



Enough Suffering: Thoughts on *Suffering and Virtue*

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Michael Brady's *Suffering and Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2018) is a wonderfully rich, important, and meaningful book. Brady's detailed case study of suffering provides a specific and much-needed illustration of the significance of feelings and emotions for virtue and moral and intellectual life more generally.

Over the past few decades, great strides have been made in multiple disciplines on the non-cognitive (or at least the not-merely-cognitive) nature of emotion.¹ Nevertheless, most of the work in moral psychology, including work focused exclusively on emotion, concentrates on cognitive or intellectual processes, such as the purported role of belief in emotion and the power of thought to alter emotion. Although many philosophers are now willing to pay lip service to the idea that emotions are important, there have been few sustained examinations of why and how this is the case.

Brady's *Suffering and Virtue* is precisely what it is needed to address this gap in our understanding. This book presents a picture of the morally and intellectually virtuous person as one who necessarily feels and emotes, and of feelings and emotions as among the defining features of a virtuous life. Moreover, it performs the important function of highlighting the value of emotions that are often labeled 'negative.' In example after example, Brady points to ways in which emotions and feelings involved in suffering are not merely acceptable but are essential. He points to ways in which our emotions and feelings can express the best parts of our character and contribute to our flourishing as individuals and as members of groups.

In addition to making a crucial contribution to our understanding of the value of emotion, *Suffering and Virtue* makes significant headway in developing a pluralistic

¹ Although several articles and books have been published in more recent years, Jenefer Robinson's *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005) and Jesse Prinz's *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) remain the best sustained treatments of the topic.

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account of the structure of moral virtues. Brady uses Ernest Sosa's account of intellectual virtues to argue that our standard notion of moral virtues—as 'trait virtues' of the sort endorsed by Aristotle and, more recently, Linda Zagzebski—should be expanded to include 'faculty virtues.'² Applying Sosa's account to moral virtue, Brady argues that the dispositions to feel pain and remorse in the right conditions are faculty virtues, rather than trait virtues, because they are reliable abilities to attain goods (e.g., to avoid and repair bodily damage, and to atone for wrongdoing), whether or not they bypass the reflection and deliberation involved in trait virtues.³ Brady thus contributes a much-needed pluralistic analysis of moral virtues to the contemporary literature—one that includes faculty virtues alongside standard trait virtues.⁴ Brady's pluralistic account warrants attention from virtue ethicists and virtue epistemologists alike. For all of these reasons and more, *Suffering and Virtue* is a major achievement.

The main conclusion of the book is that without suffering, we wouldn't be virtuous. For instance, we wouldn't be courageous, compassionate, or wise. On Brady's view, suffering is both causally necessary for the development of many of these virtues in individuals, as well as constitutively necessary for their expression. Suffering is likewise necessary for groups to develop and express the virtues of justice, love, faith, and trust.

With respect to constitutive necessity, Brady endorses a familiar notion of the virtues of individuals as "stable dispositions that enable us to respond appropriately in important spheres of human experience"⁵, and argues that it is sometimes appropriate to respond to the bad things that befall us with suffering. To illustrate, compassionate individuals don't just care about, e.g., persons struggling with Covid-19 infection, they also feel pained by their struggle. On Brady's view, suffering is constitutively essential for virtues like compassion in the sense that without it, we would sometimes fail to respond to bad things in appropriate ways and thereby fail to be virtuous. In this manner, Brady argues that suffering can be intrinsically good as a fitting response to bad things, even though it is also intrinsically bad (81).

With respect to causal necessity, Brady contends that even some suffering that is not constitutive of the virtues of individuals, and thus not intrinsically good as a fitting response to bad things, is still instrumentally valuable for the essential role it plays in facilitating a number of virtues, including virtues of strength (e.g., courage), virtues of vulnerability (e.g., humility), and the virtue of wisdom.

² See Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ Michael Brady, *Suffering and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 68. Hereafter, all references to Brady's *Suffering and Virtue* will only list the page number.

⁴ Julia Driver's *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) also endorses a consequentialist account of moral virtue, but unlike Brady, Driver does not endorse a pluralistic account of moral virtue.

⁵ 60. See also M. Nussbaum. 1988. "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13: 32-53; T. Hurka. 2001. *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (OUP); R. Adams. 2006. *A Theory of Virtue* (OUP).

Brady likewise argues that suffering is causally and constitutively necessary for the development and expression of the virtues of justice, love, faith, and trust within a group. Here, he emphasizes the communicative value of suffering. He argues that suffering is vital for communicating one's love for, commitment to, and trust of, others in the group.

Brady is careful to point out that while suffering is necessary for virtue, it is *not* sufficient. In sum, his overall picture is one in which *some* suffering is beneficial insofar as it is required for coming to have, and express, virtues. If virtues are required for flourishing (as he thinks), then this means we “won't get to live a flourishing life without suffering” (90). But, it does *not* mean that all suffering is beneficial or contributes to flourishing—suffering that results from horrendous evils such as torture clearly does not. As Brady puts the point, “a great deal of suffering, perhaps most of the suffering in the world today, has little or no value from a virtue-theoretical standpoint. For much suffering is destructive, rather than productive, of virtue, and as a result undermines the possibility of living a happy or flourishing life” (165). We agree that there is too much suffering in the world, and return to this point below.

