurting other is the single best (and often most demanding) option. I have thought of this first part of the shift as being essentially *ameliorative* in nature, although it is also revelatory in ways, too. The second stream of the shift in focus relates to the rather more daunting project of facilitating the cultivation of loving wisdom among members of the human community. This second part is concerned with ways by which she who is broken, intoxicated, compromised, lost to fear, greed or ignorance, can be reclaimed, reconciled (e.g., Krishnamurti, 2004). This second part is somewhat less familiar within the social sciences, but it has analogs in the humanities and in religions. Christians, for example, contemplate soteriology, the study of the means of salvation (e.g., Barth, 2004). Such a dialogue is made even more extraordinary, more radiant, with polarizing doctrines decentered and the question modified slightly. Instead of worrying about how to secure one's own salvation, the core concern for this second part of the shift are how to achieve the salvation or rejustification of another and to establish that priority as a driving concern for every member of the sentient community. This second part of the project is, in my thinking, *emancipatory* in nature.

Bearing resemblance to some phenomenological systems of critique, this theoretical project must necessarily be aware of itself, attentive to its own arising, its own energy and inertia. As Habermas says of historical materialism, this theory should "occup[y] itself with reflection on the interrelationships of its origin and with anticipation of those of its application, and thus [see] itself as a necessary catalytic moment within the social complex of life which it analyzes" (Habermas, 1974: 2).

### In Furtherance of Love

This effort to offer a meaningful and coherent treatment of suffering, motivated by an encompassing interest in transforming that suffering into insight and thus into wisdom and healing, must have a few particular components in order to be workable. First, it needs to be ecumenical and in the broadest possible meaning (i.e., not merely ecumenically

Christian, of course) while at the same time rich with the wisdoms of faith (e.g., Tillich, 1957/2009, 1967) and of the heart (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1987/2005), and not be rooted merely in reasoning. Second, it needs to be flexible and adaptive to a variety of settings and experiences without being falsely ossified and serving its own end over the ends of wisdom. Third, and without doubt most vitally, it needs to be meaningfully capable not only of supporting human scientific theorizing and inquiry (although not necessarily human scientific empiricism), but also capable of working in *direct* ways to help humans transmute pain into well-being. Fourth, the theory that results needs to be a coherent thing, but it must be capable of realizing, expanding and traversing itself as the biomass of healing wisdom flexes. It must be free to navigate beyond itself; it must be a bounded thing that cares little for its own skin. Fifth, of course, emancipation must be Polaris and keel, connecting metaphysical musings to granular and practical relevance. As a result, it must operate with a “transtemporal” understanding of past injustices (see Bevernage, 2015).

It follows, then, that such a theory will have several articulated moving parts, each part adaptable to context and individual particulars. The very identification of parts as such, however, runs the risk of reifying ideas into constructs, and thus ossifying them into irrelevance and dishonesty.

Again, this theory is not intended to be empirically testable in the traditional sense. It is intended to guide thought operating in more local ways related to particular settings related to harm and healing. It is intended to be used as a tool to guide thinking about how to engage with suffering at a local level, so that it might be turned into something more than restoration. What we learn in the local iterations of healing then becomes useful for revising and honing this theory. This thinking, then, is about guiding other thinking intended to interact directly with real instances of pain to transform that pain into healing and wisdom.

Theorizing as an endeavor most often involves a pursuit of context that is context-invariant but that ends up being context-embedded. Obviously, theorists tend to want to offer a framework of meaningfulness that has timeless value and standalone strength; unfortunately, even the most exciting and explosive thinkers are inherently enmeshed in their own social contexts. Each of these three context-seeking points in the theorizing process ((1) seeking context for meaning with an idea that (2) transcends and traverses context, but in the end is (3) fully a function of the theorists’ context) is understandable in local terms; the meaning we seek regarding the things that haunt or inspire us is invariably a function of the things that concern us ultimately (e.g., Tillich, 1967). The first context-related point is driven by the need to understand the human surround, at least presumably for the sake of the understanding itself. The theoretical map made is overlaid over a part of the universe to determine the map’s fidelity. The third context-related point works in conjunction with the cartographic project tied to the first point: theorizing is both directly and indirectly welded to the things that matter to us. We map parts of the universe that are for us interesting or important. Why and how we map as well are as locally particular and personal as what we map, and all are understandable as expressions of our ultimate (and perhaps also our preliminary) concerns. Tension arises, though, between the second and third context-related points: theorizing is inherently and unavoidably human even as it stretches to speak to a wider audience. Still, theorists seem often to seek a kind of cartography that leaves precious context behind to remain relevant into the future, or to be relevant outside of a local setting. This second context point is not purely about the robustness of the resulting theory, but instead is more about the reputation of the theorist. Although the craving for a bird’s eye view of human topography is not at all devoid of merit, seeking to be seen as one who perceives beyond the horizon can be a function of the preliminary concern with self and with legacy, and thus be rather less about divining human truth than about fame among

future readers. Instead of seeking theory crafted as if photographed from a drone, my effort here is to mesh extant ideas, weaving them together into a theory of suffering and healing that already exists in human spaces; over time and with tending perhaps it can become the thing that guides wisdom. Instead of a satellite's-eye view, then, I seek to co-build a tower, its foundations deep in the firmament of human wisdom; the view it will give is a far wider vista.

Essential to the task of helping to create a human place where a truest (scilicet, loving) justice is a regular activity and constant reality, where it can be taken as granted that love guides human institutional action in all instances of suffering, that we facilitate something of a tuning of awareness to the parts of ourselves that enable a connection to that idea of justice, is to inquire as to the nature of our ultimate concerns, of our truest home. Fairness is, as Rawls (1972/1999) has so convincingly shown us, something most of us can grasp intuitively with little more than a simple thought experiment; incomplete though fairness is as an idea for justice, it resonates with us, and it is not without its merit (although we will see later how fairness as the organizing principle of justice can become a lethal idea). Fairness has its place, but it is not at the taproot of justice. Stoplights dispense perfect fairness, but we never hesitate to overrule them with sirens when need requires.

Finding and dwelling in that space within us that is most responsive to a loving justice is revealed in Buber's (1970/1996) twofold understanding of the human world. I-It relations, like fairness as Rawls (1972/1999) has us understand it, are necessary but far from sufficient relations. Needed, then, is a technique of regarding, a concretized means by which we can tune in to I-You relations in key moments, like moments of decision. We need, in essence, to regard and be consonant with our truest selves.

## Desiderata

One of the missing components of these fundamentals is an orientation of things relative and things absolute. Einstein's insight into relativity was powered in part by the realization that time and space were not absolute as Newton had assumed, but instead that the speed of light was the thing that did not vary. Other things, like time and space, coiled, stretched and bent around the one absolute idea. The criminological analogy likely would treat empirical knowledge and the idea of law as a direct and undilute expression of universal values as Newton's time and space. These, however, have been decentered by critical criminologists for many years (e.g., Pepinsky, 1980; Young, 2011). What seems to have been missing is the absolute, that notion of an imperturbable force that defines the cones of meaning (past) and possibility (future), found here in the present moment. Although it lay before us all the time in some of the most cathedralesque works of wisdom, that human analog to the speed of light is love. Love is the fifth fundamental force holding the universe together; it may not work on all matter in the same way, but it is gravity for sentience. Kant's Copernican revolution (see, e.g., Creighton, 1913) placed the world in the mind. The moment before us represents a similar reorientation of all human collective endeavor toward love, a shift perhaps even more seismic a revolution than Kant's. One difference for us in this place is that this most recent reorientation, the one toward love as organizing principle of action, is one that has been present with us, in us all, all along; it is merely an awakening belonging to none and to all, and nothing more.

