

Suffering, Compassion, and the Possibility of a Humane Politics

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I merely wanted to express that anguish I feel every day when faced with the prostituting of words, the slandered victims, the smug justification of oppression, the insane admiration of force – Albert Camus¹

The issue of human suffering is one that I wish to approach here through three questions: (1) What is the relation between suffering and temporality; (2) What is the relation between suffering and the singularity of the person, and (3) what is the relation between suffering and a humane politics? These questions are not arbitrary, since not only are they interconnected in ways that I hope will become evident as my discussion proceeds, but they also concern the relation between suffering and human being, and it is this issue that seems to me to be central here. The focus on this relation is not meant to suggest that humanity *requires* suffering, which is true at least to the extent that being human requires the *capacity* to suffer (and perhaps simply having

that capacity will make some degree of suffering inevitable), nor that only human beings can suffer (which is manifestly false²), but rather that coming to a proper recognition of the human, and maintaining a sense of that recognition, is fundamentally tied to a proper recognition of the nature and reality of *human* suffering, and that this is what also supports the possibility of any properly ethical stance or indeed an ethical, which is to say also, a humane, politics. In this respect, the relation between human suffering and human being directs our attention to the centrality of *compassion* as an essential element in what it is to be human, and so also in any proper response to the human.

I. Suffering and Temporality

So it is that Tasmania has never come to terms with its past. That past has the stature of a dark family secret – quite literally a dark family secret – the half-brother bogeyman boarded up out of sight in the attic. He/it is shame for our bastard birth as a prison for the unwanted dregs of the British slums and our subsequent legacy of depravity hard upon vileness, brutality fast upon atrocity. He/it is institutionalised sodomist rape, its echoes clearly audible in the hysteria that surrounded the

1990s debate about the legal status of sodomy. He/it is the unbearable legacy of brutal dispossession and the near-complete genocide of those whose land this was. He/it is a weight of guilt that could not be borne – Peter Hay³

Tasmania is a large island (about the size of Switzerland) that lies off the southeast coast of Australia, and was first known to Europeans as Van Dieman's Land. Tasmania has had a dark and difficult history. Its settlement by Europeans in the first half of the nineteenth century, settlement based in the island's role as a place of banishment and exile, was accompanied by the destruction of the original Aboriginal population as a direct consequence of that settlement. The convict industry that was the mainstay of the island's early development included a system of harsh and often brutal treatment that led to misery and death for many. Not only have subsequent public debates within the island often been determined by the ever-present spectre of the past (including, for instance, the debate about the legalisation of sodomy referred to by the Tasmanian essayist, geographer, and poet Pete Hay in the passage quoted above), but those spectres seemed to return with a vengeance when, in 1996, at the site of the main convict settlement at Port Arthur (which had become a set of 'picturesque' ruins popular for picnics and family outings), 35 people were shot dead and 37 injured in a single horrendous killing spree – the Port Arthur Massacre.⁴

Hay argues that the failure to acknowledge the suffering that has taken place in the island – the denial of the past and the refusal of memory – has also contributed to a loss of meaning for Tasmanians. Such a loss of meaning takes the form of an inability to form a proper sense of one's own identity and place in the world or to reconstitute a sense of self that allows an adequate recognition of what has gone before but also a genuine capacity to act productively in the face of what is to come. Here *recognition of suffering* appears as the key to the constitution of meaning, and to a proper sense of history and futurity. Yet might time itself, or perhaps better, the sense of lived time at issue in the idea of history (time as worked out in concrete places and lives), stand in a special relation to suffering? Can there be suffering, *human suffering*, without time, without memory, without history?

In the now-classic definition advanced by Eric Cassel, suffering is said to be 'a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person'.⁵ As he emphasises elsewhere, 'What is threatened or injured [in suffering] is the intactness of the person as a person.'⁶ Suffering is thus not to be simply identified with physical pain, nor, Cassell argues, can it be understood on the basis of any bifurcation of the human into different domains, bodily and mental, natural and cultural, physical and spiritual. The notion of the person encompasses all of these, and cannot be decomposed into them – it is a concept of personhood as essentially *holistic*.

