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Running and the Paradox of Suffering

Abstract

What motivates the voluntary suffering of training for a long-distance run – or any other difficult athletic skill? Long-term pleasure cannot adequately explain this seemingly masochistic activity. On the contrary, I argue that pleasure, or “reinforcement,” is not the only ultimate motivator of behavior. Each of the emotion systems defines its own intrinsic values, including an innate “play” system and an innate “exploratory drive” that is included in what neuropsychologist Jaak Panksepp calls the “SEEKING system” of the emotional brain. Panksepp’s description of the conscious dimension of SEEKING is remarkably similar to Otto Rank’s descriptions of his “love of life” dimension of motivation, which actually conflicts with the pleasure principle. The desire for pleasure is a desire to reduce consummatory drives, which means reducing the energy level of our bodily systems. Complete reduction would be death. If there were no competing motivation in the other direction, there would be nothing to keep us alive. The SEEKING system is what does that. It motivates a higher energy level. In the case of athletic training, we do not have to “force ourselves” to this higher energy level. The SEEKING system is an innate natural drive. If we were to deliberately try to just sit on a couch indefinitely, at some point we would fail.

Keywords:

Stoicism, Aristotle, philosophy of sport, sports psychology, emotion, motivation

Voluntary Suffering

My high school track coach never taught me any of the fine points of training methods or running techniques. In fact, he hardly ever spoke to me at all, finding himself preoccupied with the football running backs who were allowed to train for the more glamorous distances of 100 and 220 yards. Occasionally, however, the coach would stroll up to the start line/finish line of the 400-meter. If we happened to be finishing a heat, he would give me the one piece of technical advice that he ever did offer: “Suffer, boy! Suffer, boy!”

At the time, that advice did not seem very helpful since I was already suffering as much as I thought was possible under the circumstances. But over the years, I learned the real value of his guidance. I would realize increasingly that voluntary suffering is not something that comes easily. I only wish he would have given me some tips on how to do it more effectively than I already fancied myself to be doing. Subjectively, I certainly *felt* myself to be suffering.

Obviously, we all know how to suffer. Throughout history, suffering has been the principal occupation of humanity at most times and places. When nature did not throw enough of it at us, we devised ways to throw it at each other. There can be no mystery that we all, to greater or lesser extents, know how to suffer. Throughout most of prehistory, we had no choice but to endure long-distance running and many tougher struggles. In fact, most human cultures have created rituals of suffering for their teenagers to endure. We have glorified those who were willing to suffer more than usual, such as Pheidippides who supposedly ran the first marathon, although we now know that earlier hunting-and-gathering peoples had runners who could do such long distances routinely.

The overwhelming volume of *involuntary* suffering only makes it all the more mysterious that, given the inevitable misery of our numerous human travails, we are willing to add, apparently on a purely voluntary basis, the even further suffering required by the mastery of demanding skills like music, art, mathematics, or perhaps most paradigmatically, the development of running speed. Even with voluntary suffering, there can be no doubt that we do have the capacity for it; otherwise, there would be no professional athletes, or even mildly decent amateur ones. I have never met a really good athlete – or musician or advanced master of any difficult skill – who did not seem a little obsessive-compulsive. Whether one should also call it masochism to practice a grueling discipline for many hours a day over a period of many years, I am less sure. If someone learns to enjoy suffering, is it still suffering?

Getting Off the Couch: A Mystery

What is clear is that the habit of suffering has to be re-mastered at the beginning of every new season and every new practice session. Even for those so obsessive that there is never an off-season, there is still always an effort to get oneself off the couch for a serious workout. The tricky question is how to induce oneself to suffer long enough for the suffering to become something that one gracefully chooses to endure, and possibly in some sense might even “enjoy,” although even the joy of “runner’s high” that comes with long distances is decidedly ephemeral. It occurs only at the point when the suffering itself becomes even more pronounced. So the suffering is the main thing that sticks in the memory when gearing up for the next day’s workout. In fact, even whatever enjoyment does come, seems to be taken in the suffering itself.

