

ON EVIL, PAIN, AND BEAUTY:  
A CONVERSATION WITH ELAINE SCARRY

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*Elaine Scarry is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University. Her highly acclaimed book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*—described as an extraordinary, brilliant, and necessary book—is arguably the most important work on the experience of pain and torture. Her most recent books are *On Beauty and Being Just* and *Dreaming by the Book*.*

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*The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* focuses both on the infliction of pain and on creativity. It's a jarring combination, and yet, you see a connection between them. You argue that the infliction of pain reverses the process of creation, suggesting that it undoes or deconstructs the victim's world and his or her ability to make a world. Could you say more about this?

When I talk about pain and creation, I really do mean in the most literal way possible that they are opposites and opposites that are, as you say, jarring in their relationship. When I started writing the book, I actually had begun by thinking that if I wanted to write about pain, I should not begin to talk about creation. As a student and young teacher of literature, I knew that often in literary realms we refer to the fact that out of suffering comes creation, and I had originally felt resistance to that idea just because the relentless nature of cancer pain, or burn pain, or pain inflicted in political contexts, never has any room in it for creation and, therefore, to imagine that great acts of creativity could come about seemed to excuse and apologize for

the existence of suffering in the world. So my original intention was to write only about pain and not to stray into creation. And, then, as I began to work on the question of torture—and I can almost remember the moment in which this happened, as I sat there reading piles and piles of Amnesty International materials—I suddenly saw that the structure of cruelty that I was observing was actually a kind of standing of creation on its head. Not only were suffering and creation not in league with one another; they were radical opposites.

The work of pain is to deconstruct or unmake objects of consciousness, as we can see if suddenly you accidentally slam a hammer on your hand and your mind goes blank or you see stars. You can literally see the unmaking of the objects of consciousness in front of the mind's eye. So too with language. If one is suddenly put in pain for a moment or an hour or a day or, in a worse situation, several days or even longer, you can watch language deteriorate. One's ability to say sentences, and then even one's ability to say words, disappears. In the initial moment of pain, someone might say an expletive, and then a cry; these are half-way points in the disintegration of language until, finally, one just surrenders and is quiet. That is the rude physical fact of pain.

In the cultural context I was looking at, in documents from the 70s, there was a literal acting out of the unmaking of the objects of consciousness and the unmaking of the objectifying power of language. For example, in torture not only did the torturer inflict pain, but there was actually a kind of miming of the unmaking of the world by enlisting all the objects of the world into the act. Even if the torturer was using a mechanism such as, let's say, a way of inflicting electrical discharge into the person, he would also refer to chairs and tables and windowsills and baskets and blankets and telephones and all kinds of cultural artifacts, and in that way made the body of the prisoner somehow a kind of agent for not only experiencing its own pain, but for witnessing the dissolution of the made world.

Sometimes people say to me that bodily experiences are always language-destroying, that pain is language-destroying, but so is plea-

sure. I think that that's not correct. There are places where we can see that pleasure can interfere with language. Lovers, for example, in the moment of making love may begin to speak baby talk. But, lovers are also able to call on the greatest powers of language-building. They write hymns to one another and write poems and romances, and so we have a huge linguistic celebration of love. So, too, the pleasure of eating, which is a very physical act, is very compatible with conversation, with dinner parties, and that's been true from Plato's symposium forward, or actually much earlier, when the assemblies of people in Homer are sitting around feasting and talking. Physical pain is not just language-destroying, it also destroys the objects of consciousness, and conversely, pleasure is world-building, or, to put it the other way, world-building is pleasurable. I really do see them as opposed.

### **How are good and evil related to creation and injury?**

The word "evil" isn't one that I spontaneously think of when I'm thinking about this, and yet, it certainly has many features in common with what I'm talking about when I describe cruelty or injustice. One of the virtues of using the vocabulary of good and evil is that it does register an oppositional ground—that is, it does state the fact that there are two alternatives, which is something I very much believe. My book is divided into Part I on unmaking and Part II on making, so that I place injury or the willful infliction of injury in opposition to creation. In our own intellectual time, I think we've been very discouraged from ever wanting to say: "Look, there are two distinguishable things." Instead, we've been asked again and again to say "Everything is just a version of its opposite; and it may seem that these things are different, but really they're just the same in the end." And I don't think that's true. Injustice or (using the word you introduced) "evil" not only likes to ape creation and turn it on its head, but also very much profits from our getting confused about whether what we're looking at is creation or cruelty. Whereas I think that genuine acts of making and creation, which are normally on the side of diminishing pain, have to, among other things, continually keep sorting out and de-coupling creation from its appropriative and

opposite counterpart of cruelty.