The emphasis in Cassel's definition on suffering as a form of distress that is directly related to one's sense of personhood, itself suggests a connection to the idea of memory, time, and history, since the person would seem to be formed precisely through the working out of time in relation to place and to person, through a sense of history, both personal and communal. In fact, Cassel himself makes a direct connection to time, writing that 'it follows, then, that suffering has a temporal element. For a situation to be a source of suffering, it must influence the person's perception of future events'⁷ – events, one might add, that relate to that person, and their capacity to remain intact as a person, hence it is not time alone that is at issue here, but time as it is involved in a genuine sense of the personal, and as it contributes to the formation of the person. Moreover, while Cassell emphasises the future here, neither is it the case that what is implicated is only *futural* time. To have a grasp of the future is to have a grasp of the past, as well as the present, and this, indeed, is what it is to have a grasp of time. Futurity is thus bound up with memory, as well as with current activity and affectivity.

In this respect, and although he himself does not develop the point in this way, Cassell's reference to time suggests an immediate connection with contemporary narrative accounts of personhood, particularly as worked out in the work of such as Paul Ricoeur.⁸ Indeed, while Ricoeur does not specifically address the issue of human suffering, his account of personhood almost exactly dovetails with that to be found in Cassell. Similarly holistic in

orientation, and refusing the dichotomies of conventional philosophical analyses, Ricoeur understands human persons as formed through the complex interweaving of elements that occurs primarily in and through narrative – and narrative itself cannot be divorced from the temporal and the historical. The formation of personhood is thus the formation of a sense of self, of the sense of a life, as that is shaped in the constant formation and reformation of accounts of past and future. Something like such an account may also be seen to be invoked in Hay's comments above – although in his case, the connection at issue encompasses, not only the relation between the temporal and the personal, but also the way in which collective identity and community, with which the personal is itself implicated, has an essentially temporal element, such that the collective suppression of memory may create problems for the collective ability to act in the present and project into the future, as well as for the personal.

Narrative accounts of personhood typically emphasise the relational character of the person. Not only does this mean that persons are constituted through the relating of the parts of a life, but also that the life of the person is itself formed through the relating of persons, and the relating of persons to the entities and events that surround them, and with which they are already engaged. One of the ways in which this idea can be expressed is in the form of an emphasis on the character of persons, and of human lives, as formed always in and through the places in which persons are shaped, and in which

human lives are lived. Since places themselves carry within them a strongly narrative structure – places are not static containers, but are instead dynamic openings of action and movement – so the complex holistic and relational character of personhood is mirrored in the complexity of place. Indeed, the relation between person and place can be seen to exemplify the same holistic and dynamic character: places are shaped by human interaction with them, while human lives are shaped by those places. There is no absolute priority to place over person or person over place, and each can be understood only as worked out in relation to the other.⁹

The relationality of the personhood, and the essential interconnection of personal life with a larger inter-personal and worldly context, means that we can never completely separate ourselves from those around us, nor indeed from the places in which we find ourselves, and the entities and events in those places. If we are to think about this in temporal terms, we might say that what this means is that the experience of temporality, and perhaps the very idea of time, bound up as it is, in human terms, with structures of narrativity that give form and content to both past and future, is never an experience separated from the experience of the world, or from the engagement with others. Temporality, properly understood (which means understood as more than merely the passage of a series of discrete moments), always takes us to a greater or lesser extent outside of ourselves, always connects us to frameworks of meaning that implicate ourselves with others as

they also differentiate us from others, that give us a sense of identity and commonality, that give a place and orientation to our lives, but in so doing also so enable our lives as such.

