

The Study and Management of Pain Require a New Discipline about Suffering

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Abstract

It is proposed to create a discipline, called ‘algonomy’, that would be specifically dedicated to the study of suffering. The word suffering is used here in the broad sense of ‘unpleasantness’. Algonomy would allow to deal with the unpleasant aspect of ‘physical pain’ in a more adequate manner than it is the case presently in pain research or management, where the focus is de facto on the sensory aspect rather than on the suffering component of pain. As suggested by Sascha Benjamin Fink in his 2011 article ‘Independence and Connections of Pain and Suffering’ (Journal of Consciousness Studies, v. 18, n. 9-10, pp. 46-66), the distinctive feature of pain is its sensory aspect, and that sensory aspect is NOT ‘painful’ by itself : some people, for instance patients with pain asymbolia, may experience pain without unpleasantness, and that raises a query about how the International Association for the Study of Pain defines its subject of concern. Besides, unpleasantness is common to many experiences other than pain. Therefore, if scientists, clinicians, or others want to tackle the suffering aspect of physical pain with the best chance of success, then it is suggested that they acquire the adequate conceptual framework to do so, and such a framework can only be offered by a discipline that deals with suffering as its specialty.

Key Words: Pain, suffering, unpleasantness, IASP definition, pain management, discipline, interdisciplinary.

1. Discipline is Sorely Needed

Pain scientists make sense of pain within the framework of their discipline. They define pain as ‘an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage’.¹ That definition has been useful, it has made sense for them until now, and therefore they want to go on and keep it. We, at this *Making Sense of Pain* conference, may well admit that the scientific definition of pain is good for scientists, but our purpose differs from theirs, and therefore we may speak of pain in various other senses. That is fine inasmuch as what we are talking about is defined in such a way that we understand each other, that we are knowingly talking of the same thing. Etymologically, to *de-fine* is to delimit, and limits are especially important when

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we are, here at Inter-Disciplinary.Net, in a domain of collective inquiry called *Probing the Boundaries*. Jane Fernandez, in her excellent introduction to *Making Sense of Pain -- Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, underlines the difficulties and opportunities, as we dwell together in a ‘Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy’.²

This conference proceeding provide an attempt to extend the conversation on pain, notwithstanding that the boundaries of the word ‘pain’ are characteristically blurred by connotations of suffering and trauma. The variety of papers in this collection transgress these boundaries knowingly, inviting a more expansive rather than narrow definition of pain. (...) The conference theme Making Sense of Pain is an attempt to investigate/locate/retrieve/create a language for pain.³

I am here to propose the creation of a new disciplinary framework for dealing with pain in the broad sense, or suffering in the broad sense, or unpleasantness in a technical sense, or ‘all our feeling bad’.⁴

First, a single term must be chosen for referring to the subject or topic of that discipline. I suggest *suffering*, for the time being : eventually, another term could be adopted. Then, a definition must be provided for stating as clearly as possible what is meant by *suffering*. I suggest to use the definition that has been elaborated until now in the Wikipedia article to which I have been contributing :

Suffering, or pain in a broad sense, is an experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm in an individual. Suffering is the basic element that makes up the negative valence of affective phenomena.⁵

That definition of suffering differs pretty much from perhaps a more common acceptance of the term, such as the one given by Eric Cassell (often quoted in scientific literature). ‘Most generally,’ says Cassell ‘suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person.’⁶ For the purpose of what I propose, there is a problem with using *suffering* in such a restricted sense : if *suffering* is used for distress, and *pain* for physical hurt, then there is no common word that is available for referring to ‘all our feeling bad’, and a neologism has to be used, or perhaps the term *unpleasantness*. Those two solutions seem inappropriate at this time, so let us see how far we can go with the term and definition that I suggested. Much more should be said about definition, especially in relation with Fink’s provocative paper *The Ambiguity of Pain*,⁷ but space forbidding here, it will be for another time.

