

# The Battle for Compassion: Ethics in an Apathetic Universe

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## Chapter 9. Avoiding the Abyss

### Human Suffering

Finding happiness is a daily occurrence or the quest of a lifetime, depending on one's psychological makeup, personal circumstances, drives and desires. But virtually no one wants to suffer. To any unfortunate individual who is suffering intensely, this is what really matters, more than anything else. People have a higher tolerance for pain that they have control over, or that stems from situations they have voluntarily entered, but pain that is inflicted on them, due for example to disease or others' cruelty, can be unbearable.

For most of our history, humans have faced a constant struggle for survival, often living in harsh, competitive environments. Bloody conflicts and epidemics have been staple themes. Generation after generation, individuals have had to cope with the uncertainties of the world around them and the persistent threats of force and cruelty as they tried to eke out an existence. In less developed parts of the planet where disease and violence rule, people's lives are, today, still dominated by these same basic anxieties. Life has never been easy for the vast majority of humanity. The existence of each one of us, including those now living easy, comfortable lives within secure borders, is dependent on huge amounts of past suffering having occurred. This fact alone puts our current attempts to reduce suffering in perspective.<sup>41</sup>

Why does it actually matter so much to relieve other people's suffering? This is perhaps the fundamental question of ethics, and one of the central themes of this book. For someone who is naturally empathetic and acutely aware of what is going on in the world, the question is absurd. But simply saying that it is wrong not to do something about it is to beg the question: "why?" One would like—one might desperately want—to be able to provide an absolutely airtight, fully persuasive argument in favor of doing whatever is possible to eliminate at least the worst kinds of preventable suffering. The problem is, there isn't any such argument. A high-flying businessman living it up in the world's metropolises can perfectly well savor life while remaining immune to the world's suffering, and also impervious to any supposedly logical argument why he should care. If he is rationally self-interested, which, as mentioned earlier, economists assume—not always justifiably—people to be, and also constitutively cold-hearted, he may find that there is nothing in it for him in caring. End of argument. You may fume and deplore the callousness, but the power of reason will have brought you to a dead end.

In a universe where nothing "matters" and things just happen, the importance of relieving others' suffering cannot be proven. Unlike the self-evident importance of subjective experience to those having it, it is not even axiomatic. But it is as close as one can ever get in ethics, in a deep, intuitive way that most people would, in principle, fortunately agree with.

An ethical principle known as negative utilitarianism—a term coined by philosopher Karl Popper—explicitly places the emphasis of ethics on the minimization of suffering. This is not because promoting happiness does not matter. But the average level of happiness within a population says nothing about how happiness and suffering are distributed. Despite our tendency to think of positive and negative mental states as belonging on the same scale of hedonism, there is no reason to think that suffering and happiness, in the right proportions, can simply balance each other out. This is surely true for the individual: how many people would volunteer to be brutally tortured now in order to gain something for themselves in the future, however substantial? Or would agree to go on living if this meant excruciating torture in a few years' time? This fundamental asymmetry between suffering and happiness is all the more relevant when it concerns different people, where one person suffering for another's indirect benefit cannot even anticipate future happiness as a personal reward. As succinctly distilled by philosopher David Pearce in *The Hedonistic Imperative*, a book-length web-based manifesto, "no amount of happiness or fun enjoyed by some organisms can notionally justify the indescribable horrors of Auschwitz." The principle of negative utilitarianism is an inevitable consequence of empathy, of an awareness of the real significance of others' subjective mental states. As a general principle, and avoiding absolutist interpretations of it that consider any amount of suffering bad<sup>42</sup>, I believe that it is the essential, fundamental and ultimately most meaningful ethical stance from which to approach the issues we are faced with as a global society.

Negative utilitarianism implies that we "should" be prepared to take measures to relieve suffering, at least of the extreme kind, even if there is some cost. This principle is likely to be less popular among some who have been fortunate and talented enough to end up on the positive side of the happiness scale, as well as with extreme libertarians, as it seems to imply a need for the sacrifice of wealth and personal happiness. Fortunately, happiness and well-being need not be a zero-sum game, and this fact can be exploited by those seeking to relieve suffering, for example, by granting intangible yet real benefits such as recognition and respect to those who engage in altruism.