On this account, even our own suffering can never be completely removed from the suffering of others. Not only does our suffering implicate others, but the suffering of others also implicates us. At least, this is so just insofar as meaning can be attached to such suffering, and insofar as the experience of suffering forces us to attend to the meaningful character of our lives, and to the interdependence of our lives with others. There is a reverse side to this, however, in that if, as in Cassell's characterisation, human suffering is indeed to be understood as occurring in the face of a threat to the intactness of the person, then suffering must also threaten the very relationality that is constitutive of persons, both the internal relationality of the person and the integrally connected relationality of the person to the wider context in which the life of the person is formed and shaped. The experience of suffering can thus be characterised, not only in terms of the experience of an imminent breakdown in one's sense of personhood, but more than this, as the experience of an imminent breakdown in one's sense of the world.

Suffering is always borne by the singular individual, but that does not mean that remain the individual's alone. The singularity of suffering is thus not incompatible with the temporality of suffering according to which

suffering, while directly connected with the sense of personhood, always implicates more than just the individual who suffers. What I have referred to as the temporality of suffering is itself tied to the way in which suffering, while it threatens the intactness of the person, is also tied to the character of the person as formed through the complex narratives that connect persons to themselves, to other persons, and to the world. Suffering threatens just that connectedness. The connectedness of persons does not, however, entail a dissolution of the person into mere connections or relations. The person remains, but their being as a person is not given merely through the way in which they are differentiated from other persons through the qualities or properties that pertain to them – there are no such qualities or properties that mark us out as somehow unique in relation others, since such qualities or properties are themselves constituted in and through our relations with others.

If we recognise the temporality of suffering (which encompasses more than temporality alone), then we must also recognise the way in which suffering extends beyond the individual. The recognition of suffering, and the experience of compassion (which is not to experience the *same* suffering as the one who suffers, although it may entail a suffering *with*), are correlative with one another. Thus while suffering may threaten the integrity of the self, the recognition of suffering is also a recognition of the being of others, and so opens up the possibility of a felt relation with others (which is true

compassion). Suffering may be singular, but compassion, with which it is conjoined, is always double.

Yet if suffering threatens a breakdown in the intactness of the person, then the refusal to recognise the suffering of others represents a double threat; It a refusal to acknowledge the persons who bear that suffering, and a refusal to recognise them as persons (no matter how implicit that refusal might be), but in addition, it is a refusal to recognise our own connectedness to those persons, and so is a refusal of our own personhood, our own being human, as its is formed in and by that relation. Where the suffering at issue is a suffering with which we are ourselves implicated, even if the implication is historically mediated through our common belonging to a place, then the refusal at issue is refusal of our own identity, and so also has the potential to compromise our own being as persons. This is why, in Hays account, the attitude Tasmanians take to their past, and to the past suffering that has left its marks on the island, is intimately tied to the way in which Tasmanians engage with themselves, and so with their own sense of personhood, with their own being as human. Put in terms of the temporal (which is more than a matter of time alone), we might say that recognising the temporality of suffering, which is tied to the very recognition of suffering as suffering, is also to open oneself, in varying degrees, to the sufferings of others.

2. Suffering and the Singularity of the Person

The fifth paragraph of chapter four in the 'Sanhedrin' of the Mishnah declares that, for the Justice of God, he who kills a single man destroys the world; if there is no plurality, he who annihilated all men would be no more guilty than the primitive and solitary Cain, which is orthodox, nor more universal in his destruction, which can be magic. I believe that is true. The tumultuous general catastrophes – fires, wars, epidemics – are but a single sorrow, illusorily multiplied in many mirrors. That is Bernard Shaw's judgment when he states (*Guide to Socialism*, 86) that what one person can suffer is the maximum that can be suffered on earth. If one person dies of starvation, he will suffer all the starvation that has been or will be. If ten thousand other persons die with him, he will not be ten thousand times hungrier nor will he suffer ten thousand times longer. There is no point in being overwhelmed by the appalling total of human suffering; such a total does not exist.

