

Foreword

His Excellency, the Honourable Peter Underwood AC, Governor of Tasmania

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in his 1651 treatise *Leviathan* written during the English Civil War, famously concluded that without the protection of political society people's lives would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. The bluntness of the statement reinforces the reality that governance by laws reduces individual and collective suffering. It is equally the case that medical treatment reduces suffering. Arguably therefore these two great pillars of civilization—the legal and the medical—exist in their sophistication substantially because of human suffering. Hence to examine the phenomenon is to examine considerably more than pain and anguish; a feat ably achieved in *Perspectives on Human Suffering*.

The task is complex, ranging as it must from overarching philosophical considerations (of which the progenitor may be the frequently invoked 'The Book of Job'), through great ravages caused by nature and war, to the vicarious suffering experienced by a carer or loved one empathizing with a single sufferer. As suggested by one contributor, suffering 'raises fundamental questions to which all our disciplines offer but a partial answer'. Furthermore, 'tracing the history of suffering is an immense task'. Who would have thought that such an apparently base condition could be so vexatious and elusive?

Definitions of suffering are offered throughout the book. Collectively they take into account the innumerable ways that one can 'suffer', be that physically, psychologically, spiritually or in some combination of these. An agreed generic definition seems to be this: 'A state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person [as a person]'. This is a description of suffering as a personal phenomenon, and it is accepted that suffering is overwhelmingly realized as an individual experience. Even so, one person's severe distress might not be another's. The language of suffering, as befitting the subject and its investigation in a philosophical treatise, is sensitive and requires handling with care. To take another example, 'illness' is defined in these pages as 'a deficit of well-being', which seems uncomfortably bland, yet is entirely accurate. (It would however be a brave contributor to any debate about suffering, and thankfully there is none here, describing with equal accuracy a torturer as engaging with the tortured in a negatively physical manner for a desired outcome.)

Not surprisingly suffering has always been a key component of religious thought. Whether caused by ‘an act of God’, accident, disease, infamous human behaviour or something else altogether, the question is invoked: why must the innocent and the righteous suffer? Consider these as answers: we suffer in this life because of sins in a previous life; suffering in this life will lead to reward in the next life; Christ suffered for our sins; suffering is proof that there is no divine benevolent being. These are foundational matters underpinning the great religions; surely another indication of the overbearing influence of suffering on humanity.

The contributors to *Perspectives on Human Suffering* write with considerable authority, in a range of disciplines, the latter evidenced by the division of the work into three discrete sections, which themselves are somewhat multi-faceted. The contributors also represent a truly international viewpoint, an essential feature when considering the meaning and purpose of a book such as this one. Editors Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss, following on their editorship of *Perspectives on Human Dignity*, have ensured that impressive intellect and variety is brought to bear upon this difficult subject. Indeed, the very act of pondering the meaning and modes of suffering and then writing about it cannot be easy.

Perspectives on Human Suffering makes an important contribution to contemporary thinking about mortality and morality, be it in a small hospital ward or in the Security Council of the United Nations. We can individually desire not to suffer, but can never be immune from it. We therefore need to continually strive to increase our understanding of this fundamental aspect of our being, in order to be able to deal with suffering—for ourselves, and for our fellow human beings where we can.

Perspectives on Human Suffering

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