Another component of a theory of suffering is the idea of emptiness, or at least a recognition that discreteness of concepts not only fails to reveal, but also occludes, key insights. Criminological contemplations that treat crime and related phenomena in mechanistic

ways (in Habermas' meaning of the word "mechanistic"), operating from a causal model inspired by the physical sciences, are doomed to mediocrity and partiality. *In the year that I was born*, Quinney (1970/2001) wrote compellingly about the impotence of an understanding of social cause borrowed from physical sciences. He identified meaning as one of the premises for his social reality of crime. Because meaningfulness and possibility of a thing among humans is a function of social reality of a thing in its fullest context, then we can, as Quinney urges, understand causation in a substantive fashion; "part of a social reality that is constructed by human beings, and distinct from the causal constructs formulated as methodological devices by the physical scientist" (Quinney, 2006: 69).

Quinney's later peacemaking writings are in no way dissonant with his contemplations in 1970; indeed, the two strata of his writing are complementary, should be viewed as such and should be used in tandem. Quinney's later writings centered ideas derived from Buddhist thought; *dukkha*, the nature of mind, the Four Noble Truths (*inter alia*) all played central roles in his thinking related to justice as the way of peace (Pepinsky & Quinney, 1991). The Buddhist concept of no-self (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1999, 2001) figures in prominently. No-self is the notion that self is an illusion, and yet that the self does *not*-not-exist. No-self is another way of talking about the idea of "emptiness"; all things (dharma) are "empty" of a separate existence, and yet all things are discernibly present. I am, and yet I am not very much at the same time. Thich Nhat Hanh (2008; see also, e.g., 1987/2005) analogizes emptiness and no-self in terms of waves on an ocean. A wave is clearly present, with a shape and life course of its own, yet it never stops being water, and soon returns to non-wave-ness, never having ever ceased being fully water. No-self as an idea represents an *existential* challenge to positivist, mechanistic thought about harm, and it represents a *foundational* insight into the human process of healing.

The immediate danger of our folly is only too real, too present. Causality is king in I-It relations (Buber, 1970/1996: 100), but it is its own kind of tyranny for beings capable of (indeed craving) navigating between I-It and I-You relations. Science thrives and law excels in I-It environs, but it is precisely in their fecundity once coronated that they fail us. "[I]n sick ages it happens that the It-world, no longer irrigated and fertilized by the living currents of the You-world, severed and stagnant, becomes a gigantic swamp phantom and overpowers" us (Buber, 1970/1996: 102). The pursuit of best practices in justice service is itself a tyranny, a violence; often it is a search for the most efficient strategy for achieving some end, which is nothing more than a cowardly and cynical euphemism for achieving "the very least we can do" for others. "Wise, masterful fate which, as long as it was attuned to the abundance of meaning in the cosmos, held sway over all causality, has become transformed into demonic absurdity and has collapsed into causality" (Buber, 1970/1996: 103).

There are several implications from the use of a substantive understanding of causation, and from the insight of no-self. First, if causation is not linear and directional, "cause" and "effect" as such become meaningless in physical scientific terms. Causes can follow effects just as effects follow causes. What is more, causal forces and effects can coexist in the very same femtosecond.

Second, it follows from the idea of no-self (e.g., Chodron, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 1999) that subject-object relations taken as a whole are nonsensical as understood currently. Because of emptiness, there is no subject as such, and only object exists. Yet the subject is *not*-not-present to some degree (e.g., Krishnamurti, 2004; Watts, 2018), whereas the object is also an empty no-self of her own. In essence, then, the distinction between subject and object is only fleetingly meaningful, even in the gritty and worn-leather context of justice.

Third, truth and non-truth operate in an increasingly intricate flamenco dance. Logical exclusion simply does not work among, between or within humans as it does in a physical

sense. Things in the human world can exist in superposition, can be and not be, can be both being and becoming. Fury can coexist with compassion, self and no-self are both absolutely the case, something like forgiveness can be a categorical imperative and a gift of grace at the very same time. (DeValve, 2015). The classic debate between Foucault and Chomsky has an easy resolution: both fellows were correct, and neither saw the scene fully. Recently, colleagues and I (DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018) asserted that there is such a thing as *human truth*, a reality, a presence, a state of awareness, really, a thing akin to Brahman (Watts, 2018: pp. 86–87) that reflects our inner stillness and outer obligations in the highest state of consciously driven action. Human truth is the sum total of experience, the full view out of the window, the concerns that purchase us, the meanings that hold us.

Some clarification is needed, though. It cannot be gainsaid that there are things that are repeatedly verifiable (e.g., the boiling point of water at sea level under normal conditions), just as there is absolute and whole-cloth falsity (e.g., attendance claims about an inauguration, say, that was not in fact heavily attended), but these sorts of things, scientifically falsifiable events and bizarre, rhetorical Pravdaesque assertions, must be set aside for other (one is tempted to say lesser) debates. For our purpose here, the idea of human truth does not bear resemblance to either Popper's falsification or to self-loathing-fueled delusion. Neither of these is remotely akin to human truth as we have intended, even if they are a result of an individual's truth rendered wretched by suffering. Instead, human truth is closely akin to the truth Gandhi intended in his contemplations of satyagraha. The truth that justified, even compelled, the technology of nonviolent resistance has at least three identifiable parts, the third being a consequence of the other two. First, each of us is a Child of God, a vessel of divine flame, a nondual iteration of flawed perfection, existing on our own terms yet also indistinguishable from the Divine Arc (e.g., Kierkegaard, 2009). Second, as beings we are endemically and inescapably mutual; we belong to each other and to all that is, try as we might to shroud or alter that reality (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 2001; 2008). As a function of the first two parts, when a sentient being suffers, the rest of us are called to action of a kind. These three components: divinity, mutuality and the duty to nurture, are at the core of human truth as I intend it.

## The Theory

My theory of my consciousness, or at least the parts of it that I can see, has three parts and four "courses." One part relates to who I understand I am at the most foundational level, which I call "the child within" or "The Heart of the Little One." A second part is an attempt to iterate my understanding of human lived experience as I experience it which I call "the theater analogy." The third part, related to the other two but in ways distinct, is my experience of the ground of my consciousness, or "the ocean of bliss." These three parts interact and interpenetrate each other but operate in distinct ways as facets of consciousness regarded from different perspectives. I understand them as different bits of phenomenological anatomy, for the lack of a more precise term, but naturally these three things inter-exist.

At work with the theorizing project itself, then, is a layered, precincted but also partly individualized lattice of concerns that drive humans. We theorize for pure and impure reasons, and as a result, our theories are at times beautiful and wretched, sometimes at the very same time. At least in this sense, the process of theorizing resembles other human activities that both reveal and create leitmotifs of meaning and of choice. In this theorizing



project, seeking truth beyond in the process of inquiring within, I will do my level best not only to achieve clarity regarding the theory I propose, but also about the process at work within me as I contemplate. The process of theorizing, then, becomes the theory itself.

I understand this lattice of concerns as having at least four kinds of threads or courses. These four courses are not presented in a prepotent order, although I tend to assume that earlier courses possess a deeper, more tidal influence on us relative to other, later courses. That said, however, when more proximate courses align, reinforce or resonate with more subterranean ones, the distinctions among them become of scarce little importance.