Now, it may be asked why a discipline about suffering should be created. The short answer is for knowledge organization and practical purposes. Because suffering is an important phenomenon, it must be studied and acted upon, not only through various fields of knowledge and action, but also through its own specifically dedicated field. Why doesn't such a field exist yet? A hint can be found in the preface to *Social Suffering*, by Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock :

But because of the manner in which knowledge and institutions are organized in the contemporary world as pragmatically oriented programs of welfare, health, social development, social justice, security, and so on, the phenomenon of suffering as an experiential domain of everyday social life has been splintered into measurable attributes. These attributes are then managed by bureaucratic institutions and expert cultures that reify the fragmentation while casting a veil of misrecognition over the domain as a whole (because if seen as a whole it would be too threatening?). As a result, neither a transsectoral framework of analysis nor interdisciplinary theories are made visible. By returning to the primacy of the phenomenological domain of experiences of suffering in a broad social context, we seek to show that what one expert defines as the object of health policy and another as the object of economic policy can and must be viewed in a frame that integrates these and other human problems -- a frame that names a large domain of the sources, forms, and consequences of social life. In order to intervene in that domain, we need to ground responses, with the aid of social maps and social theories, in new and more humanly valid ways or refiguring the predicaments of our time.⁸

The authors pose the question : '(...) because if seen as a whole it would be too threatening?' I guess that, to a certain extent, an obfuscating complexity is inherent in the present system of governance, or in all of the natural world, and that the simplicity of addressing the question of suffering as a whole is a threat to all of us who, in order to make the most of our short lives, prefer (or are forced by natural necessity) to use our powers to the detriment of others. In other words, we prefer to appear obfuscated by complexity rather than vulnerable through simplicity, and we will address suffering as a whole only inasmuch as we find an economic advantage in creating such a discipline, that is to say inasmuch as we transcend competition and realize that universal good is more advantageous. As we choose our definitions, so we govern ourselves.

I suggest to name *algonomy* the discipline about suffering. The ancient Greek *algos* means physical or mental pain, and *nomos* has the connotations of knowledge, domain, management.

2. Pain Science Needs to Breed a Science of Suffering

Pain research and management became a significant field of activity in the nineteen seventies, after Ronald Melzack had provided theoretical basis for more advanced neurological and psychological studies of pain, and after John Bonica had championed a wide interdisciplinary approach to pain study and management. Today, the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) counts more than 7,000 members, and impressive advances have been made with respect to knowledge and some forms of treatment. A more or less declared crisis, however, looms over the field. In spite of repeated calls from concerned IASP leaders, progress in the treatment of pain is generally lagging : populations everywhere are still massively suffering from under-treated chronic pain, a physician's formation still typically includes only a few hours of learning about pain, many countries do not allow their sick and dying citizens to benefit from potent analgesic drugs. There is also a less apparent aspect of the crisis which is to me more fundamental : knowledgeable persons in the field admit and deplore that a pervasive conceptual and terminological muddle prevails in pain science, but few, if any, are ready to invest themselves into addressing that problem. That is to me typical of a *paradigm crisis*.⁹ Here follows suggestions about how that crisis might be resolved.

Pain is understood by pain scientists as physical pain only, and it has become the subject of an exclusive preserve, carefully fenced in order to distinguish itself from the *equivocal* domain of suffering. That was a necessary step during the 20th century, I presume. Now, however, pain scientists would do well, if I may suggest, to reexamine the fundamental link between pain and suffering, not only for the sake of their own field, but also for helping to bring about a new discipline that would redefine what it means to relieve suffering in our world. According to the IASP definition, pain is an experience that is complex, unpleasant, sensory, emotional, and associated with damage or described in terms of damage. An agonomic point of view allows to single out a simple phenomenon in that complexity : unpleasantness, which is a defining part of suffering. *From there, and henceforth, a pain may always be understood, as a suffering*. In this view, pain is no longer the subject of an exclusive preserve and rather becomes, *unequivocally*, an integral part of the domain of suffering, with a lot of long sought beneficial consequences.

Jock Murray, in his 1995 report entitled *Chronic Pain*, has a section on suffering in which he recalls Cassell's appeal for a medicine that is dedicated to the relief of suffering :

Although the title of this report is related to "Pain", I suspect that we would understand the situation and the patients much better if we concentrated more on the concept and meaning of "suffering". This would help us understand what is occurring to the people, their families, their

therapists and all the others who relate to them. The aim of the medical profession is to relieve suffering. Cassell (1982 [*The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*]) reminds us, however, that this may be naive. He states that the public, and patients, feel that the aim of the medical profession is the relief of suffering, but apparently the profession doesn't.¹⁰

Murray also cites Fordyce : ‘One of the greatest problems in clinical pain, particularly chronic pain, is the confounding of pain with suffering, both by the patient and by the professional.’¹¹

Yuri Maricich in his 2010 *Making Sense of Suffering* conference paper asks whether medical practitioners have an ethical obligation to recognize and respond to suffering.¹² His Pathos Project (pathosproject.org) emphasizes that suffering is the basic notion which may converge ‘the object and action of medicine and its doctor-patient relationship’.¹³ James Giordano, a member of the Pathos Project Advisory Committee and the editor with Mark Boswell of *Pain Medicine: Philosophy, Ethics, and Policy*,¹⁴ writes:

Comprehending the complexity of (...) suffering involves both scientific and humanistic inquiry and is fundamental to the provision of technically right and morally good care.¹⁵

The US government asked in 2010 for a report to assess the state of the science regarding pain research, care and education, and to make recommendations to advance the field. In June 2011 the report came in, calling for no less than ‘a cultural transformation’ in order to ‘better prevent, assess, treat, and understand pain of all types’.¹⁶

There are various strategies that are put forward nationally or internationally for the betterment of pain research and management. All such initiatives are praiseworthy, but progress will probably continue to be lagging if suffering is not recognized as a *basic core* concern in pain science. The biopsychosocial approach,¹⁷ despite all its merits, is no more sufficient than a biomedical approach : an algonomic approach is required for dealing with the suffering of pain. That is the cultural and paradigmatic change that is needed. Meanwhile, strategies for promoting access to pain relief will probably succeed less than expected, because they will *unwittingly* compete with countless other strategies for the relief of suffering due to diverse illnesses, or poverty, or crime, or ignorance, etc.

In a letter to the editor of *Pain Research & Management*, I wrote:

I believe the problem of pain science knowledge translation has a political dimension that should be confronted head-on. It is a problem of resource distribution that could be compared, for example, to the one that prevails

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in nutrition science, in which solutions to hunger are well known but can only be implemented through politically adequate resource distribution. What modern politics is still lacking, in my view, is an approach to suffering (algonomy; <http://www.algosphere.org/indexen.htm>) that could inform social-economic management. There is a need for a science of suffering (algoscience; <http://www.algosphere.org/intro/index.html>), and psychology as well as pain science should be more aware of that need.¹⁸

Our culture, the heir of our several thousand years old civilization, is in a profound conceptual and terminological muddle regarding pain and suffering. Our contemporary culture, even if it is obsessed throughout its media by everything that hurts, ignore in fact suffering because it does not know what it is. How would it know? Where are the specialists of suffering? Our culture subordinates suffering to all other interests (be they in the domain of religion, economy, politics, justice, medicine, art, sport, etc.) and cannot acknowledge its due place, because it has no idea regarding how important it is to pay full attention to suffering itself, in itself, by itself, for itself. Suffering is so much taken for granted as an ubiquitous, worrying and cared for fact of life, that conceptually it constitutes a gigantic blind spot in our cultural visual field, a blind spot filled up with any of the contextual concerns at hand.

Pain scientists, who opened the doors of science to the experience of pain, have the responsibility to provide their help for clarifying that conceptual and terminological muddle, and for creating a science of suffering, not only because their concern with suffering is inevitable (and so much prone to confusion), but also because pain science needs algonomy for resolving its own difficulties on the levels of fundamental theory, medical practice (and ‘translation from lab to clinic’), and social or political strategy. With pain scientists’ help, we may hope to succeed in creating the required discipline about suffering.

3. **What YOU Can Do**

Inter-Disciplinary.Net is the only place that I could find where an active project about suffering is going on for years. That’s why I am here. One-off meetings and publications are not enough, even when they provide valuable outputs. There ought to be a discipline for bringing together and organizing outputs so as to form a systematic body of knowledge and prepare any subsequent focus on the matter. Interdisciplinarity is fine, but if there is no specific discipline for suffering, the ‘inter’ lacks the crux of the matter. For instance, a sociological approach to suffering offers indispensable views, but an algonomic approach to society sheds quite another kind of light. Judy Segal wrote an interesting sentence with respect to disciplinarity :

Pain and suffering are agencies in the unmaking of disciplines -- or, perhaps, the remaking of them -- not only because we can, each of us,

only touch a bit of the elephant (so, we need to be inter- and multidisciplinary) but also because pain and suffering do not respect borders (so, we need even to be undisciplined).¹⁹

Only one prefix is lacking in Judy's enumeration : neo. We need a new discipline whose specific object is suffering because the experience of suffering, in so many ways, for all of us between heaven and earth, constitute the crux of our very matter. I believe pain and suffering are powerful agencies for the making of a new discipline, but the problem at the onset is to find the first people who will care and dare. Fortunately, we may count on the initiative of Inter-Disciplinary.Net (ID.Net) :

(...) the annual project meetings or conferences take place in a much wider context of an on-going set of complementary and supporting activities. (...) By nature a project (...) contains within itself the seeds for the future development of either the project itself or the natural replacement of itself with a new project as part of its evolution.²⁰