In the sections that follow, we raise five sets of questions about Brady's arguments, focusing on: (1) the desire account of suffering (Chapters 1 and 2); (2) the role of suffering in virtue-development (Chapter 4); (3) whether suffering is required for evaluative knowledge (Chapter 5); (4) heroism and selflessness (Chapter 6), and (5) the need to reduce suffering (Chapter 5). Section 5 emphasizes that for persons who are oppressed or in inhospitable conditions, what is needed for the development and expression of virtue is *less* suffering. Brady agrees with this point. We likewise think that much of the suffering caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is neither instrumentally valuable for developing virtues such as courage, nor constitutively valuable as an expression of virtues such as compassion. Here, too, we expect Brady would agree. (Readers should note that *Suffering and Virtue* was written before the Covid-19 pandemic.) We thus suggest that the scope of several of Brady's conclusions about the virtue-theoretic value of suffering will be restricted to persons who tend to be shielded from suffering in our world (due to privilege and luck). This restriction doesn't itself undercut those conclusions, since persons who are privileged along multiple axes of their social identities need courage and compassion, and need them badly. Nevertheless, it does mean that some of Brady's conclusions are likely to be limited in their scope and application in our world, in which there is already enough suffering.

1 Unpleasant Experiences and the Desire Account of Suffering

What is suffering? Chapters 1 and 2 of *Suffering and Virtue* develop a desire view of suffering, whereby one has an unpleasant experience that one minds. Brady argues that to suffer, one must feel bad; i.e., suffering requires a negative or unpleasant affective experience. But, while unpleasant experiences are necessary for suffering, they aren't sufficient on Brady's view, since one might not mind the unpleasant experience. One might merely be indifferent to it, as when one finds “the arrangement of

chairs in the seminar room somewhat aesthetically unpleasant” but has never had “the slightest inclination to do anything about it” (28). Subjects who have unpleasant experiences, but don’t care about them, don’t suffer. Thus, according to Brady’s initial formulation of his desire view in Chapter 1:

A subject counts as suffering when and only when: “she has an unpleasant or negative affective experience that she minds, where to mind some state is to have an occurrent desire that the experience not be occurring” (27).

Brady distinguishes his desire view from John Hick’s version of the desire view: whereas Hick argues that suffering consists in wanting one’s *situation* to be otherwise, Brady’s view requires that one wants one’s *experience* to be otherwise.⁶ Brady contends that his view can explain cases that Hick’s can’t—in which agents accept their suffering (28). For instance, he argues that repentant criminals who accept the pain of punishment, and Opus Dei members who welcome the pain of self-flagellation, will count as suffering on his view, but not Hick’s, because such subjects “mind the unpleasant affective state; but... welcome the situation in which this unpleasant state occurs” (28). Roughly, the idea here seems to be that such subjects are bothered by *the pain*. But, they aren’t bothered by being in *situations* in which they are bothered by pain—rather, they think they *should* be in situations in which they are bothered by pain because they think they deserve to be punished. They think they deserve to be bothered by pain for committing crimes and for being imbued with original sin. The upshot: they don’t want their situations of ‘being bothered by pain, given that I (think I) deserve pain’ to be other than what they are. We’ll return to these cases below.

Brady further develops his desire view of suffering in Chapter 2, where he provides an account of what it is for something to be an unpleasant affective experience—we need an account of this since subjects suffer when they have unpleasant experiences that they mind. Brady argues that an unpleasant affective experience itself consists in an affective sensation coupled with a desire that this sensation not be occurring. This means that unpleasantness isn’t an intrinsic property of sensations themselves, and isn’t limited to our experiences of affective sensations such as pain, anguish, fear, despair, and other usual suspects. As Brady puts the point (48):

unpleasantness is not a property of sensations themselves, but is instead a property of an *experience*, where this is understood as a *relational state* consisting of a sensation plus the relevant desire. It is not the...sensation that is the bearer of the property unpleasant...instead what is unpleasant is the experience of having a sensation that you desire not to be occurring.

Since unpleasantness is a property of experiences, not sensations, we can have sensations of joy, love, and happiness that we find unpleasant, for instance, we can have sensations of *schadenfreude* that we don’t want to have. Plugging this account of

⁶ John Hick. *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1977). Brady argues that his view of suffering allows both for cases where one accepts suffering and cases where one doesn’t (28).

unpleasant experiences into the initial formulation of his desire view, Brady generates his final formulation of suffering:

A subject counts as suffering when and only when: “she has (i) an unpleasant experience consisting of a sensation S and a desire that S not be occurring, and (ii) an occurrent desire that this unpleasant experience not be occurring” (55)

There are several questions and concerns about this account of unpleasant experiences and Brady’s final formulation of the desire account of suffering. First, recall that this account locates unpleasantness not in sensations themselves, but in the relation between sensations and the desire that they stop: unpleasantness is “a property of the relation itself, rather than a property possessed by one of the relata” (48). This enables Brady to explain why subjects can have negative experiences of sensations of joy, such as *schadenfreude*. Now, that is a point in favor of Brady’s account of unpleasantness. But, it simultaneously leads to a concern. Because the account locates the unpleasantness of pain in the relation between the sensation of pain and one’s desire that it not be occurring, it seems committed to claiming that garden-variety masochists, who seek out and revel in pain, don’t find pain unpleasant. They would have sensations of pain alright, but their experiences of having pain wouldn’t be unpleasant because they don’t want the pain to stop. In one sense, this seems to be the *right* result—garden-variety masochists ultimately take pleasure in having pain. But, in another sense, this seems to be the *wrong* result. It will be the wrong result, if we think that the sensation of pain is itself unpleasant, and that garden-variety masochists have a second-order desire for pain *because* it is unpleasant—if the pain wasn’t unpleasant, they wouldn’t desire it, they would find some other unpleasant sensation to pursue. In short, the worry is that unpleasantness is an intrinsic property of *some* sensations like pain, and won’t merely be located in the relation between a sensation of pain and the desire that it stop (though it could also be located in that relation). Putting this point differently—sometimes, we can’t get rid of unpleasantness simply by removing the desire that the sensation not be occurring (53); indeed, sometimes we desire the sensation precisely because it is unpleasant. If this is correct, Brady’s account may only be describing one of the locations of unpleasantness, while overlooking another. That said, this point may do little more than indicate a penchant for pluralism—for making room for an internalist view of unpleasantness with respect to some sensations like pain, in addition to Brady’s relational account—in which case we can set it aside.