## Human Truth

As this project is in furtherance of a comprehensive theory of suffering and salving, harm and transformation, it will need to operate in the interstices among several epistemic modalities, ultimately working to take from each that which it needs. Human heartbreak is a thing that happens within, and so phenomenological ideas and epistemes are necessary. But because pain brims over into the distances between us, phenomenology or other contemplation of interiority alone could never be sufficient. Likewise, the epistemes of human sciences offer a considerable wealth of insights into the consequences of harmful action, but they can never be sufficient on their own. Faith operates like music, bending out the walls of the basilica and warming the icy and barren places within us, but even mighty music alone cannot be leveraged for the creation of a perfect human community. It seems almost trite to observe that human truth is, almost invariably, a thing that defies any one discourse from appreciation in fullness. That elusiveness, that ethereality, is itself reason to celebrate, as it is in part the endless and endless pursuit of human truth (e.g., DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018; DeValve, 2020) itself that is the very answer we seek.

Human truth emerges through how each of us takes in the moments of our lives and how we weave meaning from those moments. The garment of meaning itself is what I mean by human truth. It is a garment that is inherently sentient (meaning that it is a field of sentient—not only human—interaction and co-creation), in ways discernibly human, and also uniquely each our own. Our own capacities, our fortunes and misfortunes, our reason, our pains, joys, circumstances all become knitted into a garment that is both us and not us, both ours and shared. This is what I mean by human truth. A song, for example, or a date, a smell, a place, etc., might have no particular meaning for some of us, or it may mean the world to others of us. Our lives become bent and woven around these moments and the meanings we fashion from them according to our capacities, needs, questions, fears, desires. Those meanings, played in our own personal co-creating Carnegie Halls, reveal our ultimate concerns (e.g., Tillich, 1967), and tie us to the tiniest moments, moments that lived and vanished in a breath. Those meanings are subject to change, of course, as capacities grow, as coping or contemplative bandwidths wax and wane. But human truth is secondary, really, because it is the result of a substrate consciousness, a “place” referenced by some philosophers and not a few people of faith. This substrate consciousness I take to be my truest self. Some Buddhists might see this substrate as identical with the “ocean of bliss” (e.g., Thrangu, 2007). I am very drawn to the Buddhist understanding, mostly because I have experienced something this intimate vastness myself during meditation. Of course, that also means that each of us can experience it, too. I take this cloudless sky, this boundless boundedness within as being more than a place of vast dwelling, of dwelling in vastness. An image from a poem entitled *Sweetness* by Stephen Dunn (1995/2021) seems to fit it amply for me:

“...the world shrunk  
to mouth size,  
hand size, and never seeming small.”

It is a place that coexists and interpenetrates the resident, that *is*, the resident (e.g., Watts, 2018). The resident (i.e., me, in this case) also has a particular nature, almost a persona. This ocean of bliss, coupled with this persona, which I call “the child within,” I understand to be my *eidōs*. At the risk of dividing the whole against itself, I understand that this ocean of bliss is the arc of sentient divinity. And I understand human truth to be coiled around both the ocean of bliss and the child within, and yet at times indistinguishable from them, just as they are from each other.

The persona, or “child within,” is the part of us that calls us to loving action in that honoring of the divine in us and in each instance of sentience. Human justice must necessarily respond to all these portions of each of us: the ocean of bliss demands from us a kind of formal regard, the “thou” meaning of Buber’s *Du* (see Kaufman’s forward in Buber, 1970/1996: 14); the persona to which I will turn in a moment, demands from others an intimate and unqualified tenderness, and corresponds to the intimate “you” of Buber’s *Du*. Human truth frames and reframes meaning, acting in ways like a conduit between divine flames, all playing out in the theaters we carry.

This child dwells in a theater, a place where meaning is made and remade, where the only actor is the audience and playwright, and the world beyond the endocosm co-drafts the script. Human truth plays out on the stage, with the child as actor and audience, against the back wall of the theater, which is the ocean of bliss.

## The Child Within

The being—the persona I mentioned earlier—that experiences these tensions and resolutions, these four courses moving and interrelating across lived contexts, is a child. To be sure, an adult human is not a child in a literal sense; the average adult human has considerable coping capacities for navigating fears, uncertainty, unfairness, aggression and the rest, but executive function aside, the core being that navigates life’s tensions and craves love’s resolutions is the child we were, and indeed always shall be. Coping apparatuses accrue with experience and are weathered by age, but they are little more than tools. Those tools operate effectively to aid in our navigation through turbulent and tempest-tossed waters, but they are not inseparable parts of the actualized adult. In moments of great joy, great fear or great loss, the child becomes evident once again, stepping out from behind adult artifices.

The idea of an inner child as intended here is nothing like Jung’s *puer aeternus*. Or Adorno’s child’s question (Adorno, 1966/2007). Instead, it is inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh’s artful and tender portrayal of human suffering (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 2008). Within each of us, Nhat Hanh reminds us gently, is a wounded child. This child is us and is also endemic to us, regardable by us from a remove. Often, we ignore, even actively estrange ourselves from, that child; regarding the wounded child can be painful, sometimes too painful for conscious effort. Commonly, Nhat Hanh observes, we think it best to ignore the wounded child because of the pain and shame that comes from regarding her can be so formidable, making it seem like avoidance is an effective coping strategy.

One essential component of Nhat Hanh’s thought generally (e.g., 1987/2005, 2001, 2008), but closely related to an understanding of the child within, is the idea of Inter-being—in simplest terms that sentient beings inter-exist with their environments, that

we rely upon each other for our continuations and, more, that our distant ancestors as well as our distant progeny live within us in the present moment—it stands to reason that the wounded child to which Nhat Hanh gestures is also understood to be more than merely an iteration of the child each of us was at one time. Instead, it may be more aptly understood to be a meta-child, perhaps, an essence of us that is both of us and of those others who compose us.

This child is my *eidōs*; it is an operable, semi-discrete component of me (and I believe, of each of us), but one that is also regardable from a distance by the self, one that can be acted upon even as it acts as part of the central collective actor that is a sentient being, rendered in the theater each of us carries with us. The child bears our wounds *to us, as us*, but she also reminds us (if we let her) of our belonging to others, and of our capacity to regard and transform injury into something wiser, grander. The child is both object and subject; it is both the child each of us was as well as an aspect of us that we can regard in semi-removed and immutable terms. I do not take it that a close examination of the phenomenology of the child within in terms of subject-object relations promises much fruit, however. In terms of the subject-object relations that *do* interest me, as justice is most fruitfully understood to be dyadic, local, personal and granular in nature (e.g., Author & Brightman, 2018), the Child Within should be understood to be the graviton of justice. It is the thing in us that not only demands justice but also inspires it. It draws out the shout in protest and also sits at the feet of the quietest of voices within. It is that in us that hurts and asks for redress and at the same time it is that part of us moved to tend the wounds of another. It is simple in the most majestic sense of the word. For Levinas (1998) it was the Face of the Other, for me that face is not meaningfully distinguishable from the child within.

But in more concrete terms, in moments of great joy or fear, or in our agonal moments, the child within, The Heart of the Little One, becomes plain and can no longer be hidden. During the COVID-19 pandemic there were *many* gut-wrenching stories of last moments, often moments shared via cell phone or with health professionals. In many of these agonal moments, the child within becomes only too evident. I am simply unwilling to pull together a series of such sickeningly heartbreaking tales to illustrate the point; doing so would cheapen them and defile the argument with instrumental agenda. Tales of physicians and nurses being present with people in their very last moments before intubation, simply terrified as they wrestle for every breath; these tales are there if you need to hear them. I don't.