Neither poverty nor pain is accumulable – Jorge Luis Borges¹⁰

The idea for which Borges argues in the above passage appears in many different places (and not only those that Borges himself catalogues). It is an idea that need not be taken to diminish the horror of suffering on a mass scale, but can rather be taken to direct attention to the *singularity* of suffering. The way this appears in Borges is, of course, that there can be no more suffering for the many than there can be for the one, but perhaps another way of putting the point is to say that there cannot be suffering of the many *without* the suffering of the one. Suffering is always borne by individual human beings, and to recognise suffering is to recognise the suffering of individuals, and not merely of the mass. Suffering, we may say, is always *singular*.

Could we conceive of suffering that was not the suffering of an individual? To say that we can conceive of the sufferings of a society, a nation, or of a people is not necessarily to say that we can therefore conceive of a mode of suffering that is other than the suffering of individuals. Indeed, very often to talk in this way is already to presuppose the idea of a common mode of identity, shared *among individuals*, that enables each of them, to a greater or lesser extent, to understand their own identity as bound up with that of the larger whole to which they take themselves to belong, and to understand the trials that may afflict the many as also, therefore, a burden borne by each individual. To talk of the suffering of a society, a nation, or a people may thus be taken not as an alternative mode of suffering, but as one of the ways in

which *individuals* may suffer – through the harms that befall the larger communities to which they belong.

To emphasise the singularity of suffering is not the same as merely adopting a generalised individualism as against some form of collectivism. What is at issue here is not a question concerning a choice of ontologies, but instead concerns the character of suffering as itself directly related to the very character of human being, to the character of personhood, to the being of the self. Just as it is the integrity of the person or the self that is threatened in the face of suffering, so it is also the person or the self – *this one* – that suffers. One might argue that the singularity of suffering is a specific instance of the singularity, perhaps even the uniqueness, of the person. Uniqueness, however, is almost certainly the wrong term to use here, since it is all too readily associated with ideas of a uniqueness given in some special quality or set of qualities, in a uniqueness of personality or character. For the most part, human beings are not so different from one another, and it is hard to see why we should focus merely on some abstract concept of the ‘unique’ as that which marks out persons as persons. The singularity of the person does not derive from anything that belongs to one person over another – it is, in fact, more a point of commonality than of simple difference. Instead, singularity belongs to the very nature of personhood so that to be a person is to be singular, while singularity is, one might say, most fully realised in the person. This is why suffering, as distinct from almost any of the other affections or

activities of human being, is itself singular in character, since it is in suffering that the being of the person, the intactness of the self, is itself directly threatened – the singularity of suffering is a direct correlate to the absolute singularity of personal being.¹¹

One of the most powerful, although also perhaps the most difficult, evocations of personhood in English literature is to be found in the famous passage in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* in which Shylock challenges his Christian persecutors: 'I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you prick us, do we not bleed? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?'¹² On the one hand Shylock can here be seen to be drawing attention to a set of attributes that belong to Jews, of whom Shylock is one, and that they also share with Christians – the possession of certain bodily parts, certain capacities, dispositions, dependencies and vulnerabilities. On the other hand, the power of this passage derives from the fact that it is not some faceless representative, even if of a particular religion and culture, who speaks here, but *this singular human being*, who draws attention, to his own singular capacity *to suffer*, and in bringing attention to this, to his own singular being *as a person*, and so as one whose being can never completely be taken up under any of the

appellations that may be applied to him, whether as Jew or Christian. In his own standing before us as this one who suffers, Shylock also makes a demand on us for a recognition of that suffering, and for a recognition of his own being as one who, when his suffering is unrecognised, may seek to impose suffering on others – the latter being itself an expression of the relationality of personhood in a manner as unlooked-for, at least to modern eyes, as it is awful.