Second, let’s return to repentant criminals who accept the pain of punishment, and Opus Dei members who welcome the pain of self-flagellation. Assume we are setting aside the worry above—assume these subjects have unpleasant experiences in exactly the way Brady suggests, namely they have sensations of pain and they want those sensations to stop. In other words, assume they satisfy condition (i) of the desire account of suffering. Now, home in on condition (ii). Do they satisfy this condition as well? Do they want the unpleasant experience *itself* to stop? Arguably, they don’t, and that will be a problem for Brady’s account, which aims to allow for the suffering of such subjects (and in this way, was supposed to have an advantage over Hick’s account). Arguably, what these subjects want, given that they think they deserve the unpleasant experience, is not for the unpleasant experience to stop, but

for the unpleasant experience to continue. After all, they think they deserve to be bothered by pain as a punishment for their crimes and original sin. If this line of objection proves viable, then what has gone wrong here? It seems that these subjects have a first-order desire that the sensation of pain stop. But, they don't have a second-order desire that the unpleasant experience stop, and even have a second-order desire that the experience continue. Why *don't* they have a second-order desire that the unpleasant experience stop? The answer seems to be this: they don't want their situations of 'being bothered by pain, given that I (think I) deserve pain' to be other than what they are. Hick's view is defeated at the level of first-order desire only to re-emerge at the level of second-order desire.

Third and more importantly, if the above is correct then virtuous people won't satisfy condition (ii) either, and thus according to the final formulation of the desire account, won't suffer. Let's illustrate this point with respect to remorse, which plays a leading role in Chapter 3.⁷ If virtues are dispositions to respond appropriately to both the good things and the bad things that we encounter in important spheres of human experience, then in acquiring the virtue of (let's call it) conscientiousness, one will have acquired a disposition to feel remorse on occasions when one has acted wrongly. Note that even virtuous people aren't perfect—they are human and occasionally act wrongly. In other words, let's assume that 'virtue' is a threshold and degree concept: to count as having a virtue, one must satisfy a basic threshold for having the disposition(s) in question; once that threshold is satisfied, it can be exceeded to different degrees. Let's also assume that when conscientious people feel remorse, they satisfy condition (i); i.e. their experiences of remorse are unpleasant—they have sensations of remorse that they mind. Do they satisfy condition (ii)? Do they want not to have the unpleasant experience *itself*? Arguably, they don't. Rather, what conscientious people want, given that they know they have acted wrongly and know that it is appropriate to feel badly about acting wrongly,⁸ is to be the kind of people who have unpleasant experiences when they have acted wrongly. They don't want to be the kind of people who fail to have sensations of remorse (when they have acted wrongly), or fail to be bothered by those sensations. They want to both feel remorse *and* be bothered by it—they want the unpleasant experience—they don't want to feel remorse but be indifferent to it. Their case is analogous to that of repentant criminals and members of Opus Dei. To put the point differently, when conscientious people act wrongly, they will be "glad, all-things-considered" to have unpleasant experiences (84). Here, too, the problem seems to lie in the difference between first- and second-order desires. Even though conscientious people have a first-order desire not to have remorse, in the sense that they mind it, they don't have a second-order desire not to have the unpleasant experience, and even

⁷ Chapter 3 analyzes remorse under the rubric of faculty virtues. Here, we take remorse to contribute to a character virtue of conscientiousness. Since we can construct similar arguments with respect to expressions of the character virtues of (e.g.) courage, empathy, and so forth, we don't think anything hangs on the selection of remorse/conscientiousness to illustrate the point. Readers who object to the use of remorse (perhaps because they think virtuous people don't perform wrong actions) are welcome to use a different virtue to illustrate the point.

⁸ We are here assuming that character virtues require such evaluative knowledge. See Brady Ch. 5.

have a second-order desire to have the unpleasant experience when they have acted wrongly. If this worry proves viable, then having unpleasant experiences can still be constitutively necessary for virtue, but suffering itself (as it is analyzed in Chapter 2) won't be. Accordingly, this worry raises a concern for part of the main argument of the book, which intends to show that suffering is constitutively necessary for the expression of many virtues (including virtues like conscientiousness).

2 The Role of Suffering in Virtue-development

Brady argues that even some suffering that is not constitutive of virtue can be instrumentally valuable for the role it plays in the development of virtue (87). So, let's turn to some of the causal connections Brady draws between suffering and virtue-development. Chapters 4 and 5 argue that individuals won't develop virtues, such as courage and wisdom, without suffering. Below, we begin with a broader question about whether suffering is required for the development of virtue, and move to a more narrow concern about Brady's Nietzschean view that actively pursuing suffering can help facilitate courage.

In section 1, we argued that suffering (understood in terms of Brady's desire view) is not *constitutively* necessary for the expression of virtue. Here, we suggest that suffering is not necessary for the *development* of virtue either, though we acknowledge that it may aid in the development of virtue in some instances. Perhaps more to the point, and in line with Plato and Aristotle, we maintain that there is a type of character education—arguably, the best type—that involves no suffering.