My question is: what is there about the human psyche that enables the needed voluntary suffering? Or more precisely, what is the *inner conflict* that enables us deliberately to choose suffering in some cases, yet in other cases we cannot get off the couch, no matter how much we will it?

I want to argue – contrary to the Western social sciences of behaviorism, consummatory drive-reductivism, economic determinism, and “reinforcement” theories – that the real purpose of voluntary suffering is not just to

enhance longer-term pleasure or self-interest or to avoid longer-term pain at the expense of short-term misery. There is not enough long-term payoff to motivate the kind of suffering my coach was recommending. If there were, one would expect that more people than not would find losing weight or building running speed an easy endeavor, driven by the long-term pleasures that supposedly would motivate them. But empirically, just the opposite is true. Any long-term rewards of good diet or exercise are much more likely to fail than succeed in motivating people voluntarily to stick with a punishing routine.

Whatever makes the difference, it cannot just be reduced to long-term pleasure or happiness. Once we are in the habit of working out, the prospect may not seem so daunting. But how to get into that habit in the first place – how to talk oneself into initiating the suffering – that is the mystery.

Bad Habits

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (circa 340BC),¹ was well aware of this conundrum. He addressed it with his concept of “rationality,” by which he did not just mean the ability to think. What he meant was the ability to *understand our own psychology* well enough to develop training routines that could eventually foster the right habits and help us achieve the kind of character we aspire to. The resulting personality (so Aristotle’s argument runs) would include the extent to which we do or do not prioritize things like pleasure, or what we moderns would call “happiness.” Aristotle means to imply that it is within our own power to decide what kind of person we want to be, and then motivate ourselves to endure the needed practice schedules. Only then is it determined whether we are the kind of person who needs indulgence or is capable of asceticism.

For Aristotle, the need for pleasure or to avoid pain cannot completely determine our choices, because in many ways just the reverse is true: our choices determine how much pleasure we will need and how much pain we will learn to endure. What makes humans “rational” is understanding the relevant psychological principles to get ourselves to do the training voluntarily in the first place. Dogs can be trained, but they cannot devise their own training schedules. Humans understand that we can use short-term rewards, like a drink of soda or cup of coffee or a night of drinking on the town, to get ourselves to do work that we also understand will end by changing us into the kind of person who no longer needs so much of those rewards to induce us to endure further suffering. The rewards become like a ladder we can throw away after we have climbed it – provided that we guard against becoming addicted to the ladder. We understand that we will learn to enjoy things we do not yet enjoy, and that we can learn not to want things that we now want. As Gabriel Marcel implies with his idea of the “elasticity of hope,” we can even learn to hope for a different set of things from what we currently hope for.

But a crucial problem with Aristotle’s argument is that we still have to get motivated for that initial choice as to what kind of person we want to be. If long-term pleasure or self-interest were our motive in the beginning, then we would not so easily *choose* the path that leads to not being driven by pleasure and self-interest, directly or indirectly. Without a basic rejection of the pleasure principle as the central motivational force, the process of self-actualization could never get off the ground in the way Aristotle wants. It would lead only to more competent methods of self-indulgence.

1) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Why Be Stoic?

The ancient Stoics, Epictetus (circa 108AD),² Marcus Aurelius (circa 180AD),³ and Zeno (circa 260BC;⁴ see also Diogenes circa 230AD)⁵ carried Aristotle's argument a step further. Either there is some amount of pleasure that could be enough for us, or there is not. If not, then we may as well just resign ourselves to suffering and give up on happiness, or at least minimize its role in our lives. But if there is any amount that would be enough, then Aristotle's principle allows us to choose how much that will be – a lot or a little. Which personality we deliberately choose to construct for ourselves determines this. And we know how to develop training programs designed to achieve the chosen character outcome. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, argue that we should choose to become the kind of person who needs as little as possible, because what we need will then be easier to achieve.

