

Siby K. George · P.G. Jung *Editors*

Cultural Ontology of the Self in Pain

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ISBN 978-81-322-2600-0

ISBN 978-81-322-2601-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-81-322-2601-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015945613

Springer New Delhi Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

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Printed on acid-free paper

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To Professor Goutam Biswas (1953–2012)

*A thoughtful scholar of existential
phenomenology and contemporary
Indian philosophy, a fine exponent
of Rabindrasangeet; above all, a friend
and mentor to the two of us
and to many more, without borders.*

*Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain but
for the heart to conquer it.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

Acknowledgments

Our first thoughts to put together a collection of essays on pain was triggered by the invitation of Prof. Prafulla Kar to hold the third of the Enigma series Conference of the Balvant Parekh Centre for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Vadodara, India, of the year 2013 at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, with P.G. Jung as the conference coordinator. Some of the contributors to this volume presented papers at the conference on the theme “The Enigma of Pain.” We are grateful to Prof. Kar and the Balvant Parekh Centre for the initial promptings.

We want to thank our contributors. Only six of the contributors presented papers at the original conference, and of them only four have given an updated version of the papers presented as chapters of this book. The other chapters were all written specifically for this volume in response to our ‘note for contributors’. The chapters came in without much delay and the contributors, some of whom are well-known names in the field, showed exemplary collegiality and cooperation in responding to our editorial queries and revisions. As expected, some of those who promised to contribute later withdrew, and the fresh contributions were constrained by demanding deadlines. We owe them a special word of appreciation for meeting the deadlines without complaint and with the required rigour.

Our colleagues in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay and our Institute showed wonderful cooperation in the production and readying of this manuscript for press. Professional assistances and resources have never been wanting, whether it is about the Department or about the Central Library of IIT Bombay. We are grateful.

Shinjini Chatterjee, Senior Editor, Human Sciences, Springer, and Shruti Raj, Editorial Assistant, were extremely patient with regard to the unavoidable production woes of a collected volume. We could not keep several deadlines but Shinjini and her team at Springer, New Delhi, were extremely supportive, prompt and professional in their approach. We thank them.

This volume is dedicated to Prof. Goutam Biswas, a friend and mentor to both of us and to many more. He passed away while undergoing treatment in Chennai for cancer on 4 November 2012. Most affectionate friend and thoughtful philosopher,

‘Goutamda’ or ‘Bulti’ as he was affectionately called by his friends, was well loved by academics all over India. He mentored and encouraged young philosophers from all over the country. Age, rank and honorifics did not matter to him. An alumnus of HSS, IIT Kanpur, he wrote mostly on Martin Buber and Tagore. The “Other” was a constant concern of his philosophical musings. This was no accident. The most striking feature of Goutamda’s character was a pronounced, rooted, generous cosmopolitanism.

Mumbai
July 2015

Siby K. George
P.G. Jung

Contents

1	Introduction: Cultural Ontology of the Self in Pain	1
	Siby K. George and P.G. Jung	
Part I Ontology of Pain		
2	Ontology of Pain in Moral Theories	25
	P.G. Jung	
3	The Familiar Stranger: On the Loss of Self in Intense Bodily Pain	51
	Siby K. George	
4	Waiting to Speak: A Phenomenological Perspective on Our Silence Around Dying	75
	Kirsten Jacobson	
5	Pain and Catharsis in Art, Ritual and Therapy	93
	Roman Meinhold	
6	Traditional Philosophies and Gandhi’s Approach to the Self in Pain	111
	Douglas Allen	
Part II Culture, Politics and Ethics of Pain		
	Hurt	135
	Daniel M. Becker	

7 The Infinite Faces of Pain: Narrative, *Eros*, and Ethics 139
David B. Morris

8 Shame, Placebo and World-Taking Cognitivism 165
Phil Hutchinson

**9 Self and Suffering in Buddhism and Phenomenology:
Existential Pain, Compassion and the Problems
of Institutional Healthcare. 181**
John Russon

10 Many Faces of Woman’s Pain 197
Shefali Moitra

**11 Pain and Agency: On the Essential Importance
of Vulnerability and Transgression 211**
Shannon Hoff

Part III Social Contexts of Pain

**12 Dislocations, Marginalizations, Past and Present:
Pain-Experiences of Two Marginalized Communities 227**
R. Umamaheshwari