In NE II. 3, Aristotle argues that *arête* is concerned with pleasures and pains. The pleasures and pains that accompany an individual's actions must be taken as an indication of the individual's state, and “whether someone enjoys or is pained well or badly makes no small difference in his actions” (1105a).⁹ Put simply, virtuous people experience pleasure and pain as they should; that is, they enjoy behaving virtuously and are pained by not doing so. Those lacking virtue fail to experience pleasure and pain appropriately. Even when they behave as the virtuous person would, they experience no pleasure.

Not surprisingly, then, Aristotle defines the correct education in terms of training pleasures and pains appropriately: “we must be brought up in a certain way straight from childhood, as Plato says, so as to enjoy and be pained by the things we should” (1105a).¹⁰

Brady employs these ideas in supporting his view that suffering is necessary for the development of virtue. But, crucially, and in support of our suggestion that suffering is not necessary, Aristotle is almost certainly referring here to Plato's discussions of education in the *Laws* and the *Republic*, both of which contain detailed accounts of the best way to educate children to ensure that they become virtuous.

⁹ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Early in Book II of the *Laws*, the Athenian explains that virtue will arise in those who receive the right education:

I maintain that the earliest sensations that a child feels in infancy are of pleasure and pain, and this is the route by which virtue and vice first enter the soul....I call 'education' the initial acquisition of virtue by the child, when the feelings of pleasure and affections, pain and hatred, that well up in his soul are channeled in the right courses before he can understand the reason why. Then when he does understand, his reason and emotions agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits. Virtue is this general concord of reason and emotion. But there is one element you could isolate in any account you give, and this is the correct formation of our feelings of pleasure and pain, which makes us hate what we ought to hate from the first to last, and love what we ought to love. Call this 'education,' and I, at any rate, think you would be giving it its proper name. (653a-c)¹¹

In the discussion that follows, the Athenian and Clinias conclude that this education will be carried out through recreation, playtime, and games. Poetry, construed broadly to include singing, dancing, acting, and physical education will be the primary activities through which children's souls are imbued with preferences for what is good and aversion to what is bad. The Athenian says that children's souls "cannot bear to be serious," and so even though the modes of education are "deadly serious devices" for producing the concord of reason and emotion, they will be considered recreation by the children who will treat them in that spirit (659e).^{12,13}

While a great deal can be said about these discussions, the point we wish to emphasize is that they prescribe a path to virtue that contains no suffering. This is not to suggest that developing virtue will always be pleasant or will never involve feelings of discomfort, but both Plato and Aristotle suggest that if a child is raised correctly with his pleasures and desires channeled in the appropriate ways so that the child never develops bad habits in the first place, then none of the unpleasantness or struggles experienced will rise to the level of suffering. In *Republic III*, Socrates contends that the ideal education "affects their eyes and ears like a healthy breeze from wholesome regions, and imperceptibly guides them from early childhood into being similar to, friendly toward, and concordant with the beauty of reason" (401c-d). In other words, children who are educated in the manner above never develop pleasures and pains that are contrary to virtue to begin with, and thus don't have to suffer to develop virtue. If this is correct, then condition (ii) of Brady's desire view of suffering is not satisfied here either, and thus, there is a path to developing virtue that does not involve suffering.

¹¹ Plato. *Laws*, trans. Trevor Saunders. In *Collected Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The discussion of education in *Laws II* echoes and elaborates upon the that found in *Republic III*, where Socrates, Glaucon, Adeimantus et al. establish that the early education of the guardians must be constituted by a precise course of poetry and gymnastics that will foster the development of virtue. Plato. *Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004).

Let's now turn to Brady's Nietzschean view that actively pursuing suffering can help one develop courage. Suppose we bracket the worry above and agree with Brady that virtue-acquisition is connected to suffering in at least the following way. In adults who have grown up in our world (not as guardians in the *polis*), virtue-acquisition will be connected to practicing virtuous actions, and we can expect at least some instances of practicing the overcoming of suffering to aid in the acquisition of courage. More specifically, let's grant that it is sometimes true that when suffering arises in our lives—when it happens to strike—and we overcome it, we contribute to developing courage. More controversial is the Nietzschean idea that any of us can contribute to developing courage by actively seeking out suffering in order to practice overcoming it. Brady defends this idea, explicitly noting that it is counter-intuitive and that pursuing suffering seems “indicative of vice, rather than virtue” (97). A main worry, as he notes, is that pursuing suffering for the sake of developing one's own virtues seems egoistic and not virtuously motivated (98).

In defense of this Nietzschean view, Brady contends that people pursue activities such as playing chess, mountain climbing, endurance running, making art, and doing philosophy partly *because* they involve suffering and challenges (99). Of course, suffering won't be their ultimate reason for pursuing these activities. Brady argues that they seek them out so as to *overcome* suffering. In his words, “Nietzsche was right, at least with respect to some people and some activities: the strong welcome and embrace suffering, for the chance to overcome it” (101). Overcoming suffering enables them to express and develop strength, and to feel pleasure and satisfaction, which in turn produce gains in self-image and self-esteem, esteem from others, social standing, and, ultimately, in happiness (101). Overcoming suffering leads to a host of goods. Accordingly, we take Brady to be arguing that even if such suffering and one's motivations for pursuing it are not themselves constitutive of courage, overcoming such suffering has instrumental value insofar as it contributes to the development of courage and to the agent's happiness (101).