But the same problem arises as with Aristotle's original argument. We would need an initial motivation to train and condition ourselves to become the kind of person who needs little. But if the motivation is simply to make life easier in the long run (pun intended), then Stoicism reduces to Epicureanism, at least as far as our question of voluntary suffering is concerned. We would then simply be choosing a more efficient method of pleasure-maximization. But we have already seen that the long-term rewards in terms of pleasure-maximization are not enough to get most people to do the amount of suffering such a goal would require. Something other than a desire for long-term pleasure is needed, even granted that a good way to maximize long-term pleasure is to learn to minimize our own needs and wants.

The Modern Turn

Modernity attempted to just bite the bullet and admit that any motivation other than hedonism (in which they quickly included "enlightened self-interest") is impossible. Behavior was taken to be determined entirely by consummatory reinforcements or the need to avoid punishment. Thomas Hobbes,⁶ a self-described egoistic hedonist, already developed elaborate theories about how chemical reactions in the brain produce either pleasure or pain; and those reactions determine our behavior since it is a physical movement resulting from those chemical reactions in the brain. Twentieth century behaviorism, drive theories, and reinforcement theories were only slightly elaborated footnotes to Hobbes.

But those theories encounter the opposite problem from Aristotle and the Stoics. They are able to explain our natural laziness, but they offer little to explain self-discipline and the ability to develop a capacity for voluntarily suffering. If our only motive is to maximize pleasure, then what can motivate us to become someone who, at least on certain occasions, deliberately *does not* maximize pleasure? We have already seen that long-term rewards cannot explain it, because those same rewards are available to the vast numbers who do not choose the suffering of serious training. So those same long-term rewards, whatever we might suppose them to be, cannot explain why some do choose the suffering.

The arguments of Aristotle and the Stoics were rejected beginning with seventeenth century scientist/philosophers like Hobbes and Descartes, followed by Bentham and even Kant. Do not forget, even Kant assumed as a basic principle "Theorem II" of the *Critique of Practical Reason* that "All material principles – as

2) Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings*.

3) Aurelius, *Meditations*.

4) Zeno, *The Fragments of Zeno and Cleanthes*.

5) Diogenes, *A Summary of Stoic Philosophy*.

6) Hobbes, *Leviathan*.

such – are, one and all, of one and the same kind and belong under the general principle of self-love or one’s own happiness.”⁷ He later adds, “All determining bases of the will except for the single pure practical law of reason (the moral law) are one and all empirical and hence, as such, belong to the principle of happiness.”⁸ Like his modern Western colleagues, Kant is assuming that the only natural motivation (or “empirical” motivation, as he calls it) is pleasure – in fact, *one’s own* pleasure. Only a metaphysical *deus ex machina* could lead to any non-hedonistic behavior. Even then, we would have to assume that some moral principle such as “one should always obey one’s track coach” was what compelled me to obey his command to suffer. Or perhaps there is a moral injunction that “one should always become a faster runner than one is.”

Be it Ever so Humble

There is plenty of evidence that the short-term suffering of training cannot just be motivated by long-term rewards, such as glory or getting a date for Saturday night. I can assure you that, even had I won many heats (which I did not), the grandeur of those victories would have attracted little if any romantic attention, assuming that any of the other students had known that there had ever been a track meet. And one only needs to look around to realize that being in a rewarding relationship hardly correlates, if at all, with athletic prowess, and less still with the difficult mastery of other equally demanding skills like music or philosophy. In fact, the divorce rate among musicians and athletes seems somewhat proportional to the degree of their dedication to their craft. Terry Bradshaw’s devotion to football won him divorces from three different wives, despite the severe clinical depression that each divorce precipitated.⁹ Dedicated musicians are painfully aware of how substantially their marriages or relationships are being jeopardized by the road trips and long hours in studios, practice rooms, night clubs, and other performing venues.