But let's continue and probe further the significance of relieving suffering and some of the psychological obstacles that exist. Try to consider the greatest pain, physical or emotional, that you have ever experienced. Can you remember its intensity and what it really felt like at the time? Have you ever been truly aware of what it means for someone else to undergo excruciating agony? Read or watched accounts of the worst forms of torture? Of life imprisonment in a tiny, dark, filthy jail cell? Of the pain caused by some of the worst untreatable diseases? Of the barbarities caused by soldiers? Of gang rapes? Imagine that it was a person close to you who had gone through any of these terrible experiences.

Most of us have had moments of great happiness. Few of us have had the misfortune to be tortured. But because the closest access we can usually have to other people's subjective states requires us to have undergone similar experiences, for most of us, the word "torture", while firmly evil in its connotation, evokes images of the actual practices rather than the experience they induce in the victim.

If we were to look for examples of the worst atrocities committed by humans against other humans, the choice would be soberingly and depressingly vast. Some of the so-called "medical" experiments performed by the Nazis, including the infamous "Angel of Death" Josef Mengele, on concentration camp inmates are among the best documented. Victims, previously plucked from their homes where many of them had been living lifestyles familiar to many of us, were used as living guinea pigs and routinely forced to undergo surgical experiments without anesthetic, subjected to extreme conditions to measure their bodies' responses, exposed to diseases and toxic chemicals, and various other horrors, in a climate of absolute terror. And reading about the varied torture devices and techniques used during

the Spanish Inquisition and at other times throughout history, including under recent and current totalitarian regimes, it is difficult to accept that human beings built just like us are capable of such vicious sadism. Yet without being exposed to such a situation oneself, one probably cannot fully imagine just what any of these countless torture victims were actually forced to endure, and why it is so crucially important that such acts not be allowed to happen.

The narrative that humanity has been passing on for generations, that conflict, war and pain are an inevitable part of life—sometimes related with almost fond nostalgia in reminiscences of historical battles or, more recently, of ordinary people’s valiant struggles against dictatorships, depicted almost romantically in grainy black-and-white footage from Latin America in the 1970s and accompanied by melancholic Spanish music—is the tale told by the robust or fortunate ones who escaped serious harm, and by the next generations. The wartime rape victim with a vacant gaze has not a hint of romanticized detachment in her voice, nor does the soldier who has seen his buddies blown to bits by a roadside bomb. The glorification of war is not exercised by those who suffered or fell victim.

In a way, it is simply too difficult to come to terms emotionally with both the amount and the degree of suffering taking place on our planet. Our problem is not simply an inability to experience empathy, but the cognitive dissonance between our desire to enjoy life and an awareness of how intense others’ suffering is. The tendency to block out the rest of the world once the television is turned off, to act as if the suffering out there exists only vaguely or in some abstract way that is not connected to our immediate lives, is a kind of solipsism and yet understandable. We would be paralyzed by inaction if we felt empathy every time we encountered suffering.

But we are also confronted with another manifestation of the phenomenon I call compression, where the values at the extreme ends of a scale are not properly appreciated or understood for their true significance. For example, the scale for measuring the strength of earthquakes is logarithmic, which means that an earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0, such as the one that ravaged parts of Japan in March 2011, actually has 10 times the amplitude of one that measures 8.0 and 1,000 times the amplitude of one that measures 6.0. Humans have trouble intuitively grasping how values can climb so quickly as you go up such a scale. The problem is all the greater when it relates to the subjective experience of pain, for which we usually just have language to guide us. Because most people have never had to endure excruciating suffering, they don’t grasp its full significance.