The singularity of suffering is not incompatible with the temporality of suffering that was evident in the discussion above. The temporality of suffering is tied to the way in which suffering, while it threatens the intactness of the person, is also tied to the character of the person as formed through the complex narratives that connect persons to themselves, to other persons, and to the world. Suffering threatens just that connectedness. Yet the connectedness of persons does not imply that persons are nothing but concatenations of connections or relations. Persons are constituted through the complex relations in which they participate, and yet it is precisely through such relationality that persons emerge as single entities – as beings who have a sense of their own being as persons, and not merely as persons in some generic sense, but as persons for whom their being as persons matters to them. It is thus that suffering emerges as a possible mode of such being – suffering is what occurs in the face of an imminent threat to one's being as a person, and so also to one's own singularity.

What I have been calling the 'temporality' of personhood (which always involves more than just the temporal alone) thus encompasses a sense of the person as both relational *and* singular. Similarly, while suffering is always borne by the individual, suffering does not remain the individual's alone. As was already evident in the discussion above, once we recognise the temporality of suffering (which encompasses more than temporality alone), then we must also recognise the way in which suffering extends beyond the individual. To have a sense of personhood cannot only be to have a sense of oneself as a person, but requires, instead, a sense of participation and involvement with others persons. But recognising others as person also means recognising their singularity as persons, and their capacity to suffer as persons. Moreover, the singularity of suffering and of personhood means that the recognition of suffering is not a recognition merely of some set of objectively specificable responses. Recognition of suffering must involve a recognition, a felt sense even, of the singularity of the one who suffers, and so the singularity of that suffering. It is thus that we can say that the recognition of suffering and the experience of compassion –which is not to experience the *same* suffering as the one who suffers, although it may entail a suffering *with* – are essentially conjoined.

If suffering is always singular, then when we look to the suffering of the many, presented not in terms of the suffering of any single individual, but only in the suffering of a population, in the suffering of numbers, it may well

be that such suffering will no longer present itself to us as suffering. This is not because such a mode of presentation lacks the same emotional impact – even though it may well be less emotionally confronting – but rather that there is no suffering in numbers alone, but only in those who suffer, and who suffers is not a number, not a population, but a singular human being – even when there are many such. Borges tells us that ‘there is no point in being overwhelmed by the appalling total of human suffering’. Not only is there no point, but to be overwhelmed in that way is to lose one’s own sense of the suffering that is at issue – it is to be overwhelmed by a multiplicity that does not itself reflect the genuine suffering at issue. If we wish to avoid the reality of suffering, if we do not wish to be moved to recognise our own implication in such suffering, then perhaps we need do no more than turn our attention away from the individual and on to the mass, the population, the number. It is perhaps for this reason that we can remain relatively insensitive to the suffering of a million no less than of a thousand or a hundred. For when we look at suffering in this way, the real fact of suffering all but disappears. Not only, then, is suffering not increased through the multiplication of those who suffer, but suffering is also removed from us, rendered in a form that no longer makes the same demands upon us, perhaps no longer gives rise to the same compassion.

3. Suffering and a Humane Politics

The end of the movement of absurdity, or rebellion etc, and consequently the end of the contemporary world, is compassion in the original meaning of the word, that is to say, in the last analysis, love and poetry – Albert Camus¹³

Albert Camus' politics and ethics of rebellion – an ethics and politics that emerges at its strongest in his writing after the end of the Second World War, and especially in his writings on the Algerian situation – is an ethics based on a simple idea: the absolute refusal of human suffering. Already this idea is clear in a passage from *The Plague* in which Camus presents his own unequivocal answer to the question that appears in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: can any amount of good be justified if it depends on the suffering of one innocent human being? Camus describes a scene in which the novel's main protagonist, the doctor Rieux, has just attended the tortured death from plague of a young girl. While the priest who is with him offers what is intended to be the consoling advice that the divine order that allows the girl's death and suffering cannot be understood but must simply be loved, Rieux angrily replies: 'I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying

day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.’¹⁴

The response that Rieux, and through him, Camus, makes here can be seen, not only to be based on the conception of human suffering as an absolute evil, one that is not able to be mitigated even by the role it may play in some larger divine order, but as also embodying a recognition of the singular character of suffering. If suffering is not multiplied by the multiplication of those who suffer, then neither is suffering reduced by the reduction of those who suffer – not even if the suffering at issue is reduced from the suffering of an entire world to the suffering of a single child. Rieux’s refusal of what is put to him by the priest should not be construed as directed only against suffering as it might be taken to be ordained by God. It is as much a rejection of any order that issues from human beings as from the divine. ‘I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture’, Rieux says, and when we read this in conjunction with Camus’ explorations elsewhere, we know that this means a refusal willingly to go along with any ordering of the world in which suffering is not itself refused and in which it is not struggled against. Camus’ philosophy of rebellion is thus above all a rebellion *against suffering* – a rebellion against our own suffering and against the suffering we may impose on others – a rebellion in which Camus rejects the roles both of victim and of executioner.¹⁵

If what Camus refuses is indeed any scheme of things 'in which children are put to torture', then what he refuses is the very scheme of things that we find in the contemporary world. The scheme of things that operates in the world in which we now live is indeed one that involves the torture of children, as well as of adults, even if it is a torture enacted, not only through violence and war, but through poverty, starvation, exploitation, and disease. It is, moreover, a torture that is a direct consequence of decisions and policies taken by politicians and governments around the world, a torture in which we are ourselves implicated through our participation in an economic and social order that not only allows, but is often predicated upon, the existence of inequality and injustice (one need only think of the use of child labour to produce goods for Western markets to see to what extent this is so). In this respect, the use of torture as an instrument in the so-called 'war against terror' by nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom can be seen as an expression of a deeper willingness to use suffering as an instrument of policy, as an instrument of governance, a deeper willingness to participate in a scheme of things in which what matters is not the singularity of the person, but the generalised interest of the nation, the financial elite, the government of the day, the globalised corporation.

The singularity of suffering is directly tied to the singular character of personal, which is to say, human being. Camus' refusal of suffering can thus also be seen to rest on a recognition of the singularity of the human, and to

itself constitute an assertion of the human – an assertion, even, of the *dignity* of the human.¹⁶ Yet the position that Camus exemplifies here, a position to which we seem to be led by precisely the reasoning set out in the pages above, also seems to present us with an impossible situation. On the one hand, the singularity of suffering means that suffering can never allow of being quantified across persons – can never allow of the possibility of balancing the suffering of one individual against the diminution of suffering among some greater mass of individuals. Moreover, to treat suffering only in terms of the suffering of the mass is already to overlook the genuine character of suffering, is already to turn away from suffering, and so also, to turn away from a genuine recognition of the human. On the other hand, it seems to be precisely in the nature of that mode of decision-making associated with the governmental and the political that it should not concern itself with the single individual, but only with the collective, the group, the mass. Thus, within even liberal, democratic polities, decision-making routinely deploys utilitarian calculations that allow suffering to appear only in terms of the statistics that characterise a population, while such quantified levels of suffering are considered merely as elements within larger calculative frames.

On the face of it, the conclusion to which are driven here is that the idea of a genuinely human politics, a genuinely humane mode of government, is truly a chimera, since it would require stitching together two radically different modes of engagement with the world and with the fact of

human suffering. It would seem to require a mode of politics, a mode of government, that acknowledges the singularity of human being, and yet is also geared to that which goes beyond the singular, that pertains to the collective, and to the mass; a mode of politics, a mode of government, that refuses to allow the quantification of human suffering as one of the methods and instruments of operation, and yet nevertheless continues to operate at the level of the quantified and the generic.¹⁷

It may well be that the difficulty that appears here is one that is fundamental to any politics and to any mode of government. Yet it would surely be a mistake to therefore consign politics and the practice of government to the realm of the inhumane, if for no other reason than that it would itself constitute an acceptance of a form of inhumanity. Camus' position is not one that draws back from political engagement, even if it is an engagement that often remains purely critical. At the very least, what has to be recognised is the danger that is always present within a purely political or governmental frame that such a frame will lead us away from the realities of human life and suffering, to an obscuring of the singular nature of the human, and so to a mode of operation that may well turn out to be a denial of the human.