Some might assume that narcissism is the motivation. Maybe just being proud of one’s accomplishments could be enough? But this too is a popular myth. In fact, contrary to much of common opinion, athletes have to learn to be among the most modest of creatures, more aware than anyone of their finiteness and limitations. Underneath the occasional public bravado, athletes know that no matter how fast one is, there are some who are faster. Or if not, wait two or three years, and there will be. Another few years, and there will be tens of thousands. The physical life above all else makes us aware of our frailties and shortcomings. We have to focus acutely on those very shortcomings in order to build better performance.

Even in football, the sport that seems most obviously to win some glory for its most celebrated “stars,” those who work so hard to open the hole through which the running back casually strolls are hardly even noticed by most of the fans. Yet the “stars” are humble enough to gladly grant all the credit to those dedicated yeomen. The quarterback Ben Roethlisberger effusively thanked the long-suffering craftsmen of the front line who had protected him so well the previous week that, contrary to his usual experience, he had been able to go for several days that week without being in continuous pain. Even that brief reprieve from suffering was not available to the unnoticed linemen and blocking backs, yet they not only endured it willingly, but made it their purpose in life. Narcissism cannot motivate that kind of suffering.

Above all else, mastery of a craft requires humility. In order to improve, we first have to pay careful attention to what is deficient in our skills. Only then can we develop effective practice routines designed to correct them. The more narcissistic a young athlete is, the more attention is paid to what is good rather than

7) Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 33.

8) *Ibid.*, 119.

9) See Bradshaw’s *Chicago Tribune* interview: Pierson, “Depression Awareness-Campaign.”

bad about current performance. That attitude is not conducive to improvement. And we have to be prepared to suffer through the embarrassment of poor performance in the earliest years. In all these respects, narcissism directly conflicts with the motivation to suffer. The narcissist is virtually insulted by the idea that suffering should be required.

Nor can money explain anything. Remember, runners earn virtually nothing. Even for professional football or baseball players, during the earlier years when the most strenuous dedication is required, the probability of ever becoming a professional is similar to winning a lottery – so the choice to suffer for that reason would be completely irrational.

Your Mind and You

In a too-little-appreciated way, Freud dissented from the modern hedonistic view of human nature in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There he argues that reduction of consummatory drives cannot be the only basic motivation. Complete reduction of all consummatory drives would mean that all the electrons of all the atoms of the molecules in the nervous system would be reduced to their lowest possible energy level – which would be death.¹⁰

Otto Rank, Freud's student, extended that point and proposed an internal-conflict theory of motivation: there is a fear of death, including the quasi-death of any low-energy condition (for example, complacent satiation); and a fear of life – fear of the energy-demanding chaos that threatens our comfort, security, and the predictability of our future. The death-fear (or alternatively, a love of life) motivates curiosity, exploration, and creativity;¹¹ the opposing tendency – the desire to reduce the energy level of the molecules in our consummatory drive systems – motivates what Simone de Beauvoir calls the “dull comforts” of material satiation.¹²

Play and Seek

Recent neuroscience presents us not with two internally conflicting motivations, but at least *eight*. Jaak Panksepp¹³ is in the forefront of demonstrating the independence of all these different emotion systems from each other in terms of the unique and clearly distinguishable combinations of brain areas and neurotransmitters each of them uses.¹⁴ None of these endogenous systems are developed due to “reinforcement” of any of the others. As is clear in Panksepp's major work, *Affective Neuroscience*,¹⁵ the PLEASURE/PAIN system is *only one of the eight*. (Panksepp adopts the convention of using all-caps to designate his eight basic emotion systems with their separate brain activities.) The other seven systems are equally innate, and will drive behavior regardless of whether they are rewarded or punished:

10) Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

11) Rank, *Truth and Reality*.

12) Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7.

13) See Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*; Panksepp, “The Neuro-Evolutionary Cusp Between Emotions and Cognitions,” 17–56; Panksepp, “Cross-Species Affective Neuroscience;” and Panksepp et al., “Affective Neuroscience Strategies for Understanding and Treating Depression,” 472–94.