Suffering is not divisible into discreet units: many people suffering a little is not equivalent to a few people suffering a lot. One person suffering intensely, such as at the hands of a torturer, is qualitatively different and, logically, incomparably worse than a million people suffering from a mild hangover. This may seem an obvious fact, yet there are examples to the contrary, such as a proposed multipliable unit of pain termed the “*dukkha*”. The priorities we set also do not always reflect this fact, perhaps because one million people with headaches have greater political and economic power than one torture victim. But if we grasped its significance more viscerally, our highest priority would be to ensure that no one experience preventable suffering beyond a certain degree. Some things should never, ever be allowed to happen. A truly compassionate system of ethics would insist that this is the one thing that really matters above all else.

Those trying to relate what they endured under sadistic totalitarian regimes do their best, stringing words together in the hope that these will give others a glimpse. The books that relate these horrors take for granted that their depravity will be perceived as such by the reader. Some things are assumed to be so obvious that they are left unstated. But we often just don’t get it. And our senses become dulled by repeated exposure to the media, the acts

themselves becoming banalized. The statements of some politicians, even in democracies, that play down the horror of torture or attempt to nuance it are hardly a supportive contribution.

Additionally, those who were tortured or treated with abominable cruelty and lived to tell about it tend not to stand out physically, and they are often able to describe their experience with calm and lucidity. It's easy to think that while the experience must have been terrible, all's well that ends well—as if the person's return to freedom and a physically pain-free existence somewhat mitigates the significance of the pain they had to endure at the time.

Survivors of torture or other terrible suffering are like first-hand observers, trying to communicate vivid memories that continue to haunt them. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on identity, the actual victims somehow reside in the past, and the intensity of the subjective experience can be next to impossible for the survivors themselves to adequately relate.

Every instant counts. It's just that the past is no longer under our control. Reconciliation and firmly moving forward towards a brighter future require that guilt and regret not have a crippling hold on the present. But the past happened, and it mattered then as much as the present does now. Our challenge is to prevent such pasts from belonging to the future, and for that, we need to keep the intense memory of those pasts alive.

French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt, held hostage for over 6 years in the jungles of Colombia, said regarding a play she initially planned to create, "Those who will see what I experienced will understand that we must be careful never to fall into this abyss."<sup>43</sup> There are limits to the usefulness of language to faithfully evoke a sense of what a victim endured, information delivered as words often being insufficient to trigger the extreme ends of the emotional scale. That is why Betancourt, soon after her release, turned her thoughts to other effective media, such as performance art, that could more fully communicate the nightmare she lived through (although she eventually did write a memoir in book form, *Even Silence Has an End*).

Surely the atrocities going on right now, hidden from view in foreign countries, matter as much as similarly great suffering caused by Nazi death camp doctors. If we knowingly allow people to suffer and die when we could do something about it with relatively little sacrifice on our part, we bear an uncomfortable similarity in our behavior to passive populations that, in the past, closed their eyes to genocide occurring practically in their backyard. And we expose as hypocritical any grand claims to morality. In the face of continuing terror and the emergence of new threats we cannot control, we easily become prey to the phenomenon of learned helplessness<sup>44</sup> and shut ourselves off from reality. But by absorbing ourselves in the microenvironments of our own lives and shunning information that we find unpleasant and that might make us feel compelled to act, we are nonetheless "guilty" of inaction. Finding ways of breaking down these barriers is therefore our ultimate challenge.

At this point in our reasoning, we are, of course, no longer describing objectively how people actually tend to act under certain circumstances, but allowing subjectively felt compassion to take over and drive the argument. And it must. If the avoidance of suffering is not regarded as a fundamental priority, then we are putting the satisfaction of our own desires above higher principles, essentially doing what we can get away with. For anyone with a shred of idealistic passion, pure self-interest cannot be tolerated as the sole determinant of how a society or the world is allowed to operate, as it implies that might indeed makes right, and what cannot defend itself— whether minority populations, inhabitants of small countries, human rights activists or non-human creatures we use for our pleasure—may be made or allowed to suffer, potentially excruciatingly, without consequence.