The Heart of the Little One is our lived center, it is that part of us that wonders; that grieves, that misses the nurturing touch of a parent or soulmate; it is the part of us that issues Weil's seminal cry, "Why am I being hurt?" (Bell, 1998), while drawing us to another who hurts, like poison is drawn from a wound. The Heart of the Little One is our center of eidetic gravity, but as it is also interpenetrated with that which has been and that which will become, it is not wholly ours alone. It is *fully* us in the truest and most complete sense, in no small measure because it is not *discretely* us. That the Heart can be regarded as an object by the self in no way diminishes the Heart's centrality and totality. Every sentient being, I assert, has at her core an innocent, beautiful child. Often that child is injured, but that child is also noble and capable of speaking in clearest terms through the artifices of adulthood. It is the thing in us that asks for justice from others and inspires it from ourselves. The Heart of the Little One is the graviton and engine of, not to mention reason for, justice.

## The Theater Analogy

For humans, things are as they are according to the *meaning* any given being ascribes to them. A rifle with a rose in the barrel is a flowerpot. Kind of. A sword bent to a new task is a ploughshare. Maybe. The truer nature of a thing for us is less a function of its chemical or physical composition than it is of the meaning which we grant it. More, meaning stacks upon meaning; the rifle above might still retain rifley aspects, and in so doing carry *that much more* meaning as a flowerpot. But this granting of meaning is, in the main, a quasi-intentional action. Meaning-making presupposes continued choice-making. *Understanding and helping to guide wholesome choice-making and meaning-making, then, is the lever by which justice institutions can directly impact the quality of sentient justice.*

The meaning making project each of us tends lifelong is referred to as “the theater analogy” here. Meaning is the stock in trade in a theater: audience and performers exchange a dialogue of meaning from well before they assemble together in the room. Meaning shifts in each moment; props clutter the wings until they are carried on stage and become vital. The scene over, props become toys again. The audience may not realize to what degree they are also the performers; hopefully the performers are aware of the degree to which they are dependent upon the audience, the degree to which they *are* audience. And then there’s the building itself: ornate lobby, orchestra, pit, mezzanine, Vaudeville decor, legs, wings, lights, boxes, fly-space. There is no theater, of course, but the theater in and between us is where meaning is made and remade.

## The Ocean of Bliss

It is a difficult thing to describe the sensation of the ocean of bliss, as it must be experienced anew, not only for oneself, but for each of us anew every time. Watts (2018) reminds us that there is no secret, hidden space behind consciousness like the one seemingly pursued by the phenomenologists. Seeking totality of a thing by the thing itself is like trying to eat your own mouth. Thrangu (2007) offers something of a useful image for understanding this place or state within us. Regular thought is regarded as akin to salt water. It is laden with minerals that make it unpotable. Still, when the sun shines, the water evaporates and eventually falls as delicious and life-sustaining rain. The pure water that falls is the bare attention of mind experienced as the ocean of bliss.

## Four Courses

*First*, fundamental questions, like the theodicean question, or like the meaning of our own existence, or where we came from and what happens to us after death, all operate in deepest waters, far offshore, moving silently, massively. I refer to this as the abyssal course. *Second*, greed, fear and ignorance, as sources or roots (*samudaya*) of suffering (*dukkha*), operate as generalized and overlapping forces as both cause and effect. This second course can visit itself upon us in a fashion akin to filters or tints that occlude, magnify or frame suffering in both edifying and revelatory, or dishonest and destructive ways. Because the focus of this course is on the identifiable roots (*samudaya*) of suffering, I call this course the *samudaya* course. *Third*, there is the course related to a deeper tension from feelings of estrangement, arising in part from how we navigate the first two

courses. We often hurt but we may not even know why; often that pain is the result of a primordial sense of estrangement and/or the craving for reconciliation. Such feelings often result from unwholesome attachments or ideas (i.e., “the Rogue’s List of Lethal Ideas,” discussed below). This, for me, is the *estrangement* course. Fourth and finally, there are more particular dynamics, rooted in temporally particular settings (e.g., worries, say, about the bills, cavities, flat tires or homework) that reflect off of these other three courses but also have an energy of *their* own. I call this the *adjacent* course.

Below I will discuss briefly each of the four courses of concerns mentioned above. It would be, I believe, dishonest to offer a particular anatomical shape for the four-course conceptual model beyond the basic description of it as a guide for our thinking and serving. These four courses change priority and valence in every moment, ebbing and flowing, and it is defensibly possible that the four courses might operate for each of us differently. That they possess something like a general positionality is stated and is important, but I am not inclined to make detailed arguments about structure beyond this. Doing so invites a departure from the task of tracing a human phenomenon with as much authenticity and clarity as I can manage, and a movement into the less authentic and more agenda-laden process of theory-building. I assume that *where* they exist in each of us and over time matters relatively little; each can take a defining or initiating role under the proper circumstances. More, I assume that these four courses exist in us in a superpositional sense, occupying common space or operating within us in multiple ways at once.

What I can say is that they exist and that they interrelate, aligning and dialoguing over the course of our lives. Bearing in mind their superpositionality, we might think aptly about these four courses as varying over time in terms of their quiescence or serenity. Life events, rumination or simple questioning can bring a course or part thereof out of quiescence and into influence. These courses seem for me to operate in a kind of dissonance or consonance. When they leave a state of quiescence and are allowed to voice themselves, they can resonate with each other and become consonant. When consonance arises, the experience can be a multiplication of suffering, augmenting their deleterious effects.

## The Abyssal Course

The abyssal course is so called not because I take it to be foundational in some prepotent sense. I think of this course as “abyssal” because commonly it operates far beneath and away from the experience of presence, of our present moment attention. Watts (2018) speaks of the subconscious as that part of ourselves we do not understand, and such a view is not inapt; to understand movements of the abyssal course makes them not quite so abyssal.

I take it as granted that most humans wonder about where they came from, what happens at the moment of death and after. They may wonder if there is some divine *telos* or even a grand sentience at the helm of the cosmos. These questions do not necessarily bubble up to guide our selections from the lunch menu, but they remain in us, and more, they remain in us as unresolved tensions. Many, although not all, of these questions that power the abyssal course operate from some form of an assumption related to a *telos* or grand purpose of, well, everything. In this way, then, we might take the first stage of Camus’ (1955/2018) two-stage understanding of the absurd (to wit, *The Plague*, see DeValve, 2020) as being related to the abyssal course.

For those who contemplate such a being as God (although even for those who do not but who think about existence in conceptual terms are, according to Tillich (1967) still

thinking theologically), one of several abyssal questions—one that is particularly illustrative of the abyssal course for its resonance and prevalence—is that of theodicy: if God is all-knowing and all-powerful and also loving, how is it possible that evil exists in the world? Put another way without resort to God, “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” The fundamental tension arises among the three claims—two about God and one about evil in the world—of which one must be false (and if any are false then the whole edifice fails). If God created evil, then She is complicit in the vast suffering that results from it. If She is incapable of staving it off, then she is weaker than supposed. If She is deaf to the cries of suffering sentience, or if we cannot meaningfully call that suffering evil, then She is either not aware of that suffering or, perhaps worse, is indifferent to it.

The width and breadth of contemplations of theodicean arguments and narratives alone give voice to the truly ecumenical nature of the question of why evil exists. The Western dialogue regarding God and evil over the past two millennia might be understood as the movement of three intertwining vectors changing relation over time: the nature of evil, the role of God in human experience, and the proximity of thinkers to grievous, rib-crushing suffering.