14) See also Watt, “Affect and the ‘Hard Problem,’” 91–92; and Watt, “The Centrencephalon and Thalamocortical Integration,” 91–114.

15) Panskepp, *Affective Neuroscience*.

The PLAY system
The RAGE system
The FEAR system
The CARE (or NURTURANCE) system
The PANIC (or SEPARATION DISTRESS) system
The LUST system
The SEEKING system (including the exploratory drive)
The PLEASURE/PAIN system

Two of those are crucial for our question about voluntary suffering: PLAY and SEEKING. Panksepp is best known for his discovery of “rat laughter” during play, and his documentation of the unique neural correlates of the endogenous or innate motivation for play. But equally important is the SEEKING system, which facilitates Rank’s “love of life,” including, as Panksepp puts it, “mental complexities that humans experience as persistent feelings of interest, curiosity, sensation seeking, and, in the presence of a sufficiently complex cortex, the search for higher meaning.”¹⁶ Watt shows how the SEEKING system energizes many of our more complex cognitive operations, including any kind of curiosity or exploration.¹⁷

Shake It Off

How are those emotions relevant to the will to submit to suffering during training? Let us return to the Stoics for a moment. One might expect that Stoics would be best at what is named for them: Stoic self-discipline. But are they? Epictetus, a Roman slave, is famous for having refused to obey his master even when the master literally twisted his arm until it broke. Epictetus reportedly remarked calmly, “I told you if you twisted it too far it would break.” Similarly, Zeno the Stoic recommended “apathy” as the ideal attitude to aim at.

But I have known runners for whom this kind of Stoicism was exactly counter-productive: they stoically pushed themselves so hard that burnout came at all too young an age – especially when injuries became aggravated enough to knock them out of their training altogether. There is a type of stoicism that shuns enjoyment and punishes so severely that Zeno’s “apathy” *truly is* reached. Apathy, pushed too far, motivates nothing – not training or suffering or anything else. An injury as severe as Epictetus’s broken arm is hardly the result an athlete wants from “just muddling through” in spite of any of the body’s complaints. The “I’m just going to bull my way through and ignore the pain” quickly converts a slightly inflamed fascia into a debilitating injury that ends a season or a lifetime of running.

The Panic Button

Pushing oneself that recklessly means failing to listen to the body. Among the various conflicting innate motivations that are being ignored or dampened here, the PLEASURE/PAIN system is not the only one. Our self-punishing Stoic is also suppressing the PLAY system, and virtually ignoring the SEEKING system. The “apathy” becomes an almost complete absence of SEEKING. In fact, Panksepp et al.¹⁸ find that SEEKING system suppression correlates strongly with clinical depression – especially the apathy component of depression. As

16) Ibid., 145.

17) Watt, “The Centrencephalon and Thalamocortical Integration,” 91–114.

18) Panksepp et al., “Affective Neuroscience Strategies,” 472–94.

they put it, SEEKING suppression renders any feeling of “enthusiasm” for anything impossible. Enthusiasm, or inspiration as I would call it – the everyday baseline inspiration to do things – is one of the main experiential correlates of SEEKING system activity.

The other system that correlates with depression is the PANIC (or SEPARATION DISTRESS) system. This is the main system that impels us to define our meaning in terms of relationships with others. The frantic neurotransmitter activity in the PANIC system of a mother separated from her infant is the classic example – followed closely by distress over the death of a loved one or the break-up of a marriage or romantic relationship. It can also be triggered by altercations with friends or co-workers. Anything that interferes with the crucial need for interpersonal relationships can trigger it. Experientially, the PANIC system is felt as a kind of deep sadness, all too familiar to sufferers of clinical depression. PANIC system hyperactivity, after an initial bout of agitation, then interacts with the SEEKING system, suppressing it and leading to the incapacity for “enthusiasm” that Panksepp finds correlates with it.¹⁹