## Animal Suffering

In a world in which human beings are still tortured, massacred, and left to die of disease and malnutrition, some would claim that it is a serious confusion in our priorities to focus too much attention on the welfare and suffering of other conscious beings. I used to receive anti-vivisection tracts in my mailbox, and I found it irritating how, to advance their cause, the authors spuriously denied the objective contributions of animal experimentation to very real medical advances that have prevented the suffering and deaths of countless human beings. Even today, if I am to be honest, were it my own child who was suffering from a terrible genetic disease for which animal experimentation could help develop a treatment, I dare say I would still downplay the significance of the well-being of a few mice.

The problem is, suffering is still suffering. Pain and extreme distress that occur on the other side of the species barrier can be equivalent to what we ourselves are capable of feeling. Yet the conscious experience of animals is often largely ignored as a relevant item of consideration when we decide on our priorities. While an anthropomorphic view of animals that was once fashionable among scientists studying animal behavior was criticized during much of the 20th century both for the arrogance of using ourselves as a model for how animals think and feel, as well as for a lack of objectivity—a trend that has since reversed with recent scientific insights into the emotional world of various animal species—, it is arguably more arrogant to deny that other creatures have a similar capacity to suffer.

We don't know exactly how other living creatures experience suffering—we have enough trouble empathizing with the suffering of our fellow humans. But the assertion that they don't feel pain in the same way that we do, expressed even by many scientists eager to carry out their experiments, is simply untenable. For a wide range of animals, the contrary is likely to be true. Simply disregard the feathers, fur or scales and the inability to compose music and conduct abstract thought, and focus on the ancient, evolutionarily useful functions that we share with other animals—which undoubtedly include pain perception and distress. Indeed, aside from the many published studies demonstrating the cognitive capabilities of animals very different from us, numerous other studies suggest that even much simpler creatures are able to feel pain. Furthermore, while humans can develop rational coping mechanisms to deal with their own suffering, most animals are probably far more helpless when faced with distress they cannot avoid. With subjective experience so difficult to infer and document and yet as real as anything else in the universe, we take a stand that is both cavalier and intellectually dishonest in minimizing its significance in creatures other than ourselves.

The subjective experience of suffering by any creature, regardless of its phylogenetic<sup>45</sup> classification—whether it is a cow, a fish, a rodent or a crustacean—, must be as inherently worthy of avoidance as a similar quality and intensity of suffering in humans. To suggest otherwise would mean that, in fact, it is not others' subjective experience itself that really matters, but how it makes us feel as observers, and that whatever we don't worry about doesn't actually matter. And there, we are back to the egoism of pure self-interest. If torture is considered so horrible an experience to endure that it is banned by international treaty in even extreme wartime situations, why should the imposition of any similar experience on any creature other than humans be any more justifiable? If one agrees that intense human suffering should be avoided for its own sake, then logic and consistency imply that other creatures' intense suffering must matter as well. And yet, the intensity of concern and discussion about "mainstream" sources of suffering like torture and massacres committed against humans drops off dramatically when the focus shifts to cruelty to animals.

Not all animals display suffering with the grimace or high-pitched yelp or cry we would

recognize. The cues may be different or imperceptible to humans but the suffering equally present and equally intense. For example, an article describing the discomfort of whales exposed to U.S. Navy sonar exercises mentioned various analogies, such as “having a highway built next to your house, having a jet land next door, or standing next to a rocket blasting off.”<sup>46</sup> And frequently, in articles about the harm done to animals such as whales, references to environmental concerns and biological diversity often eclipse concerns about the actual subjective experience of the animals in question and the core issue of suffering.