**One definition of evil might be “using the language-destroying power of pain to unmake someone’s world intentionally.” Pain can be caused by unintentional actions, but the *intentional* use of that attribute of pain to unmake someone’s world could be a definition of evil. What do you think about that?**

I think that that’s right. The pain that has no human agent, such as certain forms of cancer pain or burn pain, are every bit as horrible for the person who suffers them, and yet, we can at least work to heal that pain, and no one’s confused about whether it’s a good or not. The idea that actually willfully inflicting those kinds and levels of pain—if there is such a thing as evil, then that is what it is. If I hesitate at all about the word “evil”—let me insert a parenthesis in here as to why I hesitate—in some ways “evil” is a very resonant term, and I’m sure that for some people it conveys a kind of absolute quality that explains why the cruel acts that it holds within it have to be absolutely prohibited. For me, for some reason, the word “evil” doesn’t work in my intuitive, everyday world, to carry with it that absolute prohibition in the way that “injustice,” or a more neutral-sounding word like “cruelty,” does. It may be because “evil” sounds theological and, therefore, may have a slight feeling of excusing the human actors involved, as though it was a force beyond them, that they couldn’t help participating in. But, I’m just saying that as a parenthesis, because I think, for the most part, what you mean by “evil” and what I mean by “injustice” or “willful infliction of cruelty” or “willful infliction of injury” are very close to one another.

**How does the idea of injury fit into your understanding of the relationship between evil and suffering?**

Whereas there are a lot of things in the world that are morally ambiguous, the willful infliction of injury is not ambiguous, and normally one can take that as a kind of center of gravity for understanding what’s to be aspired to and what’s to be avoided. And so I think that the language of evil absolutely should have the infliction

of injury associated with it, if we use it at all. It has the benefit of asserting that there is a double ground. It's not that everything blends into, or smudges into, each other and that things that are good can't be differentiated from things that are evil.

**Some people claim that suffering is the result of evil. Others suggest that suffering is the evil against which we should fight. How do you see the relationship between evil and suffering?**

I certainly think that suffering that is not willfully inflicted is as hateful—as horrible and hateful and to be dreaded—as suffering that is willfully inflicted. I think, though, that there is a certain advantage in holding out the word “evil” to describe acts of agency, that is, acts that are intentional. If what the word “evil” does is to mark out something that we plan to work together to eliminate or avoid, then that's a virtue of the language. That is, it designates something against which we will stand.

**Your work is focused on pain as injury, with torture and war being the two primary situations of pain that you discuss. What do you think of those instances in which pain is not the infliction of injury, for example, the pain associated with medical operations in which the goal is the alleviation of an illness or a wound that has caused pain, or childbirth, or extreme physical exertion? How does the intention of the inflictor of pain relate to whether we view this infliction as injury or as evil?**

I think that at the very heart of pain is the felt experience of aversiveness. It is something that is immediately palpable as something we don't want or one doesn't want. Here again, is something that people sometimes get very confused about. They'll say: “Well, pain is neutral. It can either be positive or negative.” No, that's not correct. Pain is negative. It's the felt experience of aversiveness. It's something that in the most vivid way possible one doesn't want and doesn't want it with all one's being; and therefore, it really is a kind of acting against one's will—both because one feels the helplessness of one's own will in getting rid of it and because, even before one's attempt to

get rid of it, the mere fact of its existence seems to call into question the power of one's own volition, or the power of one's own will.

So, to go on to your question: what about those situations in which there is some voluntary control on the individual's part? I think those situations are very different. If I will myself into a situation of pain such as a medical therapy, and I agree to go to a doctor and let her do something to me that hurts, then it's already very different. And it's not just different as an interpretative act, but, rather, to say that more clearly, the act of interpretation is so deeply grounded in the felt experience itself that if I am actually seeking it, it already has a kind of power to transform the pain. That is, it is no longer pain, since pain is centrally the felt experience of aversiveness. So it may have unpleasant sentient characteristics associated with it, but it doesn't fundamentally insult my whole being the way physical pain which is unwanted does. If you watch any child go into a medical office and watch his or her face as the needle or the scalpel approaches, it's a reminder that being able to willingly take on pain, as we do when we go to the physician, is a learned experience. It is deeply counter-intuitive.

**Isn't it the case that the pain is still unwanted, that there's still an aversiveness to pain, but that there's a greater good that makes the individual willing to bear it, in which case it's still physical pain and still has aversiveness at its core?**

I think that's right. It's certainly the case that one undergoes terrible pain by agreeing, say, to chemotherapy. It's just unquestionable. And it's certainly the case that childbirth involves extremely high levels of pain. But, in both of those cases, as you said, there's a good outcome, very great outcome, and also there's some recognition that the amount of time involved is limited, which it isn't if it's certain other forms of pain. The kind of repudiation that would be involved in unwanted pain is not the same.

Now, here's another crucial element in all these situations: The person who's experiencing the pain is also the person who gets the ben-

efits of the greater good. It's the person who's chosen the medical therapy who will derive the benefits, if there are benefits to be derived, from the medical therapy. And it's the person undergoing childbirth who will have this wonderful new creature in the world with her soon. The problem with these instances being cited is that they then get used by people to say that sometimes pain leads to a greater good, where it's one person who's being put in pain and somebody else who's getting to determine what the greater good is. And, of course, this is very clearly true in regimes that torture. I'm sure they're telling themselves that they don't really want to inflict pain, but for the good of the regime, they have to do it. What is absolutely crucial is that the location of sentience for the pain and for the assessment of the pleasure or what the good is to be derived have to be in the same location. And if they're not, then the thing is a very great falsification.