A Steel Curtain

By the time Terry Bradshaw had won his unprecedented four Super Bowl victories, his SEEKING system was becoming suppressed, and he later realized that he suffered from clinical depression. In a retrospective interview, he described himself as having wished his football career would just hurry and get itself over with.²⁰ From the phenomenological perspective, this kind of depression represents, among other things, a situation in which we find ourselves unable to feel very inspired by the value of any action we might take, although we might feel able to *re-act* to environmental circumstances to a limited extent and with some effort. Bradshaw did not feel that he could just play for the love of the game. Ultimately, only the fear of failure, the discipline of his coaches’ practice routines, and the comforting comradery of his team-mates kept him going.

In an abstract way, the depressed person is strongly motivated toward one goal: to *stop* the suffering and lethargy. But with the SEEKING-system suppression, there is no specific action toward which much enthusiasm can be mustered. Even Bradshaw’s impressive achievement of goals could not add up to an enthusiastic motivation. He managed to avoid complete surrender to the depression by forcing himself to keep up his physical training. Physical activity can release just enough dopamine to wake up the motivational systems, at least to an extent.

When I say Bradshaw “forced himself” to stick with his training, this way of putting it bears closer examination. In fact, the structured practice routines, with their human interactions, were a welcome relief from the suffering of his depression. For a time, he could just go out and PLAY (I use the all-caps to emphasize that PLAY is one of our independent motivational systems). I used to wonder why so many amateur runners pay money to drive across town and meet with a group of people with whom they can do their running and other training exercises. I barely have time to go out and run in my neighborhood or at the local high school track. Why would anyone drive across town to do it? But then I read Panksepp and realized that the interpersonal interaction is what makes it a form of PLAY for them. When I was young, I too wanted to run with friends or with the other members of the track team. It was not that they gave me much more technical advice than my football-preoccupied coach did. But they made the running into a form of play.

Someone might say, Aha! But now you are falling into the same trap as the behaviorists, reducing the motivation to a form of pleasure. But do not forget, PLAY is not a pleasure/pain system. It is an innate drive that needs no reward other than its own activity. It is one type of direct expression of Rank’s love of life, as

19) Ibid.

20) See Pierson, “Depression Awareness-Campaign.”

opposed to dull satiation. It does not even have to be pleasurable – as with the grueling pain my team-mates and I suffered with each of our ten 400-meter efforts every day, not to mention the couple of miles to warm up and the weight-training and other exercises outside of the practice session.

Intrinsic Values: From Solitaire to Hide and Seek

Why did I not need that comradery to motivate suffering in later years? One reason is that I just do not take running speed very seriously anymore, and therefore simply do not choose to suffer as brutally as I did in the early years. But the other reason can be attributed to Aristotle. The earlier years had already developed the *habit* of suffering. Those who worry that running is masochistic have the wrong idea of what habitual voluntary suffering consists of. Once the habit has been cultivated, the suffering is neither pleasurable nor, on the whole, very unpleasurable. This also explains the paradox that it is neither masochistic nor not-masochistic. We need to get out of the habit that those seventeenth century philosophers and scientists got us into, of thinking of everything under the categories of pain and pleasure. The pleasure/pain system is only one of at least eight independent and innate motivational systems.

The way I have described PLAY so far is in interpersonal terms. To be sure, the “rat laughter” documented by Panksepp occurs during “rough and tumble play” among the rats.²¹ But is PLAY necessarily interpersonal? When not on a track team or with a running buddy, I still did try to run strenuously enough to do some suffering, all by myself. Is that a form of PLAY? Is it possible that challenging oneself as to how effectively one can suffer in order to run well could be a kind of game?