The fact that pain and suffering are integral elements of nature does not make them any less relevant an issue. There is currently no conceivable way of preventing the pain that is naturally inflicted on animals by other non-human animals (although David Pearce, one of the most compassionate and idealistic philosophers reflecting on these issues, advocates the future bioengineering of nature as a way out). But it is nothing less than terribly cruel to be a knowing perpetrator oneself, and tragically callous to play the role of a deaf, dumb and blind accomplice. If one is logically consistent, then accepting the above reasoning requires adapting one’s behavior accordingly. But since the conclusions require sacrifices that many people do not want to make, the issue is sheepishly skirted. Suffering is so seemingly ethereal and intangible that it is convenient to pretend it doesn’t exist. Even as adults, we act in a way that is reminiscent of children who think that when they close their eyes no one can see them. We shift our attention away and— poof!—that reality vanishes.

Let me provide a concrete example from personal experience. I grew up an omnivore, and I very much liked foie gras once I discovered it as an adult. Animal rights activists often disparage it as diseased liver, but from a purely sensory point of view, I shared the common perception of it as a culinary delight. Although I had many times heard the claim that force-feeding is cruel, I didn’t initially believe that simply putting excess food in a duck or goose’s stomach was in itself such a bad thing, and I was sure I had seen footage of seemingly happy, free range geese on a foie gras production farm, waddling over to the farmer to be fed.

Then I discovered the reality. The majority of foie gras production is performed industrially in a setting that, were these humans and not birds, would be called a torture chamber. The birds spend their lives in narrow cages where they can scarcely move, and at regular intervals they are grabbed by the neck and long metal pipes are shoved roughly down their throats. Videos are visible on YouTube (type “foie gras cruelty”) that are simply shocking for the callousness displayed towards birds’ visible suffering, both from physical pain and general distress. While it is convenient for the pursuit of one’s own pleasures to ignore this evidence, maintain that the birds do not suffer or insist that their suffering is irrelevant—and many people, even aware of the evidence, will affirm, “but it tastes so good”—, for someone otherwise capable of empathy, this stand reflects an unwillingness to think rationally and independently and to apply one’s principles consistently. The consequences of many people holding this position are horrific.

But industrial foie gras production is just one notorious example. The pitiful conditions under which so-called farm animals are raised industrially by the billions and eventually slaughtered for food are meant by the meat industry to be kept out of the public eye, but they have been well documented and the cruelty exposed. The skinning alive of furry animals in some countries, including China, is another documented phenomenon, videos of which are too appalling to watch. There are many others. Even when farm animals are well treated during their lives, slaughter is usually carried out in a violent manner and anticipated by the animal during its last moments<sup>47</sup>—a far cry from the way pets suffering from terminal illnesses are gently euthanized.

The issue of animal suffering is distinct from the question of whether animals ought to be

killed altogether, and it is important that we not confuse the two, even if they are sometimes closely related. The very idea that humans take the lives of animals, though itself a valid topic of often heated debate, has to be the secondary concern. The fact that the animal kingdom from which we evolved is a constitutively brutal network, and that throughout our history, right up to the present day, we have been killing other animals for food, clothing and other purposes, are by no means a sufficient rationalization for continuing the practice. We are not bound to perpetually kill just because we have always done so. But realistically, as a species, we are (still) very far from transforming ourselves into pacifist vegans with a generalized moral view that taking the life of any conscious creature is wrong. When carried out under the most humane conditions—admittedly a rarity—, an animal life can, in theory, be wiped out in an instant with no warning or physical pain and thus no suffering and little consequence, other than for any human or animal survivors emotionally attached to that individual being. While it is cruel to cause conscious beings to dread having their life extinguished by others, most animals' reduced understanding of their situation puts them on a rather different level than humans. Ethicist, humanist and animal rights activist Peter Singer has argued strongly against "speciesism"<sup>48</sup>—discrimination against non-human species—, but such a case is most convincing when it concerns respecting animals' equivalent subjective experience, rather than evoking any intrinsic right they have to die of old age or predation.

The adoption of veganism out of principle—the refusal to kill or exploit other sentient beings—is at least as much a reflection of how we feel about ourselves, about our relationship to the rest of the world, and about life. It represents a refusal to ultimately betray the implicit trust felt by a domestic animal towards its caretaker, regardless of whether it ever becomes aware that this trust will be betrayed. Conceptually, the vegan movement also helps keep our moral compass pointed in the right direction by pressing us to become less permissive about killing animals rather than more permissive about killing humans.