In the West it is reasonable to see theodicy as one of the many fruits of the Enlightenment even if the rather cruel shape of the doctrine well predates Voltaire by more than 1100 years (e.g., Augustine, 426/1958); after all, it was Leibniz (1710/2005) who coined the word and Weber who framed it as an existential question (see, e.g., O’Flaherty, 1980), but Medieval thought grappled with the nature of God’s culpability for the existence of evil as well, as did some Eastern traditions in their way (O’Flaherty, 1980; see also Buber, 1970/1996). Aquinas (1485/2006), for example, seeing God as perfect (to wit, complete, inter alia), felt that evil was an incompleteness, a lack. The lack of goodness in the world is not a constituent part of the universe and thus was not a part of God’s creation as such, thus God was not culpable for evil’s existence. Leibniz bought none of this; God created the necessary conditions for evil to arise, so the idea of evil being an absence of good offers God no defilade. What is more, human understanding of the good was a myopic way of understanding good in the first place. The world that exists is, definitionally, the best of all possible worlds, and any evil that exists is necessary for some grander, perhaps unseen, good.

In the *Summa*, Aquinas seems to hold human suffering at more than arm’s length, regarding it in highly abstract terms, despite the vast scale of human suffering during his lifetime. Leibniz’ rejection of Aquinas’ escape for God seems related to Leibniz’s greater willingness to connect with the reality of human suffering, but that connection, though closer, was still somewhat formal and distant (e.g., “for God is not as a man, able to look upon events with unconcern...” (Leibniz, 1710/2005: Part One, paragraph 2)). Perhaps it is fairer to say that Leibniz was nearly as abstract as Aristotle regarding suffering but may have been more tender in a general sense. Undoubtedly, Leibniz’s understanding of innateness of human sinfulness is instrumental in both his appreciation of suffering and his maintained distance from concrete examples; one has the impression that his faith enabled him to be both relatively more compassionate but still abstract about pain. Mary Hays (1759–1843), in turn, will have none of *this*. Hays rejected original sin as a coherent doctrine (e.g., Hernandez, 2014) and perhaps as a result of her more pointed critique of Christian doctrine was a decidedly more formidable prosecutor of God regarding real, lived human suffering.

Neither Aristotle nor Leibniz seemed blithely unaware of the scale of human suffering, but neither held that suffering before themselves in their contemplations. Hays’ work by contrast is driven by grotesque sex inequities and is compelling for it in ways neither

Aristotle nor Leibniz could possibly manage. It bears observing, though, that although Mary Hays enjoyed no space between her contemplation and her oppression, neither Aquinas nor Leibniz had to contend personally with suffering on the scale of two world wars and a Holocaust, and neither had precedent for anything akin to nuclear conflagration. What is more, they lived lives free from confronting anything like the unrelenting pain of the physical and social violence visited against women worldwide and against Blacks in America.

When the distance between thinker and suffering nears zero, as it does in Hays' writing, and in the theology of James Cone (e.g., 2013), theodicean questions hold a far sharper edge. As with Job's suffering, God finds Herself in the trial dock, finally being held to account, not by the State on behalf of the aggrieved, but instead by the aggrieved themselves. "Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that in it the cry of the crucified has become inaudible, hears not the Gospel but a myth of the victors" (Metz, 1998: 126). Still, it is an almost paradoxical (but radiant) theodic tension that arises for many Black American Christians. Strong belief in God and in Her goodness seems almost mockingly grotesque in the face of the indescribable lexicon of cruelty visited upon Black Americans over the course of four centuries and more. Du Bois's (1919) short story "The Gospel according to Mary Brown" reveals this grinding and beautiful tension. In it is a *wailing* unto God, *demanding* an answer as to why so beautiful a being as Mary's son, Joshua, would be so pitilessly ground into oblivion by a White mob, and yet there is juxtaposed with this very same wailing a hope, inexplicable in rational terms but powerful all the more for it, that Black theology sees hope in the very suffering that gives rise to despair (e.g., Harris, 2020). Driving the point home, Harris points to the open casket of Emmett Till and standing beside it young Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, as a modern-day Pieta; it is a scene in spirit identical to that of Du Bois' Holy Family. Even in this most brutal of moments, the very cruelty-upon-cruelty condition which renders reason dumb and anesthetized also prepares the ground for a mad, radical unreasoned and Herculean hope, placing the Black sufferer on Golgotha beside God, urging a movement through despair toward justification. The unabashed wretchedness of White oppressors set Black Christian sufferers into closer communion with their God who had suffered and died for *them* (Harris, 2020). Meaningless suffering, then, finds a meaning for some believers... *because it must*. It is there, but it is not necessarily where we are accustomed to seeking it (e.g., DeValve, 2020).

One might have perceived here a tension between the Buddhist idea of emancipation from suffering and the Christian idea of embracing suffering. In fact, there is no tension. Buddhist emancipation from suffering (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1999) is rooted in the acknowledgement of suffering's ubiquity. Watts (2018) reminds us that we are powerless, an insight that can only come through the hurt that makes rage at The Fates. Krishnamurti (2004) shows conclusively that attentive acceptance of our many sufferings is key to our cage of brokenness. In Cone's faith we can see both emancipation and embracing at work, hardly at odds. No, embracing suffering and emancipation from suffering are the same process viewed from different vantages (see, e.g., Macy, 2007: p. 194).

No one is free until we are all free, and the theorist (each of us, that is) is the theory: Lazarus, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dr. King and others have made this observation, but it is far more than merely a barometer for assessing policy failings. It gives voice to an abyssal fear we all share and we all must honor: if I must suffer, if I must cease to be, will my suffering at least be meaningful? Will my memory matter? Suffering is cruel enough but suffering without purpose or remembrance is a cruelty upon cruelty. Theodicy is perhaps a special case of the second stage of the absurd as Camus (Sisyphus) intends

the term to be used; it is the vertiginousness that follows hard on the heels of a demand for explanation that is answered by God... by nothing. And it is a vertiginousness to which we are all subject. *And it is a vertiginousness that we in community have the power to address if we choose to do so.*

## The Samudaya Course

It would be to oversimplify things deceptively to speak of the roots of *dukkha* as being fully discrete and independent things. Buddhists often refer to them as the three poisons (i.e., greed, fear and delusion), but it is probably wiser to think of them as being one and the same thing viewed from different vantages. Greed is a special case of fear, fear is a version of delusion, and delusion is an iteration of avarice. Understanding that the three poisons, even if varying in important contextual ways, are deeply intertwined, works to bring attention to the fact that dynamics within the samudaya course are inherently relational, dyadic. A perceiver or regarder is presupposed by the samudaya course, where that is not necessarily the case for other courses. That observer can be the individual herself, but it is more typically another sentient being observing the suffering being and seeking to engage in some form of interpretation of etiology, what Weil (1962) would call “reading.”

But the fertility and transformative capacity of that reading is conditioned upon the skilled framing of the perceived by the perceiver. Here again, Buber (1970/1996) saves us. The suffering subject must be regarded both as a You and also as an It in turns. It is our melancholy lot as beings, Buber tells us, to transit between You and It statuses. Indeed so, but that lot is far from melancholy, at least potentially. Sentient beings move between You-status and It-status *necessarily*; love necessitates, even facilitates, such a commute. Perhaps it is more precise to say that healing is the likeliest outcome when the transit between It and You statuses is framed dialogically, iteratively (to wit, lovingly). A physician sees a broken femur or torn ACL in order to repair the injury, but she must also regard the whole being in so doing. She will continue her relationship with the bone or with the joint, while never forgetting the heart, until the patient can skip away unaided.