It would be hard to deny that games can be played on a solitary basis. With the invention of the internet, solitary playing of games is more obvious than ever, but even before that, the card game of “Solitaire” was familiar to everyone. A college friend of mine used to sit around playing a solitaire game called “Casino.” The object of the game was to “beat the casino.” I asked him, “But why do you want to beat the casino, when the casino *isn't there*?” His answer was a clever play on the “Why do you climb Mount Everest?” answer: “Because it isn't there!”

For my part at the time, there would have been great difficulty getting motivated by something like “Because it isn't there!” As an idealistic young man obsessed with political causes, I could not feel the outcome of “beating the casino” as important enough to motivate playing the game. Now, however, I have more respect for my friend's position. If my friend's enjoyment of life did not have *intrinsic* value, then how could any of my political goals have *instrumental* value? Instrumental value toward what end? I was unwittingly drifting toward the direction that Simone de Beauvoir warns against in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* – allowing instrumental values to supersede intrinsic ones.

And again, pleasure is not the only intrinsic value. Each of the emotion systems defines its own intrinsic values, including PLAY and SEEKING. The interactions of the various systems with each other and with our cognitive skills lead to even more complex values. SEEKING has a very special status in this regard. Panksepp's description of the conscious dimension of SEEKING is remarkably similar to Otto Rank's descriptions of his “love of life” dimension of motivation, which actually in his view is in conflict with the pleasure principle. The desire for pleasure is a desire to reduce our consummatory drives, which means reducing the energy level of our bodily systems. Complete reduction would be death. If there were no competing motivation in the other direction, there would be nothing to keep us alive. The SEEKING system is what does that. It motivates a higher energy level.

21) Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*.

We do not have to “force ourselves” to this higher energy level. The SEEKING system is an innate natural drive. Panksepp has studied its neurophysiology for all kinds of mammals, and there is evidence that a SEEKING system is present in all animals with nervous systems. It simply defines what it is to be alive for a creature with a nervous system.

Couch Potatoes, Catatonics, and Chewing the Cud

If we were to try deliberately to just sit on a couch indefinitely, at some point we would fail. The failure would be especially acute if there were no TV, cell phone, or radio, because those media at least enable us to exercise Rank’s life-wish in imaginary ways. Stories about sports, war, and crime-solving all allow us to suffer vicariously. But absent those imaginary activities, nobody would have the capacity to just sit still for very long. For the totally paralyzed person, of course, the radio and TV or simply one’s own imagination have to satisfy the need for activity, at least vicariously or virtually. But the paralyzed person does not volunteer to be immobile.

To be sure, akinetic catatonia, which sometimes is a side effect of schizophrenia or severe depression, and some cases of marasmus, where infants simply “fail to thrive,” do become virtually inert. Yet the catatonic, contrary to popular belief, is not always immobile, but rather sometimes engages in erratic, repetitive movement. In those rare cases where there is virtually complete lack of movement, an early death is usually the result.

Nearly total apathy apparently has actually been observed in cases of orphaned infants who are completely deprived of maternal affection and thus lose interest in being fed and develop marasmus, an extreme infantile lethargy and fatigue-like syndrome almost like akinetic catatonia – a failure to thrive, even though the orphanage staff do try to feed them; the infants sometimes even die as a result.²² While it is believed that marasmus is proximally caused by nutritional deficiencies, what Spitz and Wolf found, consistent with subsequent studies by Ashley Montagu²³ and others, is that the infants’ disinterest in taking nutrition itself ultimately results from their lack of motivation. Montagu’s position is consistent with Panksepp’s research, which now shows that appetite itself is part of the “appetitive” as opposed to “consummatory” motivational processes; they are a function of the SEEKING system. The appetite of animals can be stimulated by giving them mirtazapine, which triggers SEEKING system activity generally, and has been used in humans as a treatment for depression. Spitz and Wolf in their 1946 study brought women from a local prison into the orphanage to hold and cuddle the infants, resulting in substantial recovery from the syndrome. The infants began to feel that life was worth living, and again thrived.