We must admit that we are puzzled. It isn't clear to us how Brady's defense is supposed to circumvent the egoism worry above. First, it isn't clear to us what the ultimate motivation of such agents is supposed to be. If Brady intends them to be ultimately motivated by pursuit of their own strength or advances in their own social standing or happiness, then we worry that this will detract from the development of courage by undermining the development of virtuous (intrinsic) motivations. Here, we have in mind, studies in educational psychology which indicate that extrinsic motivation and reward tend to undermine intrinsic motivation.¹⁴ Perhaps, instead, the motivation to seek out challenges is supposed to be virtuous because these agents are already in a strong position and wouldn't encounter challenges *unless* they sought them out. If so, it would be a motivation to improve—to refuse to be complacent about one's position of strength. But, then we wonder why these agents seem to seek out challenges that make *them* stronger but do little to make others stronger—devoting one's Saturday afternoons to mud runs, mountain climbing, or

¹⁴ E.L. Deci, R. Koestner, R.M. Ryan. 2001. “Extrinsic Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation in Education: Reconsidered Once Again” *Review of Educational Research* 71(1): 1-27.

solitary philosophical inquiry arguably has little benefit for others. (Indeed, both of us worry about this in our own lives.) If these agents *were* virtuously motivated, wouldn't they pursue challenges that (also) benefit others—wouldn't they pursue teaching philosophy in under-funded schools, working for athletic organizations that benefit marginalized populations, etc.? Wouldn't they look outward to help others with the challenges that life had already put in *their* paths, rather than manufacture mud runs for themselves? Perhaps, the reply is that many of these concerns miss the point—since Brady is not trying to respond to the egoism objection directly, but circumvent it by arguing that even if such suffering (or one's act of overcoming it, or one's motivation for overcoming it) isn't constitutive of courage, overcoming suffering still has *instrumental* value for the development of courage. That said, we think the worry about egoistic motives undermining the development of virtuous (intrinsic) motives remains.

This points us toward a second question, which addresses instrumental value. Is actively seeking out or generating suffering for oneself more likely to contribute to an excess of the trait of courage, and thus to the vice of rashness, rather than to the virtue of courage? As Brady points out: "since pleasure is a positive reinforcer, those who overcome suffering and adversity will tend to be motivated to seek out more of that which generates pleasure: they will look for greater challenges to overcome, more adversity to conquer" (100). But, if agents who overcome challenges tend to seek out even greater challenges due to the pleasure they gain, won't this put them at risk for going overboard? Perhaps, the answer is that these agents will also need *phronesis*, or good judgment, to prevent them from becoming adrenaline-junkies obsessed with competing in ever more challenging mud runs, from retreating into a solitary life of doing philosophy, and from myopically focusing on increasing their own virtue and strength. Indeed, agents without *phronesis*, who seek out challenges in order to make themselves stronger, may be at risk not just for rashness, but for a host of vices, including self-indulgence, arrogance, and callous indifference to others. Without *phronesis*, any instrumental value that the active pursuit of suffering might have gained (from its contribution to the development of the agent's self-image, social standing, and happiness), would easily be swamped by the instrumental disvalue it would have due to its facilitation of vices. *Phronesis*, Brady agrees (127), is required for virtue. But, if *phronesis* involves evaluative knowledge of how to act, then wouldn't the agents above make better choices—wouldn't they at least pursue challenges that benefit others?

Perhaps, the reply is that these concerns are still missing the point. The point is that to develop courage, one needs to *start* somewhere, and seeking out the activities above is a way for strong people, who would otherwise be shielded from suffering, to start. To put this point differently, people who tend to be shielded from suffering (by privilege and luck) can start developing courage by performing actions a courageous person would *not* perform, and then gradually learn to perform actions that a courageous person would perform. Their route to developing courage might even involve overcoming the stolid complacency of privilege by "dragging" themselves "to the contrary extreme" (Aristotle.NE.II.9.1109b5)—by (initially) over-correcting with mud runs and other 'extreme' challenges. Granted, people who have been shielded from suffering (by privilege and luck) need courage, and need it badly.

Moreover, if systems of oppression tend to make everyone in them vicious, including those who are strong and privileged, then virtue theories will need to include remedies for those who are strong and privileged. For this group, Brady's Nietzschean argument may provide some useful advice, noting the concerns we raised above. But, while we agree that the routes to developing virtue are varied and can include actions a virtuous person would not perform, and while we think this Nietzschean argument may offer some useful suggestions, we simultaneously worry that the scope of the argument is limited to persons who are already strong, and shielded from the challenges and suffering encountered by so very many others. This may be part of Brady's motivation for addressing virtues of vulnerability, such as humility and adaptability, which he takes to be important for persons coping with conditions of hardship and adversity.¹⁵ We return to questions about scope below.

3 Is Suffering Required for Evaluative Knowledge?

This brings us to the connection between *phronesis*, evaluative knowledge, and suffering. Chapter 5 argues that wise people have knowledge and understanding of what is good and what isn't. Among other things, wise people know which features of a given situation are morally relevant and which actions to perform. On Brady's view, *phronetic* reflection and deliberation are required for gaining such evaluative knowledge and understanding, and suffering is required for motivating *phronetic* reflection and deliberation. Importantly, Brady seems to be drawing two connections between suffering and evaluative knowledge/understanding. First, he is arguing that emotions such as suffering *can* facilitate evaluative knowledge and understanding (133)—they can consume our attention, make moral features salient, and motivate us to reflect about whether our initial affective appraisals are accurate (e.g., am I really in danger, or was the noise that woke me up caused by my drunk flat-mate coming back late from the pub?), and about the best way to respond (e.g., should I call the police or not?). This is a crucial point, with which we wholeheartedly agree—namely, emotions can facilitate knowledge. Even emotions thought to be 'negative,' such as suffering, can at least aid in facilitating knowledge (see below). Second, Brady is arguing that the emotion of suffering is *necessary* for motivating the reflection that leads to evaluative knowledge and understanding. In Brady's words (131):

it also seems true that when we are no longer emotional we usually *lack* the motivation to assess the accuracy of our initial emotional appraisals or think about ways of dealing with our situation. If, for instance, I no longer feel