There seems to be something of a tension between the First and Second Noble Truths, though. Suffering is in the nature of sentience (e.g., Nhat Hanh, 1999); attachments to, say, a child or spouse, are only natural, fear of things like death and the unknown only make good sense (but see, e.g., Chaudhri, 2021). But if suffering is endemic to the sentient condition, how is it that it has discernible (and ultimately transcendable) roots? If suffering is truly *endemic*, if its roots *are* us, it does not seem reasonable that suffering would have discrete parts of us that are etiologically responsible for it. It would seem that those roots would be more than merely woven into us but instead would be twisted into the very thread of the thread of the thread from which our yarn is made. Those roots of our suffering are the ladder for our climb to freedom (e.g., Krishnamurti, 2004).

And indeed, this is true: greed, ignorance and fear are not *parts* of us like a gall bladder is part of us; they are inseparable from us. Inseparable, perhaps, but they, like the gall bladder, *are not* us; it is also possible to know freedom from them. It is not through surgery, though, through the excising of fear from our person somehow, but through our acceptance of it as such and through the insight that we are not servants of that fear, that we are not defined by that fear. Fear is us, but we are not fear. A popular science fiction character asserted once that fear exists only to be conquered. The imputation of *deus*



*ex machina* purpose for fear in the assertion is burdensome; instead, let us say, smiling, “Fear exists. Let us overcome it.”

## The Estrangement Course

We are beings of both flame and soil, beings concerned with both absoluteness and relativity; we are finite beings often concerned with events and things that point beyond ourselves in time, space and idea. We are corporeal but nevertheless experience things which can be described in numinous terms. Our deep nondual bivalence. We, constrained by boundaries, are made mighty by those very same boundaries. In Tillich’s (1967) terms, we are divine-adjacent, beings subject to finite freedom that works in the context of divine destiny. Our divinity and our mortality are not contradictions, though, nor are they actually in conflict, but the sense of tension is all too real, all too pervasive, illusion though it may be.

This nondual duality (e.g., see also Watts, 2018) can be isolating, driving a wedge between our personas and the rest of us, between us and the rest of sentience. That division, setting part against whole and whole against whole renders itself on us in the form of estrangement. Whether we recognize it or not, it is likely that each of us craves reconciliation at some point: with self, with another, with belief, with doctrine, with idea. At some level, we seek to be reconciled, we seek resolution, rejoining, rest. This theory is in part evidence for its own claim; it is an effort at navigating the essentialist/existentialist tension for me today, a bridge away from estrangement toward reconciliation for the person who writes this.

Treating this estrangement most ably requires Paul Tillich’s aid. With his accustomed singular erudition, Tillich (1967) treats the long waltz between two partners: essence (i.e., potentiality, detachment) and existence (i.e., “standing out” from potential, realization, connection). His tracing of the partners’ steps is robust illustration of the degree to which humans have grappled with a sense of estrangement over the millennia. For Plato, Tillich tells us, essence was great truth and existence represented a kind of Fall from purity. Tillich takes Aristotle to be one seeking to obliterate the distinction, throwing both essence and existence into a conceptual blender, failing in part because of his own weakness to Plato’s view, evidenced in the *Metaphysics*. The Scholastics sought to understand God by asserting that although the rest of existence was subject to the essence/existence divide, God was not, and thus not subject to the conflicts that arise from the cleavage (Tillich, 1967). During the Enlightenment, as the capacities of science and of reason were waxing, the emphasis was on existence as the sphere of action where humans can have impact. “To stand out of one’s essential being was not a fall but the way to the actualization and fulfillment of one’s potentialities.... [E]xistence is, so to speak, swallowed by essence” (Tillich, 1967: 23). Hegel asserted that there was no gap at all between essence and existence; the world itself was the process of divine self-actualization. In something of a reply to Hegel, existentialism arose, which rejected one of the dancing spouses Hegel had sought to wed (Tillich, 1967). There is no essence, and history is not a divine self-realizing arc, but is merely scattered shards of conflict; hopelessness, anxiety and meaninglessness are the true reality of sentience.

But not a few faiths are existential in nature as well, and the hopelessness to which secular existentialists gesture is not the only conclusion to be drawn from a view that privileges the standing out from essence to guide the two dancers. Buddhist thought, for example, would argue that there was never a tension at all between essence and

existence; interbeing, nonduality, impermanence, all fundamental principles of Buddhism, illustrate a blurring of essence and existence. For Tillich (1967), and for not a few theologians of the middle-twentieth century, the standing out from essence was of vital concern (the Second Vatican Council, for example, was in part an effort to reconcile Christian doctrine with the lived experience of pain confronted by priests who served congregations in the Global South). For Tillich, the Fall is better understood, then, in a semi-mythological way, not “a break, but an imperfect fulfillment” (Tillich, 1967: 30), and it provides a robust model for understanding and resolving the essence/existence tension. The Fall is possible because of the inherent polarity between freedom and destiny. The motive for the Fall was the divine-adjacent nature of humanity, coupled with the exclusion from that divine infinity. The event itself is attributable to that particular freedom of humans to contradict themselves and their fundamental essence. The consequence of the Fall is the human condition of finite freedom operating within a sphere of destiny (Tillich, 1967: 30–32).

Examples of secular portrayals of estrangement are simply too many to count, but it bears numbering just a few to highlight the diversity of views. Existentialist writers (e.g., Sartre, Beckett, Kafka) had us worried we might wake up a cockroach and die with our father’s apple lodged in our thorax, or perhaps descend into a hell decorated in eclectic Macaroni fashion. Golding’s anti-hero in *Pincher Martin* was so divided against himself he could not recognize radiant love from monstrosity; he was quite literally dead and alive at the same time, and what’s worse, we can’t even be sure how long that was the case. At the beating heart of Marx’s thought is another form of estrangement, a wedge between essence and existence driven deeper by capitalist greed. Much of the corpus of Western psychology which treats the idea of a separate self as central to its worldview as being a fashion of estrangement (e.g., Watts, 2018).

Tillich’ finite freedom within destiny’s globe (Tillich, 1967) is a noble compromise, and although the path to it is appealing, the conclusion leaves something to be desired. There is freedom and there is vector, and if Buddhist wisdom is any guide, there is in fact no tension there at all, as both can be true at the same time despite any sense of contradiction. We are not *in fact* estranged. We are the universe to which we make appeal; if there is divine flame sharing space with soil, there was never an estrangement to begin with, but all of the brochures *insist* that there is. What needs to concern us is that there is the *sense of* estrangement despite there being no *actual* estrangement whatsoever, aside from the estrangements we create (e.g., greed, prison, hate). To understand these human-made estrangements more clearly, it serves to turn brief attention to a set of ideas that work to craft (or inspire) these estrangements.

### The Rogue’s List of Lethal Ideas

There is a set of ideas, all of which I have concluded contain not a little lethality. They represent lethal lies, mistruths or partial truths, but all of them lead away from love’s wisdom. Specifically, they lead away from love’s wisdom in that they catalyze some form of estrangement. I have come to call them the *Rogue’s List of Lethal Ideas*. These ideas include:

*Judgment/comparison* Judgment and comparisons are natural, and to a degree necessary for sentient beings engaging in a corporeal world (e.g., *this* tool is more effective than *that* tool). Judgment and comparison regarding sentience, however, is inherently violent. Judgment and comparison directed at sentient beings, including the progeny of such judgments

(i.e., supremacy of any kind, fetishistic fairness, retribution, actuarialism, adversarialism, deservedness, and any social policies and faith doctrines informed by these ideas), are inherently lethal.