More than just this, however, any mode of political or governmental practice that aspires to retain a sense of the human and potentially humane character of such practice must always remain open and responsive to the

challenge that can be made on the basis of the singular character of the human, and that constantly confronts the anonymity of the political and the governmental with the singular reality of the sufferings of individuals. Such responsiveness to the fact of suffering need not imply that we can always exercise a power sufficient to relieve suffering – but it does imply a refusal simply to accept it, and a need constantly to find ways to address it. In this respect, it is not the need to judge fairly between different interests, or to find just means to allocate finite resources that gives rise to inhumanity, but rather the development of systems of political and governmental decision-making and modes of administrative organisation that operate according to what is effectively a *calculus* of human suffering in which suffering becomes almost an *instrument* of policy.

There must always exist a tension within modes of political and governmental operation between their grounding in the realities of human life, and so in the singularity of the human, and the demands of their ever-widening spheres of operation, as well as the collective interest that they appear to serve. The danger of our contemporary situation is that this tension has been exacerbated almost to breaking point by the increasing dominance of modes of organisation and decision-making that belong to a technology of governance based around the quantifiable, the measurable, and the manipulable.¹⁸ Within this frame the very singularity of the human, and of human suffering, seems indeed almost completely to have disappeared.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the transformation, within all manner of public and private institutions, of singular individuals, into customers, clients, consumers – even the vocabulary of the citizen has now become one that transforms us from acting, deliberating persons, into elements within a system of electoral obligation and civic accountability.¹⁹

I began this discussion with the observation that the refusal to recognise suffering may contribute to a loss of identity, to a loss of a proper sense of the past as well as the future, to a loss of a proper sense of our own humanity.

The refusal to recognise suffering, which is always a refusal to recognise the singularity of suffering, is thus not some form of particular and limited blindness that affects only a part of our functioning as human beings, but is instead corrupting of the singular relationality that is itself determinative of who and what we are. To the extent that contemporary modes of politics and governance embody such a refusal of suffering within their very modes of operation, then to that same extent they also function as corrupting of any proper sense of the human, as cutting us off from an ability to engage with ourselves, with others, or with the world. The challenge, then, and it is a challenge whose answer will always remain difficult and perhaps even obscure, is to find ways in which the machinery of contemporary life, a machinery that seems itself to include human suffering as part of its very mechanism, can be redirected, reconfigured, redesigned so as to enable the

human to reappear within it, to enable a properly humane politics, to enable a politics in which suffering is not accepted, but constantly and steadfastly refused. Such a conclusion may well be viewed as a nothing more than a naïve idealism that is incapable of facing up to the pragmatic realities of things. But one can have too little idealism as well as too much. If the demands of the pragmatic are indeed such as to require that we give up a capacity for human responsiveness, then the cost of such pragmatism is surely more than we should ever be willing to pay.

¹ 'Defense of Freedom', *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (New York: Vintage, 1960), p.100

² That non-human animals can suffer seems clear even if their suffering is not, in all respects, identical to human suffering. One might argue, in fact, that there is a distinction between suffering and mere pain or discomfort that holds in the case of adult human experience, but that does not hold in the case of the experience of non-human animals or human infants. The suffering of animals is a issue that I do not address in the discussion below, although it undoubtedly introduces further complications for any attempt articulate an ethical and political stance that is indeed attentive to the fact of suffering. In particular, one of the questions that my account here

immediately raises is whether the *refusal* of suffering must also entail a refusal of the suffering of *non-human animals.*, and if so, what the implications of this would be (would it not imply the alignment of the position outlined here with some of the stronger animal rights positions?)

While I agree that this is an important and pressing issue, it is not one that I have time properly to address here.