**13 AFSPA and the Tortured Bodies: The Politics of Pain
in Manipur. 249**
Malem Ningthouja

14 Medical Mission and the Interpretation of Pain 269
Parinitha Shetty

Index 285

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Cultural Ontology of the Self in Pain

Siby K. George and P.G. Jung

Abstract The term ‘cultural ontology’ evokes the sense that the social, political, religious and historical narratives and other cultural forces that are at play within the world one inherits exercise a sculpting power that shapes one’s self, and this power is greater than the power that one has over them. The self thus formed is not an unchangeable substance but a non-substantial way of being or relating meaningfully to the world. The experience of pain is not an accidental element in the way of being of the self but is constitutive of the formation and being of the self. The process of meaning-making is intrinsically fraught with pain. Pain is at once aversive and necessary. This introductory chapter outlines the 13 other chapters of the book from the perspective of the cultural ontology of the self in pain, dividing them into three groups. The first set of essays deals with the various dimensions of the ontology of the self in pain; the second with the ethical, political and cultural angles, consequences and approaches to pain-experience; and the third with certain concrete contexts of the self in pain with reference to Indian social and political life.

Keywords Cultural ontology · Body-being · Representationalist · Antiessentialist · Meaning · Self

1.1 Cultural Ontology, Self and Pain

Beginning with Zborowski’s pioneering anthropological work *People in Pain* (1969), literature on the cultural dimensions of pain has been common. Although empirically oriented works like Zborowski’s have not been many (Encandela 1993),

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his contention that pain experience and expression have deep social and cultural underpinnings, and that people respond to pain not as bare, abstract individuals but as historical and cultural individuals (1969, p. 20) has informed subsequent understanding of pain.¹ This culturally informed approach complements the medical approach to pain and challenges the cognitive-scientific, physicalist, mechanistic, causal understanding of pain, leading to the ontological-literary-cultural and medical humanities writings on pain, placed at the interface of biology and culture (see Coakley and Shelemay 2007). Medical humanities today is replete with studies that exhort nurses, paramedics and physicians to recognize a holistic understanding and the cultural sensitivities of the sick body-being's experience and expression of pain for a more humane way of dealing with trauma, suffering and illness (see Carr et al. 2005). What is there in this book's essays that are not there in the profusion of material already available on cultural diversity in the experience of pain?

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) and David Morris's *The Culture of Pain* (1991) are two very differently oriented but landmark works in the culturally informed approach to pain. Scarry's frame of analysis is a political ontology of the world-shattering power of pain effected by its demonic inexpressibility—especially attached to such politically charged cruelties as torture and hegemonic silencing through oppressive domination—and the world-making power of human expression and creativity as a sort of inherently human, and therefore, ontological response to ineluctable pain that permeates existence entirely.

As a theoretically compact work, *The Body in Pain* does not look at the literature on pain that is not necessary for its tightly woven argument. Morris, on the other hand, seeks to puncture the thick walls of the physicalist's reductive paradigm by engaging with it and taking into account medical research on pain to emphasize the urgency to combine cultural understanding with “insights of numerous fields now separated by specialized vocabularies and divergent theories” (1991, pp. 6–7). Morris claims that “the experience of pain is not timeless but changing, the product of specific periods and particular cultures” (p. 4). In his *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (1998), Morris's term ‘postmodern illness’ stands for “our changed and still changing experience of human affliction” as distinctive as the cars and computers that define the postwar postmodern era are. He argues that these distinctive experiences of suffering in our era are products of the complex relations between biology and culture, wedded to the postmodern human's quest to live forever, something that *defines who we are today* (Morris 1998, p. 3).

Morris's argument is that the contemporary *self* is rather distinctive in comparison to *selves* of all previous historical eras and cultures. It is not that we can have an experience discretely separable from an unchanging core self, hidden beneath the folds of our transient thoughts. The self is *not* an unchanging substance but our *way of being towards* the manifold experiences that are always intentionally

¹*People in Pain* is criticized for racial stereotyping, but Zborowski's conclusion that pain responses are culturally coded has found wide endorsement and the work is considered as the founding attempt to “the study of culture and pain” (Mander 2011, pp. 19–20; see also Morris 1991, p. 55).