*Selfism* All ideas related to the existence of a separate self, including capitalism, self-aggrandizement, masculinity are poison (see DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018). A non-trivial portion of Western thought either presumes or insists upon a discrete and independent self. One cornerstone of the American cultural edifice is “rugged individualism” (e.g., Prasad, 1998). Such a creature, as we have seen above, is both real and unreal; when the self becomes the reason for action and the center of the fortress, lethality ensues.

*Reificationism* Reificationism is the intellectual tendency to treat as static that which is dynamic, to intellectually impose a codex, typology or other simplification on a phenomenon that is inherently changing, living, actualizing. Reificationism leads to the ossification of idea and institution, creating its own false gravity of (un)truth. Selfism might fruitfully be understood to be an example of reificationism.

*Will to Rupture* Thomas Merton recounts a painful childhood memory; he and his friends built a makeshift fort crenellated against the younger brothers, his and another boy’s. Merton remembers that his brother would not leave, but could not stay, dwelling on the far edge of a stone’s throw. “We will[ed] to separate ourselves from that [disinterested] love” possibly, he speculates, because it reminded them that they incomplete without such love (Merton, 1998: 26).

The will to rupture is the compulsion to divide and parse humanity against itself, or against the rest of nature, operating counter to the fundamental nature of humanity. Violence in responses to violence, for example, is a call for separation, to wit, the ostracism (e.g., Williams, 2001) or destruction of the harming other. Jingoism, nationalism, factionalism, capitalism, extreme competitiveness all are examples of the will to rupture. If we are to take Tagore’s (2017) understanding, the will to rupture arises from the very walls we build around ourselves, our corporations, our jurisdictions, our nations. If Tagore offers anything akin to wisdom, the walls build us.

*The Strangling Telos.* Without doubt, some things in human spaces are edified by purpose. Purposefulness saved Viktor Frankl’s life (1992), even as he watched purpose devour others when purpose collapsed on itself. The first stage of Camus’ absurd arises from the assertion that a thing is wrong, that the wrong end came to pass. The absurd, like institutional theory (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and a considerable swath of criminology, arises from a flawed assumption about the value of purpose, about the meaning of telos. The intellectual project of critical theory is emancipation (see, e.g., Agger, 1985). Emancipation sought by Habermas, Freire and the rest is a *far* more worthy aim than the pursuit of order or security, to say nothing of selfist avarice, but like any aim it is located on an asymptotic arc (e.g., Watts, 2018), mired in the striving, always approaching the thing it craves so earnestly, but never quite arriving. Only by leaving aside purpose, even self, can there be space for divine grace (e.g., Merton, 1972).

## The Adjacent Course

Adjacent course concerns are rooted in the pedestrian concerns of life: worries about the well-being of a spouse, a child, aging parents, in-laws, colleagues and friends arise and fall away. Then, of course, there are the bills to be paid, maybe the exhaust system on the car needs repair, and the dog’s digestive/excretory issues simply will not abate. Perhaps events on the local, regional or national stages cause consternation, perhaps even sickness.

The workaday nature of these concerns can belie their sometimes-outsized impacts on our lives, though. Concerns of the adjacent course need not be about things so catastrophic as things seemed during 2020. Health examinations can be brutally stressful for those who have “white-coat syndrome” and the silence that mends for some contains only heartbreak for the musician. Thich Nhat Hanh (2001, 1987/2005, 2008) has so often observed that when one has a toothache it dominates the interior landscape, but the concern for toothaches do not dominate when all teeth report themselves ready for chewy duty. The adjacent course concerns are worries over which we may have some measure of control, but that come from a bottomless well of concerns. They rise and sink according to the moment, but in them we see ourselves, or deeper concerns and the other courses at work on us when the green water of adjacent concerns break over our bow.

### **The Child Within and the Four Courses**

As has been said, the child within is the graviton of justice: it calls us to act in reply to a hurting other, and it is that within us that calls others to act on behalf of us when we hurt. The child within is awash in the concerns represented by the four courses; she navigates them according to her gifts, her blind spots, her scar tissue, her resources, her privileges, her open wounds, her contemplative practice.

This, the Heart of the Little One, is likely not only present in humans. In all probability, it is just as present in non-human sentience as it is in us, but I am without doubt that Child is central to every human and that condition alone unites us beyond our capacity to estrange. The nefarious actor and the hapless victim, the police officer and the victim of police brutality, the cop doing her level best and the family who just learned of the death of their beloved teen son, all exist as tender children in heavy seas of concerns. It is from this fundamental awareness of our ontological nature that all justice policy must arise.

### **A Theory of Salvation, or What can be Done?**

The child within, the radiant being that is you, is hurting. The four courses work tidally and knifelike on you, sometimes urging you to self-care, sometimes to despair and to heartache. Buddhist wisdom asserts that suffering is fundamental to sentience (e.g., Chodron, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 2001); *sumus ergo patimur*: we are, therefore we suffer. Yes, we are also beings who breathe and create meaning, but this is so in no small part because meaning helps make the prepotent suffering more bearable.

We are not *hopelessly* adrift in our suffering, though (Tillich, 1957/2009), even if we are powerless (Watts, 2018). After all, we have each other, our separate theaters co-inhabiting each other. Our craving for sure footing is as understandable as it is misguided, but we have within and beside us the possibility of a different kind of leverage. Estrangement both presents the necessity and implies the real possibility of reconciliation; tension implies resolution even though it does not guarantee it. Denouement is not compelled by dialectics even if it is the most natural thing. We might crave, even need, reconciliation, but it is not ever guaranteed. It arises because it must, but at the same time it arises because it has been chosen. We need reconciliation. We crave it, in fact, but it may not be the kind of reconciliation we might infer is at work in a considerable portion of Christian theology. It is a reconciliation with ourselves, with silence, more akin to migratory birds reacquiring their magnetic bearings. And we crave a reconciliation with each other; after all, the distinction

between self and the rest of sentience is quite a bit smaller than we might perceive. Achieving that reconciliation is possible, but there are requirements of each of us, and of us as a wider community. We might think of these “requirements” for reconciliation as being of three general kinds: beauty, truth and remembrance. In each of them, choice and loving praxis are key components, of course.

## Beauty

I define beauty as “that which is life-affirming.” Such a definition takes beauty out of the sole purview of art, and also re-coronates beauty in art as something altogether grander. Duchamp’s *Fountain* (a urinal mounted on its side and displayed as art) possesses pleasingly aquiline curves, and thus is beautiful. It is also evocative, even shocking, and thus is beautiful (to wit, life-affirming) through the dissonance it to which it is both newborn and midwife (see Danto, 2003).

## Moment of Beauty

Beauty, then, is our great hope. I have discussed the idea of epistrophe (DeValve, 2017), a kind of revelation that leads to subsequent ideation and behavioral alterations toward greater wisdom. A central challenge before zemiology, and the second of two streams (one I called “emancipatory” earlier) that arise in the focus shift which I advocate, is how to help guide individuals toward emancipation through epistrophic revelations and their consequences. I have come to think of this process, the process whereby one person (or organization) actively supports healing wisdom in another as a *moment of beauty* (or if you prefer, a moment of grace). One way to understand a moment of beauty is to think of it as being powered by a walking between insights gained through perceptions in an I-It fashion, when those insights are allowed to penetrate into I-You regarding of a hurting sentience.