³ Hay, 'Port Arthur: Where Meanings Collide', *Vandemonian Essays* (Hobart: Walleah Press, 2002), p.29.

⁴ The man was Martin Bryant, later condemned to life imprisonment in Hobart's Risdon prison.

⁵ E. J. Cassel, 'The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine', *New England Journal of Medicine* 306.11 (1982): 639.

⁶ Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2004), p. 274

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁸ See, for instance, Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1995).

⁹ For a fuller account of the ideas at stake here see my *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Borges, 'A New Refutation of Time', *Other Inquisitions* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1964), p.178.

¹¹ While the connection is not made explicit in the text, the account of personhood that is presented here clearly resonates with the account of the ethical relation to be found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas – particularly in its emphasis on the singularity of the ethical relation and its character as given in the face-to-face encounter with another – see, for instance, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Although there are important features of the Levinasian account that are replicated here, there are also aspects of Levinas’ approach that I would contest – particularly his emphasis on the ethical relation as preceding anything ontological. In fact, on the account sketched here, and also I would argue in Levinas’ own account (in spite of his own claims to the contrary), the ethical and the ontological converge.

¹² William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1, 40-45.

¹³ Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, trans., Philip Thody (London: 1966), p.103

¹⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p.178.

¹⁵ See Camus, *Neither Victims nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder* (trans. Dwight MacDonald; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005) written shortly after the end of the Second World War, and originally published in 1946 in the Resistance newspaper *Combat*.

¹⁶ On the nature of dignity, and the manner of its relation to concepts of the human, as well as to the relational understanding developed here, see the discussions contained in the volume to which this is a successor, Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss (eds), *Perspectives on Human Dignity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), including my own essay in that volume, 'Human Dignity and Human Being'.

¹⁷ One might argue, in addition, that the insistence on the refusal of suffering of the sort found in Camus can never be satisfied – is not to live already to be enmeshed in a system that involves suffering as an inevitable part of it? – and enjoins us to do what cannot be done. The refusal of suffering cannot mean, however, that we are committed to the attempt to eradicate every instance of suffering by our own efforts nor can it mean that we should refuse our own lives (rather as Schopenhauer, but not Camus, argued we was the only ethical course available). Not only would such course of action fail to achieve their ends, but they are more likely to contribute to suffering rather than diminish it. What the refusal of suffering requires, more than anything else, is a willingness to take seriously of our own lives, as well as the singularity of those whose lives connect with our own, and to act in ways that are attentive to that singularity, within the capacities available to us and in a way that accords with our own situation. Camus'; own position is one that stands against excess – whether the excess of the

one who does nothing or of the one who attempts to do everything. What is absolutely refused is the turning away from the singular, the concrete and the lived that is the necessary accompaniment of both forms of excess.

¹⁸ The tension that is evident here is apparent in many aspects of contemporary organisations, and particularly organisations whose primary concern is human welfare – organisations concerned with matters of social welfare, health, and education. It is significant that only this tension have an impact on those whose welfare is supposed to be the focus of such organisations, but also on those who work within the organisations in question. Thus Thomas R. Cole and Nathan Carlin, for instance, have written of ‘the suffering of physicians’ as this arises due to the way in which medical practitioners increasingly find themselves unable to live up to the ideals and obligations of their profession because of the limits imposed by the organisational situations in which they find themselves – see Cole and Carlin, ‘The Suffering of Physicians’, *The Lancet* 374 (2009): 1414-1415. The ‘dehumanization’ of medicine to which Cole and Carlin refer is, I would argue, directly linked to the inability of contemporary medical policy and modes of organisation to respond to the singularity of suffering

¹⁹ The work of Michel Foucault provides us with a detailed elaboration of the rise of what he referred to as ‘bio-power’ – a shift in the character of

governmental operation towards the management not of individuals, but of populations, a shift made possible because of the rise of new actuarial practices and managerial techniques. See, for instance, Foucault *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1976).