So, we may dream that algonomy become an ID.Net *project* which might become a *hub*. Reciprocally, algonomy might help conference delegates to 'make sense of' pain and suffering, that is to say it might help to make those phenomena intelligible and controllable, more understood and mastered. To begin with, the univocal terminology of algonomy could help to distinguish and sort activities under the themes of pain or suffering. In any event, a basis exists for starting the construction of algonomy. It consists in works from ID.Net, and from researchers like David Pearce²¹ or Bruno Contestabile,²² and from many others that can be found in my online bibliography.²³ I also offer on algorithmsphere.org a rudimentary introduction to algonomy, with a few words about methodology, algometry, collection and classification.

Adventurers, consider this as an invitation!

Notes

- ¹ International Association for the Study of Pain, *IASP Taxonomy*, Viewed 4 April 2012, <http://www.iasp-pain.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Pain_Defi...isplay.cfm&ContentID=1728>.
- ² Jane Fernandez, Introduction to *Making Sense of Pain -- Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jane Fernandez, (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), xviii.
- ³ *Ibid.*, xiii and xvi.
- ⁴ The expression ‘all our feeling bad’ is taken from the following sentence written by Leonard Katz: ‘Pleasure, in the inclusive usages most important in moral psychology, ethical theory, and the studies of mind, includes all joy and gladness — all our feeling good, or happy. It is often contrasted with similarly inclusive pain, or suffering, which is similarly thought of as including all our feeling bad.’ Leonard D. Katz, ‘Pleasure’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, Viewed 4 April 2012, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/pleasure/>>.
- ⁵ Wikipedia contributors, ‘Suffering’, in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Viewed 4 April 2012, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Suffering&oldid=483791374>>.
- ⁶ Eric J Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.
- ⁷ Sascha Benjamin Fink, ‘The Ambiguity of Pain’, in *Making Sense of Pain -- Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jane Fernandez (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 3-12.
- ⁸ Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, Introduction to *Social Suffering*, eds. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (London: University of California Press, 1997), xxv.
- ⁹ Such as described in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- ¹⁰ T.J. Murray, *Chronic Pain*, Report to Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia (1995), 51.
- ¹¹ Wilbert E. Fordyce, ‘Pain and Suffering : A Reappraisal’, *American Psychologist*, 43 (1988): 276.
- ¹² Yuri Maricich, *Do Practitioners of Medicine Have an Ethical Obligation to recognize and Respond to Suffering*, Draft conference paper, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/YuriMaricichpaper.pdf>>.
- ¹³ Pathos Project, *Our Mission*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://pathosproject.org/ourmission/index.shtml>>.
- ¹⁴ James Giordano and Mark V. Boswell eds., *Pain Medicine: Philosophy, Ethics and Policy*, (Oxon: Linton Atlantic Books, 2009).
- ¹⁵ James Giordano, ‘Dolor, Morbus, Patiens: Maldynia, Pain as Illness and Suffering’, *The Pain Practitioner*, 16(1) (2006): 11.
- ¹⁶ Institute of Medicine, *Report at a Glance*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/Relieving-Pain-in-America-A-Blueprint-for-Transforming-Prevention-Care-Education-Research/Report-Brief.aspx>>.
- ¹⁷ See the excellent critique and interesting new theoretical framework by Milton Cohen and John Quintner, ‘The Clinical Conversation about Pain: Tensions between the Lived Experience and the Biomedical Model’, in *Making Sense of Pain - Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jane Fernandez (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 85-100.
- ¹⁸ Robert Daoust, Letter to the Editor, *Pain Research & Management*, 14(2) (2009): 173.
- ¹⁹ Judy Segal, *On Pain, Suffering, Rhetoric, Disciplinarity -- And Hypochondria*, a text figuring since 2001 among *Workshop: Discussion Papers* on the website of Pain and Suffering Interdisciplinary Research Network, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.english.ubc.ca/projects/pain/paper.htm>>.
- ²⁰ Inter-disciplinary.Net, *How ID.Net Works*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/about-us/how-idnet-works/>>.
- ²¹ David Pearce, *The Hedonistic Imperative*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.hedweb.com/index.html>>.
- ²² Bruno Contestabile, *Philosophy as Therapy - Working papers by Socrethics*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.socrethics.com/index.htm>>.
- ²³ Algosphere, *Bibliography in Algonomy*, Viewed 5 April 2012, <<http://www.algosphere.org/intro/mediagraphy.htm>>.

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