Obviously, these are not minor considerations, and they bring us back to fundamental questions about our own humanity, the limits of compassion, and even the extent of our "right" to assert our existence and take pleasure in it. There are no clear, absolute answers to these questions, regardless of activists' insistence on the contrary. But reducing cruelty to animals—a practical consequence of veganism—is more directly about how they feel and is thus the principal ethical concern.

Of course, in reality, the way most animals are slaughtered makes the distinction between suffering and killing a moot one and can blur the line between us and them to the point of insignificance. Shunning the niceties of trying to make such a distinction and taking a strong, principled stance about any use of animals is clearly the most compassionate attitude, although for advocacy efforts, it is important that the core issue of reducing suffering not be diluted.

The extent of suffering inflicted by humans on animals is unfathomable.<sup>49</sup> Because it is so widespread and commonplace, it is all the more difficult to come to terms with how bad it really is, as this would force us to acknowledge that we have been making a terrible mistake all along, and that our belief in ourselves as good people reflects a devastating, though often unintentional, hypocrisy. The use of animals as objects is so entrenched in human cultural practices around the world that to step aside and see things objectively requires almost a Copernican paradigm shift. We cannot change the past. But we can change the future.

## Non-Biological Suffering

Compared to the very real suffering of millions and millions of flesh and blood humans and animals, it may really appear a needless distraction to evoke the suffering of other entities. We think of consciousness as unique to the animal kingdom, and the idea that technology could create new forms of consciousness might seem to belong to the world of science fiction. But this concern is neither fanciful nor irrelevant. There is endless attention paid to artificial intelligence—essentially, the ability of machines to manipulate and create information—but comparatively little regarding any subjective experience associated with this intelligence. As discussed earlier in the section on consciousness, we still don't know what kind of wiring it takes to produce subjective experience, such as pain. But as computers and intelligent networks become ever more complex, it is not inconceivable that one day—and we cannot be absolutely sure that this has not already happened—they really will become conscious in some way.

Sooner than we think, we may be creating conscious inorganic beings with locked-in syndrome—having some form of subjective experience which they are unable to communicate to others. Perhaps a computer would only be so for brief moments at a time as it carries out calculations, like a drugged human continually drifting into and out of consciousness, without any change in outward appearance and without anyone ever knowing. If it doesn't feel pain or boredom, perhaps it won't matter so much. But the technological evolution of new beings that have the capacity to suffer should not be ignored as we learn more about the physical correlates of human consciousness. Again, we may never know with absolute certainty if they are conscious, since consciousness cannot be directly observed, only inferred from observations that might correlate with it. But there could be "someone" there inside—perhaps not even a thinking mind, but a center of pure pain perception—, and what we consider as mechanical tools might turn out to be suffering beasts of burden.

Except for some of the religiously devout, most of us do not fear eternal damnation, the prospect of a human being suffering forever and ever. However miserable one's existence, death at least brings an end to suffering, and this thought may, perversely, also make it more bearable. Endless suffering may seem like an abstract concept, but if you are unable to imagine being kept in a tiny cell and subjected to gruesome torture day after day, then, more mundanely, think back to the worst hangover you have ever had—a splitting headache and nausea which you desperately wished would stop— and imagine that it continued forever. We joke about hangovers because they are the short-lived price paid for hedonistic excesses, but the grin would rapidly disappear if a hangover never ended.

Something like it could happen. Counterintuitive as it may sound, it is entirely within the sphere of plausibility to create an artificial conscious being that would suffer the most intense distress for what felt like eternity. Even if it was not our intention, by creating electronic circuits with an architecture similar to humans' neural circuits, we might inadvertently or indifferently cause tremendous, subjectively experienced chronic pain of which we were entirely oblivious. And because the subjective experience of time might actually be greatly expanded in proportion to the number of calculations performed per second, during even a very short passage of time these electronic beings might suffer terrible pain for what subjectively felt to them like an extremely long duration. What could possibly be more horrible? A computer that feels and one that doesn't would probably differ only in the specific wiring of their circuitry and their code. These differences might, of course, be enormous, but they might also be bridged very easily.