¹⁵ Compare Whitcomb et al.'s argument that humility is important not just for privileged persons but also for marginalized persons, despite the intuitive thought that it is pride, courage, and perseverance, and not humility, that are important for marginalized persons. See Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Bataly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder "The Puzzle of Humility and Disparity" in M. Alfano, M. Lynch, and A. Tanesini (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Humility* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 72-83. Note that pride, courage, and perseverance count as virtues of strength for Brady, not virtues of vulnerability.

afraid, then it is unlikely that I'll bother myself much with seeking evidence as to whether or not I'm in danger, and as to how I might therefore cope. Here again...it is negative affect that is central to the motivational story...If the prospect of danger...didn't *feel bad*, then the chances are that I wouldn't be (as) bothered to deal with it, and would thereby fail to arrive at the appropriate understanding and awareness of the best coping strategy.

We have two sets of questions about suffering as a requirement for evaluative knowledge, both of which will be familiar from the literature on virtue epistemology.

First, is suffering *needed* to supply the motivation to reflect, or are there other motivating forces that would do an equally good job? Here, motivations for epistemic goods—for truth, knowledge, and understanding—and the motivation of curiosity (132), come to mind. Why can't a desire to know, e.g., whether my behavior is implicitly racist, motivate my reflection *instead* of suffering? Even if we were to agree that it is easier to motivate reflection through suffering (insofar as suffering makes reflecting more urgent), why would suffering be *needed* to motivate reflection, when it seems that I can take this alternative route? Namely, I can set out to value and recognize all persons and to gain knowledge of my failures to do so, and launch reflection about my behavior in this way.¹⁶ In short, why would we *need* to appeal to suffering in our explanation of what motivates reflection, when we can instead appeal to the motivation to gain knowledge of one's own moral failures? Additionally, we might wonder whether motivations for epistemic goods would at least need to accompany the emotion of suffering in order to prevent it from generating false beliefs. In other words, we might wonder whether suffering could facilitate evaluative knowledge on its own without such assistance.¹⁷ Unmoderated by the motivation for truth, suffering might instead lead us to draw the conclusion that is the most expedient in getting the suffering to stop, even if it isn't true. Relatedly, it might lead us to get defensive and draw self-serving conclusions, and to jump to conclusions about others. Consider the knee-jerk response 'I'm not implicitly racist; you're being overly sensitive.' Suffering might also lead us to see shame, danger, and threats where there aren't any. In short, motivations for epistemic goods might do a *better* job than suffering at generating evaluative knowledge and understanding through reflection.

Second, we might wonder whether emotion or motivation of *any* kind—be it a 'negative' emotion such as suffering or a 'positive' motivation such as a desire for knowledge—is necessary for evaluative knowledge. Or, whether evaluative knowledge, and perhaps even understanding, could be gained from testimony, without *phronetic* reflection and deliberation on the part of the agent in question. Evaluative knowledge and understanding are complex, and so perhaps they are not the sorts of things that can be gained from testimony and without reflection. But, *whether* they can be gained from testimony and without reflection is a matter of controversy.

¹⁶ These claims may bring to mind Brady's argument that evaluative knowledge itself is not motivating in the *akratic* (73). But, the point above is a different one—it is about *motivations* for knowledge rather than about whether knowledge itself is motivating.

¹⁷ See Brady's discussion of Thomas Reid on the motive of curiosity (132).

Is knowledge that, e.g., slavery is wrong, or George Floyd was murdered, or the Tuskegee Study was racist, transmissible via testimony? And, is evaluative understanding—at least in the form of explanation—transmissible via testimony? In other words, are explanations of why George Floyd’s death was a murder, why slavery is wrong, and why the Tuskegee Study was racist transmissible via testimony? *If* they can be gained from testimony and without reflection, that would make trouble for Brady’s argument. Of course, that is a big ‘if’! The jury is still very much out both with respect to the status of moral testimony, and with respect to the nature of understanding.¹⁸ So, all of this is just to say that *if* evaluative knowledge and understanding end up being transmissible via testimony, then they won’t require *phronetic* reflection. In which case, we would need to turn to Brady’s other arguments for the claim that wisdom requires suffering (129-30, 133-36).

4 Heroism and Selflessness

In chapter six, Brady shifts his focus from the individual to the group and contends that there are three ways in which suffering is vital for group or social virtues: it is essential for justice, for loving relationships, and for faith and trust. In all three cases, Brady claims, suffering is important because of what it conveys about and to members of a given community. By examining the vital role of communication in group and social virtues, Brady sheds light on areas of moral psychology and virtue theory that too often are minimized or ignored. The breadth of *Suffering and Virtue* is one of its many strengths and is one of the reasons the book has significance for so many different areas and debates within philosophy. That being said, we have a few concerns about some of the implications of the views put forth in chapter six.

One concern relates to the argument that suffering is critical for the expression of faith in and commitment to one’s community. Brady develops this argument, in part, through a consideration of initiation rites and rituals, which typically involve the infliction of suffering as a test of an initiand’s faith. An initiand proves his commitment to a group (or to God in certain religious cases) by enduring extreme suffering and thereby showing that the group matters more to him than his own needs, desires, and comfort.

To illustrate this, Brady offers the example of the initiation rite of the male youths of the Gisu in Uganda. In this rite, a youth must stand motionless in front of an audience of men while a lengthy operation of circumcision is performed. It is believed that in order to be successful, initiands must possess strength of purpose and body, which enables them to conquer their fear and maintain control during the operation.