I am thinking of “moment” in a way akin to its use in physics. In physics, a moment is a measurement of the amount of force necessary to compel an object to turn on its axis. The force needed to turn a screw with a screwdriver is a moment, often expressed in terms of force–time (e.g., foot-pounds or kiloton-meters). The term “moment of inertia” refers to the amount of energy necessary to impart a rotation of a given angular speed to an object. The moment of *beauty* is the energy necessary to transform a given harm into wisdom; it is the energy necessary to impart healing.

Often a moment of beauty seems to occur in a particular moment in a temporal sense, but such may or may not be the case. Often the groundwork for epistrophe has been laid well in advance, and often additional energy is necessary to bring the epistrophe into a self-sustaining state. Aspects that influence the moment of beauty include the capacities of the harmed individual, the source of leverage (e.g., the nature of the relationship with the person or organization providing the healing energy), and the nature and extent of the harm suffered. I hesitate to push the analogy too far, but we might think of a harm as being an act that breaks “momentum,” that cancels some or all “inertia” in someone’s life. The moment of beauty is not merely restorative, bringing one’s “inertia” back. It is also transformative in that the end result is actualization for all involved; the entire “physical system” is thus more beautiful, more fully realized, than it was before the harm.

## Truth

Leibniz's best possible world, and Schopenhauer's worst possible world, were both mistaken. Of course they were; it is a mixed metaphor to speak in simplistic terms about all that is. The truth does not live at a point somewhere between, either, because the assessment itself is misplaced. And yet both Leibniz and Schopenhauer saw something valid, something true: We *are* world, an incomplete completeness shaped by choice, impregnated by a rich vocabulary of meanings (e.g., Dogen, 1985; Watts, 2018). The world and we in it exist in endlessly co-creating reciprocity, driven by choice but also by the insistent and unrelenting negative-entropic pull toward higher sentience that is love. The universe is not *tabula rasa*; much is built into the nature of awareness, and it is to these built-in realities we must pay homage.

## Remembrance

A crucial component of reconciliation is recollection or remembering. We saw earlier how engagement with real, lived suffering was integral in the honing of thought regarding theodicy; proximity to pain necessitated an engagement of the theorist in that pain. That unmediated engagement has a transformative, emancipatory aspect for the theorist, as it wrests her from abstraction while keeping her engaged with questions of ultimate concern. I would like to think that the theorist, once emancipated from abstract and figurative slumber can offer insights that can help emancipate others. Theory that is not inherently emancipatory must do rather more than sing for its dinner.

But "the freedom which is critical of society and which bears witness to itself in the spirituality of liberated freedom is never purely intellectual in its attitude" (Metz, 1970/1999: 98). Reason alone is incapable of closing wounds. Memory, often grindingly painful memory, is inescapably necessary for reconciliation; for a future to be possible, we must hold the past before ourselves and become reconciled with it in fullness.

But memory alone, even with reason, is not sufficient. The duty (i.e., at law) to remember is a relatively recent development; urged forgetting (i.e., to move on from horrors), was standard fare (e.g., 1598 Edict of Nantes or the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia) up until the mass horrors of the twentieth century brought forth in high relief the categorical imperative to never forget. By itself, though, not forgetting not sufficient for the grander healing project. Forgetting, urged by harmers is only somewhat different from renewed violence; simplistic recalling that operates in an unlimited litigation of past wrongs can also be aggressive (Veraart, 2012), working counter to healing purpose. Similarly, although forgiveness promises transformation, compelled forgiveness is yet another iteration harm.

The human truth around unspeakable harms is a living and changeable thing, such that aspects of remembering, forgetting and forgiving all must find themselves woven together according to need. In South Africa, where total military victory was not precursor to the new Constitution, and where oppressor and oppressed had to find a way to live together, punishment, vengeance and all the rest was dropped, but the one essential thing remained: remembrance (Tutu, 2000). It was remembrance shorn of vengeance to maximize the possibility of forgiveness.

Memory is an essential ingredient in reconciliation, but memory itself is not the end in itself; the spirit in which remembrance arises and is maintained (both choices regarding meaning) are powerful determinants. When wounds are fresh, remembrance is a bearing witness to the scope of harm, offering communal validation of suffering and need;

early remembrance operates like Weil's (e.g., Bell, 1998; Weil, 1962) cry. When wounds are more healed, remembrance takes on more of a sentinel's watch; it is no less vital, but remembrance operates somewhat differently personally than it does in a more collective way. Personally, a healed remembrance is akin to honored grief for loss; healed remembrance impacts wider awareness in a more formal sense. But because healing is not a linear path, as wounds reopen or become raw again, so the role of remembrance must change to fit need. Recent increases in the popularity of right-wing nationalist thinking, in particular Holocaust denials, has necessitated a shift in remembrance toward a more vociferous, witness-bearing tenor. A time will come again when remembrance returns to a kind of tranquil, tear-streaked awe, just as active but nearly motionless. A return to such remembrance is evidence of the kind of healing that really means something.

## Practical Use of this Theory

No theory is worth the time if it does not have practicable value, but this theory is not intended for use in the same way other criminological theories are intended for use. It is not aiming to offer a framework for creating a program or policy. Instead, it might be best thought of as the obverse, the thing that precedes law or intervention.

Love as I have defined it (DeValve, 2015) is eminently practical and policy-ready, but it is *supremely* challenging, *desperately* frightening. What is needed for love's practical use is not a definition; it turns out the definition was the easy part. Nor is a playbook the thing needed, because no playbook could offer a map to your heart. Love lives and moves in the deepest recesses of ourselves and also in the most bare and unmediated here-and-now. This theory, in essence, *is* the thing in itself. It is an invitation to look deeply into self while at the same time regarding the present moment in all of its quotidian and humble fecundity. If this theory resonates, use the framework to contemplate your own human truth/Dharma/Brahman/Geist, then regard others nearby from these ideas, and then serve justice from that place of regarding. If it does not resonate, plumb your own endocosm and make your own narrative and discard this theory aside from the freedom it invites.

## Conclusion

Allow me to conclude our time together by observing that nothing in this letter was something that you didn't already know. If the theory as such is something new, let us remember that the raw materials are the last thing from it—in fact, they're ancient, and they are already part of each of us. The *only* thing that *might* be somewhat new is the way in which the raw materials are organized. Something radically new is needed to achieve the kind of justice we seek for our children (DeValve, 2015); that new thing is fully possible, and yet when that new thing arises, it will be evident that it has been with us all along.

To engage with the topography of human hurting more fully, there is a necessity to rethink fundamentally how we consider crime. Etiological treatments of crime may well be obsolete; certainly, most have been underwhelming in their capacity to produce meaningful emancipation and healing. Instead, my suggestion is to direct our considerable collective capacity to thinking about what Weil's cry asks of us, and then also what our responses to the cry of suffering can do to help harmers and harmed alike find wholeness. To facilitate just such a reorientation of contemplation, something of a new ontological model is

offered: love (DeValve, 2015) is the basic duration of sentience, and it shapes the cone of meaning (past) and possibility (future) in the body of the present moment through choice. The axle of the ontological model, derived from my understanding of my own interiority as I perceive it is of two parts: the ocean of bliss and the child within. Human truth is the warp and weft of praxis of that ontological being navigating its ultimate concerns in conjunction with others, who themselves are likewise finding their way. We can understand the operation of concerns, of suffering, as existing in four interlaced and interdependent courses. In our tidal tempests, when we remember that which has been forgotten—specifically, that we inter-exist and that we belong to each other, we can author beauty through our loving praxis.

## Declarations

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