Imagine we discovered, through the careful scientific mapping of our own neural hardware, using high resolution brain imaging and other approaches, and extrapolations from it, that



some types of computers were almost undoubtedly conscious and experienced pain. Would we stop using them? Indeed, a recent scientific paper found “striking similarities” in the organization of human brains, the nervous system of the nematode worm, and computer chips, further supporting the possibility that computers could experience pain.<sup>50</sup>

The last reflection is part of a broader question of supreme importance: is there any point on the scale of suffering that would, if we were aware of conscious beings subjected to it, cause us to drop whatever we were doing and come to their rescue? The evidence from our current behavior is not encouraging. It is likely that the reality of extreme suffering will only ever have a vague meaning to most of us, like the perception of the color blue to a blind person, or bats’ perception of sonar to a human<sup>51</sup>. The phenomenon of compression may prevent us from perceiving the full significance of further increments in the scale beyond our usual range of perception. Intellectually, we have enough information about pain to draw appropriate conclusions about what should never be permitted to happen. The deeper problem may be that self-interest and the avoidance of cognitive dissonance may once again cause us to ignore what the facts tell us.

In the chapter “Where We Are Headed”, I discuss the predicted overtaking of biological intelligence by non-biological intelligence in a few decades. Although the focus of a visionary book I refer to that makes this prediction is on intelligence and, somewhat more implicitly, on consciousness, directly associated with these developments is the likelihood of non-biological suffering. The implications of these developments seem not yet to have been thoroughly explored, but the possibilities are potentially terrifying. The wrong kind of electronic intelligence in a position of power could intentionally cause the worst kind of suffering imaginable. Preventing this from ever happening sounds like the kind of challenge worthy of a futuristic Hollywood action film, but we are already on the edge of the future.

### **Suffering Beyond Our Reach**

If the universe is as complex, vast or strange as many physicists believe, there may be a lot more suffering going on than meets the eye. A cruel joke the universe may be playing on us is that the amount of suffering we are confronted with may be the tiniest fraction of what’s out there. Renowned cosmologist Carl Sagan apparently raised the whimsical but thought-provoking suggestion that the atoms in our universe could contain an infinite series of smaller universes within themselves, and that our universe might be a minuscule component of an infinite series of larger universes, which would also imply that an infinite amount of suffering is occurring. Less hypothetically, gazing out at the evening sky and at a minuscule fraction of the stars that our known universe contains, one can imagine that there may be huge amounts of unknowable suffering going on and being perpetrated in the cosmos on any number of life-bearing planets where conscious creatures commit horribly cruel acts upon each other. And the theory of multiple parallel universes would just amplify everything by orders of magnitude.

These contemplations make our own lives and reflections appear very small and insignificant indeed. Attempts to relieve the suffering of humans living in distant parts of our own planet, placed into a broader context, may really appear part of an infinitely Sisyphean task. A metaphorical image comes to mind, inspired by a scene from Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky’s classic film “Stalker”, of two despondent characters in a gloomy, industrial wasteland, standing thigh-deep in a huge cesspool of toxic, radioactive sludge, each armed with just a bucket and with the task of cleaning it all up. Where do you start? When do you stop? And why bother altogether if there is no end in sight?

Of course, it is also possible that we really may be alone in a unique universe, with life

actually being the rarest of flukes. One might have expected, as Martin Rees has written, that at least one intelligent civilization would have built self-replicators that spread throughout our galaxy and made contact with us. Then again, intelligent life may always be a very short-lived phenomenon, wherever it arises. We just do not know.