¹⁸ For an overview of the debate over moral testimony, see Alison Hills “Moral Testimony.” *Philosophy Compass* 8(6)2013: 552-559. For an overview of debates about the nature of understanding and about whether understanding is transmissible via testimony, see Stephen Grimm “Understanding” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/understanding/#Test>. Accessed on: May 24, 2021.

Brady explains that this ritual tests *bunyali*, or ability, which is associated with strength of character and surmounting obstacles (163).

On Brady's account, the ritual's revelation of who does and does not possess *bunyali* has clear benefits for the group since it shows that there are enough men in possession of *bunyali* and who they are. These men can be trusted to be competent and strong and are assigned a role in society accordingly. Brady goes on to discuss how suffering of this kind further benefits the group by promoting social cohesion, but our concern is with the first part of this discussion.

We worry that this positive account of suffering risks valorizing an unhealthy ideal of the sort often associated with notions of the heroic and hypermasculinity. While we don't doubt Brady's characterization of the ritual as playing a critical role for the Gisu, we nevertheless question whether or not it is correct to classify this type of suffering as beneficial and to associate it with virtue. Bracketing the issue of whether or not this initiation rite truly benefits the Gisu or does so more than it harms them, it seems like a problematic example to use as a paradigmatic case of a major respect in which suffering can benefit the group.

If proof of worthiness requires a young man to endure excruciating pain while exhibiting no fear and refraining from moving his body, is this not too much suffering, and/or a kind of suffering akin to torture that isn't valuable from a virtue-theoretic standpoint? Moreover, the link between extreme suffering and masculinity is troubling. Brady quotes Jean La Fontaine who writes about this ritual that, "Those who show any sign of weakness indicate an unmanly lack of it which may be remembered years after the event."¹⁹ Thus, it seems that the ritual has long-lasting implications both for those who succeed and for those who do not.

In her 1997 *Twilight Zones*, which examines the significance of cultural images, philosopher Susan Bordo develops a scathing critique of contemporary Western culture's obsession with the action hero ideal that is exemplified by the character William Wallace as portrayed by Mel Gibson in the film *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), which Gibson also directed, and can also be found in numerous advertising campaigns and in the media coverage of the 1996 Olympics.²⁰

In *Braveheart*, Wallace is publicly tortured (stretched, racked, and disemboweled), all while maintaining his free spirit and unwillingness to submit.²¹ Bordo argues that Wallace's ability to withstand such torture is the point of the film for it demonstrates that Wallace's will is so strong that he can endure anything and thus is worthy of hero worship (28).²² It simultaneously communicates his commitment to the group.

¹⁹ Fontaine, J.S. *Initiation: Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge across the World*. (Penguin, 1985), pp. 144. Quoted in Brady (2018), p. 163.

²⁰ Bordo, Susan. *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.*. (University of California Press, 1997), pp. 27-65.

²¹ Interestingly, at least two of Gibson's subsequent films feature drawn out scenes of protagonists withstanding physical torture: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Apocalypto* (2006).

²² Bordo, *ibid.*

Bordo identifies additional examples of this punishing ideal of moral fortitude in the way the press portrayed the 1996 Olympic athletes as heroic because of their willingness to endure pain and suffering while remaining undaunted (28).²³ She writes that, “As in *Braveheart*, the ability to rise above the trials of the body is associated with the highest form of courage and commitment” (28).²⁴ It demonstrates commitment to the group (in this case, the nation). Bordo praises the courage of the athletes but insists that the ideal being perpetuated is dangerous and unrealistic. The idea that brutal tests of mettle separate winners from losers means that any of us unable or unwilling to undergo excruciating pain will be considered unworthy.

Now, Brady never suggests that those unwilling to participate in initiation rites such as the one practiced by the Gisu are unworthy. Yet, we worry that his positive account of suffering as an expression of faith valorizes the kind of unhealthy machismo ideal criticized by Bordo. We likewise worry the suffering described in the initiation rite is excessive, and of the wrong kind, to be of virtue-theoretic value. We suspect it would be difficult to distinguish the suffering described in the initiation rite from some of the suffering that results from horrendous evils, such as torture that have no virtue-theoretic value.

We have another question about chapter six. This one concerns Brady’s argument on how suffering is vital for loving relationships. On this view, it is not only the case that one may voluntarily choose to suffer for the sake of others in order to express one’s love; suffering for the sake of another is necessary for a relationship to be strong and deep (154).

Brady explains that we can help to atone for another’s wrongdoing by being a ‘willing’ or ‘silent’ scapegoat and inviting and accepting punishment so that others are not blamed. We see such selfless suffering reflected in the archetype of the ‘hero as scapegoat,’ and in the idea of ‘taking one for the team.’ Real world examples Brady adduces include the inspiring case of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest who died in Auschwitz after volunteering to take the place of another man (156).²⁵

Brady maintains that by choosing to suffer for the sake of others, we express our love and concern for them. He further argues that the recognition of this tends to deepen relational bonds, and that the selfless attitude on display is a core element in deep, personal relationships. According to Brady, this type of suffering has a distinctive communicative value. Due to the fact we have little voluntary control over suffering and its expression, it is often a more reliable and effective form of communication than other expressions of love and commitment such as statements. This is an important and insightful point about communication—language isn’t the only way,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ A far less important but perhaps better-known example is the character of Katniss Everdeen, the hero of the *Hunger Games* novels and films. At the outset of the first novel (film), Katniss volunteers to participate in the ‘Hunger Games’ in order to take the place of her younger sister, Prim, who was selected as one of the participants from their district. The way this action is depicted in both the novels and the films fits well with Brady’s analysis in that it seems to be proof of Katniss’s love and concern for her sister, which is arguably one of the primary reasons the character of Katniss is viewed as good and secures readers’ and audiences’ sympathy almost immediately.

or perhaps even the most reliable way, to communicate one's love and commitment. These can be communicated directly through affect.