The research into the SEEKING system shows that it is an expression of what Rank posited as a will to live. Suffering for a good cause like improving one’s health or athletic performance is an expression of this will to live – in de Beauvoir’s sense, the will not to be too dependent on the “dull comforts” that would reduce us to placid, cud-chewing creatures. Even cattle, the ultimate cud-chewers, have the same innate emotion systems as other mammals, and therefore are not actually as placid as popular impressions would make them out to be.

The Exercise Wheel of Life

We do not need to force ourselves to will to live; it is a natural function of our drive systems. Simply running, in itself, as well as trying to improve one’s running, is a natural expression of being a living as opposed to completely apathetic being. We cannot be motivated to suffer by cultivating the Stoic ideal of “apathy.” On the

22) Spitz and Wolf, “Anaclitic Depression.”

23) Montagu, *Touching*.

contrary, the deliberate suffering of athletes is a function of the affirmation that life is worth living – not an affirmation that some long-term pleasure is worth it, but that life itself is worth it. Suffering is not necessarily a means toward the end of becoming a faster runner; sometimes it is just an expression of the desire to run, even though that involves some suffering. Running, like any other sport, music, art, philosophy, science or even ethical behavior, is something we do in order to live – with living defined as expressing all of our motivations for action, not just the PLEASURE/PAIN motivation. To be sure, we do not just suffer for the sake of suffering; we do it in order to run, or to develop our craft as an artist, musician, or scientist.

Interestingly for our purposes, a little-appreciated empirical psychology experiment by Kagan and Berkun²⁴ found that rats will do work for the reward of being allowed to run on a treadmill. As I have discussed in other places (e.g., 2005, 2018), this type of finding tended to be ignored because it contradicted the hedonistic assumption that all behavior is determined by consummatory rewards and punishments. In the case of the rats' running, the behavior seems to be its own reward, and needs no further reinforcement as motivation. This directly contradicts the behaviorist and consummatory-drive-reduction theories that were popular at the time.

The Fierce Urgency of Now

Why, then, do we so often refuse to suffer? If we reflect phenomenologically on an instance where we wish we could have suffered more, but found ourselves unable to will to do so – like the bank robber who famously wished he did not want to rob banks but nonetheless did want to rob them – what we can observe is that we are not choosing to *never* suffer. What we are choosing is to *put off* our suffering until some indefinitely future date. Maybe I will just skip this year's half-marathon, and plan on training for next year's. I do not feel like working out today, maybe I will do it next week. Maybe my sloth will lead to ill health, but I will not worry about that now. We forget that life has a finite duration. If we put off training for another time, when that time comes, we will put it off to a still later time. We are forgetting what Martin Luther King called "the fierce urgency of now."

If we are to be living creatures, the time to live is not at some future date. It is now. We choose the suffering of training not primarily to lose weight or increase our running speed, although those are nice goals to set. We train to run or play football or music because those are expressions of our will to live – our will to live now, not at some imaginary far-off future – now, before it is too late. In effect, the choice to put off suffering to a later and later time is a refusal to accept the finiteness of our existential condition. We fancy that we can keep getting to the next day, and the next day and the next, indefinitely. We fancy not only that we can live without a need for suffering, but also that we can put off the will to live itself indefinitely into the future.

For the same reason, professional athletes do not play primarily in order to win, but also and more importantly they win in order to play. In that sense, Koski Tapio²⁵ speaks of running as not merely an instrumental behavior (toward the ultimate end of "being happy"), but rather as a "way of life." We have already seen that financial rewards or narcissistic gratifications cannot explain the choice to engage in the needed suffering. Of course, athletes want to win – that is part of the game. But they have to be prepared to suffer the losses as well. When athletes do win, the main thing they have won, from a whole of life perspective, is the right to play the game again the next season. The desire to play the game itself is not merely an instrumental value in the service of something else. It is a way of expressing Rank's love of life.

24) Kagen and Berkun, "The Reward Value of Running Activity," 108–110.

25) Tapio, *The Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Running*.

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