Even keeping our sights fixed on our own planet, the situation is rather grim.<sup>52</sup> There is a huge amount of unavoidable suffering occurring among humans and throughout the animal kingdom, much of it terribly intense, for which even our best efforts would be impotent. In fact, our very existence, even that of the most compassionate pacifists, might inevitably cause suffering of unknown intensity among countless insects and other small invertebrates we tread on unknowingly as we go about our daily lives.

If you were entirely consistent in applying the principle that we must prevent all extreme suffering that we can, you might reach the conclusion that, as intelligent human beings, we have a duty to destroy the Earth so that no more such suffering takes place, in the way that we kill an injured animal in order to put it out of its misery, or that we allow euthanasia on an adult who wishes to be spared continued suffering from an incurable disease. Essentially, pulling the plug on the planet in an act of collective empathy.

I am the first to admit that that scenario sounds absolutely mad. Because this frightening conclusion is another seeming consequence of rigorously applying negative utilitarianism, some philosophers have concluded that this ethical principle itself is wrong and dismissed it altogether. Their argument is not entirely baseless. But if you aim for logical consistency and, presumably, you don't want to destroy the Earth, must you then conclude that all the otherwise unavoidable, intense suffering that occurs is "tolerable"? This may be the ultimate paradox haunting the humanist, struggling for compassion but striving for existence.

But the more subtle and, perhaps, "reasonable" answer is that, however bad some suffering is, we can aim to do our best to reduce the preventable kind, but categorically refuse to intentionally destroy the planet and eliminate ourselves and everything we care about in the process, even if it demands putting up with all the residual suffering that occurs. There is no logical requirement to treat negative utilitarianism as a simplistic dogma and extend it to its most absolute limit, where it requires the destruction of life. Value systems are grounded partly in emotions, and even a compassionate humanist or humanitarian activist can have a deep desire to see life continue. To clarify this position and distinguish it from absolutist variations, we could call the principle "negative utilitarianism plus". We'll come back to these reflections soon.

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41 For an authoritative account of some of the recent atrocities humans have committed and an incisive analysis of the various factors that played a role, see Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century*.

42 See [www.utilitarianism.com/pinprick-argument.html](http://www.utilitarianism.com/pinprick-argument.html) for a discussion by David Pearce of the absurd consequences of absolutist interpretations, even if the alternative is an intellectually less "pure" ethical system.

43 "Betancourt plans play on ordeal," BBC (6 July 2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7492144.stm>.

44 Learned helplessness is a psychological term that describes how humans and animals, having learned that they are unable to avoid a painful situation, fail to adapt their behaviors when the situation changes, falsely believing they are still impotent to exert control.

45 The term "phylogenetic" refers to the evolutionary relationship between organisms.

- 46 Nick Anthis, "Supreme Court to Address Navy Sonar Exercises", *ScienceBlogs* (24 June 2008), [http://scienceblogs.com/scientificactivist/2008/06/supreme\\_court\\_sonar.php#more](http://scienceblogs.com/scientificactivist/2008/06/supreme_court_sonar.php#more).
- 47 James McWilliams, "Eating (Synthetic) Animals," *The Atlantic* (June 2010), [www.theatlantic.com/food/archive/2010/06/eating-synthetic-animals/58930](http://www.theatlantic.com/food/archive/2010/06/eating-synthetic-animals/58930).
- 48 See his influential book *Animal Liberation*.
- 49 For further insight, see [www.meat.org](http://www.meat.org).
- 50 See "Chips, worms and gray matter: More similar than you think," *e!ScienceNews* (22 April 2010), <http://esciencenews.com/articles/2010/04/22/chips.worms.and.gray.matter.more.similar.you.think>.
- 51 Philosopher Thomas Nagel's classic paper "What is it like to be a bat?" addresses the inaccessibility of other creatures' subjective experience. Available at [http://organizations.utep.edu/Portals/1475/nagel\\_bat.pdf](http://organizations.utep.edu/Portals/1475/nagel_bat.pdf).
- 52 See [www.utilitarian-essays.com](http://www.utilitarian-essays.com) for essays on wild animal suffering and attempts to reduce suffering in general.