Brady is right that selfless suffering for the sake of another can express the sufferer's love to both the other and, in some cases, the sufferer herself. And the historical figures he references who selflessly sacrificed themselves are no doubt praiseworthy.

It does not follow from this, however, that selfless suffering is necessary for loving relationships. It is one thing to say that loving relationships require us to care about and attend to our partners' well-being. It is another, however, to say that to love deeply we must place the other's well-being above our own. We can accept Brady's claims about selfless suffering being indicative of love of and concern, deepening love relationships, etc. but this doesn't prove that those who do not subordinate their own well-being to the well-being of their loved ones don't truly love.

In addition, we worry that Brady's account risks being used by others to support unjust systems of oppression in which some groups, but not others, are expected to prove their love and commitment through repeated acts of selflessness. Take, for example, traditional norms of motherhood within patriarchal societies. Mothers are supposed to be completely devoted to their children. They are expected not only to attend to their children's every need and desire but to do so even when it comes at their own expense. What's more, they are typically supposed to enjoy doing so.²⁶ Although these norms have been and are continuing to be challenged in many places, they still exist, and are rampant in places where girls and women are routinely denied basic rights and education, at least in part because it is assumed that their lives will be and should be dedicated to the selfless care of others. Those who resist these norms are often judged to be unnatural, selfish, and morally suspect: something is thought to be wrong with the woman who is unwilling to selflessly suffer, who does not want to give up everything for the sake of her children or to care for her family. They are thought not to *love* their children, their husbands, etc.

It is not our view that Brady is in *any* way endorsing misogynist practices. We're nonetheless concerned that parts of the analysis in Chapter 6 risk glorifying a brand of selflessness that has been problematic historically and that should not be considered a requirement for loving relationships. In both heroism and selflessness, we worry that the suffering is too excessive, and of the wrong kind, to be of virtue-theoretic value. The next section addresses the need to reduce suffering.

5 Enough Suffering and the Need to Reduce it

Brady is right to point out that suffering that results from horrendous evils, such as torture, starvation, and many forms of oppression, does not have virtue-theoretic value and does not contribute to flourishing. As he puts the point, "we can... accept that some suffering, perhaps a great deal of suffering, is all-things-considered bad, or has no redeeming features" (117). He likewise argues that since

²⁶ For discussion of traditional ideals of motherhood and their damaging effects, see Cynthia Willett's *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (Routledge, 1995).

“suffering will be much more likely to produce virtue in circumstances where... institutional structures are supportive and non-oppressive,” conditions of oppression, and the suffering they cause, must be reduced (137). In short, for persons who are in conditions of oppression, what is needed for the development and expression of virtue is *less* suffering.

We agree and think it important to emphasize this point. Conditions of oppression can produce pervasive and overwhelming suffering, which detracts from one’s ability to develop virtues like courage, pride, and autonomy, and instead results in “moral damage,” facilitating submission, servility, and dependence.²⁷ Nor is such suffering constitutively valuable as an expression of virtues like compassion. Responding appropriately to the pain of others in such conditions would require constant suffering on the part of the agent. Because such suffering impedes the agent’s flourishing, it won’t be constitutive of virtues, unless virtues are de-coupled from flourishing. As Lisa Tessman (2005) has argued, even being moderately sensitive to the suffering of others, when such suffering is extreme and pervasive, impedes one’s flourishing. In her words, moderate compassion: “is terribly demanding, to the point where its bearer cannot be said to be living well: attending to even a tiny fraction of those who suffer requires taking on great pain, and meanwhile one is disturbed by the overwhelming level of need to which one necessarily will fail to attend” (2005: 164).²⁸ Tessman contends that moderate compassion in such conditions is a “burdened” virtue—i.e., it is a virtue insofar as it enables one to act as well as possible when right actions are unavailable, and it is burdened insofar as it detracts from one’s flourishing.

Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic has also produced extensive suffering, much of which is neither instrumentally valuable for developing virtues such as courage, nor constitutively valuable as an expression of virtues such as compassion. If this is correct and much of the suffering caused by the Covid-19 pandemic lacks virtue-theoretic value, then several of Brady’s arguments will be limited in their current application. Perhaps, the conclusion to draw here is that suffering may still have virtue-theoretic value for *some* persons. Persons who have been shielded from much of the suffering caused by the pandemic (due to privilege and luck), may still need to suffer to develop and express virtues. Or perhaps, the conclusion to draw here is that *some* degree of suffering may be needed to develop and express virtue; i.e., a world without any suffering would be a world in which humans don’t have virtues. Even so, it will be important to emphasize that for many people, and for a world in which there is already enough suffering, what is needed for the development and expression of virtues that contribute to flourishing is *less* suffering. We think this is consistent with Brady’s call for a reduction of suffering and hope our questions have been helpful in encouraging further research on the connections between suffering and virtue.

Suffering and Virtue makes a vital contribution to the literature at the intersection of moral psychology, virtue ethics, and virtue epistemology. The arguments

²⁷ See Lisa Tessman. *Burdened Virtues*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Brady makes are impressive in their vision, breadth, and depth; they are significant for multiple areas within these fields; and they clearly warrant further attention and study. We hope to have contributed to the ongoing study of virtue and suffering inspired by Brady's project. We are grateful to Brady for writing a book that will be an outstanding resource for future projects on this topic.

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