**Torture is one of the most extreme examples of the situation in which the suffering of one person is used for the supposed good of another: the pain of the victim of torture is directly inverse to the good for which the torturer claims he is doing this torturing. Is that why you see torture as “close to an absolute immorality”?**

I think you're exactly right that one person's pain is being appropriated and its attributes are being objectified and falsely conferred on someone else or something else. And, therefore, it does represent an absolute of immorality. That's my judgment, but it's also a widely shared judgment. It's why international prohibitions on torture are stated in unqualified form, and it's why torture has extra-territorial jurisdiction in the United States where, unlike any other political crime, it doesn't have to have happened on our soil or even to involve a U. S. citizen for it to be tried in the country. Those are, legally, very unusual circumstances. But it is just for the reason you point to: there is a complete lack of consent in the situation so that the location of the pain and the location of the asserted good to be derived are wholly severed from one another. The example of torture shows this in its global features and also in the minute workings of it. Very literally you can watch in slow motion this transfer across the two

locations, so that, for example, certain features of pain, like its totalizing power, are transferred over to the regime; in this mime that's going on in the prison room, it seems to be the regime that's total. Well, the regime isn't total at all. It's usually because the regime's in a lot of trouble and doesn't have ordinary forms of popular verification and authorization that it's resorting to torture, and, yet, for the duration of the act of torture, it seems as though the regime is total and totalizing because the felt experience of pain is total and totalizing. But it does seem to me an absolute standard.

Once in a while, you'll hear somebody try to make an argument like: "Let's imagine a situation where we would all agree to torture. Imagine someone has a key secret to some kind of terrible weapon, like a nuclear bomb, and only by torturing him or her do you find out where it is." Leaving aside the fact that it's been demonstrated over and over again that torture leads to a mountain of false information, not to true information—even if we can allow that it leads to true information, it doesn't change the fact that there's no reason to want to change the fact that torturing the person is wrong. It's just that in that situation one would be willing to accept carrying out a very wrong act in order to do something else. But to say that as though what you really want is to absolve somebody—I mean, why would anyone in that situation even want to absolve themselves in wrongdoing? Presumably they're going to do something for humanity. They are not going to ask to be absolved from that.

**There's no reason to try to say that torture is a good thing—even if, for example, it does save the world from this nuclear bomb. It's still a very bad, destructive thing to torture someone, but you might say it was a necessary evil for that particular situation.**

I think that's exactly right.

**Let's talk about beauty and evil, which is a strange combination, but you went from writing a book about pain and to writing a book about beauty and justice. How do you understand the relation between injury and beauty?**

I think the whole sequence of questions you've been asking me underscores the bridge, the structure, that connects the earlier work I did on pain and the more recent work on beauty. It's in part because *The Body in Pain* is so much about the opposition between pain, on the one hand, and creation, on the other, so that creation, which is very bound up with beauty, really does stand in opposition to pain. Some people who have read the book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, even when they've been incredibly generous to the book, have said: "Well, she never talks about ugliness." But, beauty, like anything else, can have many different opposites. And the thing that, for me, is the opposite of beauty is injury. There is a straightforward continuity between the two works. Beauty makes us want to diminish injury in the world. When I say that beauty makes us feel adverse to injury, what I'm trying to say is that one never wants to cease being opposed to injury.

The felt experience of standing in the presence of beauty is life-affirming; it both makes us salute the aliveness (or if it's an artwork, the kind of life-likeness) of the thing before which we stand, and ignites or vivifies our awareness of our own aliveness, making the pleasurable facts of sentience more emphatic. It's always the work of creation to diminish pain, but not to diminish sentience. It's the work of creation to amplify the pleasurable forms of sensation, such as seeing. Creation helps us see farther, or hear better, or with more acuity, or to touch better, but it's only the adversity of sentience, of physical pain and injury, that creation opposes. Beautiful things incite in us the desire to do one of two things: to protect and take care of beautiful things that are already existing in the world, to engage in acts of stewardship, and to perform new acts of creation. When you're in the presence of something beautiful, it often leads you to want to bring yet more beauty into the world. So you see a beautiful tree, and now you want to take a photograph of the tree, or make a drawing of the tree. The tree is already beautiful and yet, now it's going to be supplemented with one more beautiful thing, this sketch or this photograph. And the outcome may be incredibly great, as is the case if you're Leonardo doing this sketch, or it may be something as modest as just the fact of staring. When one stares

at a beautiful building or a beautiful flower or stares acoustically at a beautiful piece of music by playing it again and again and again, what one is doing is perpetuating its existence in the world, that is, perpetuating, giving it more standing, giving it more ground to stand on. And, therefore, that act, though it seems very ordinary—the act of staring either with your ears or your eyes or your hands or whatever—is very closely bound up to the act of creating, since what it tries to do is bring about more of this thing that already is.

**I was thinking about your descriptions of pain as the shrinking of the world to just the body or the part of the body that is in pain, and of seeing beauty or experiencing beauty as a sort of duplication or reproduction—there's a certain fecundity to it that is a multiplier of sensations, a desire to reproduce the beautiful object or to share it or to insure its existence along with one's own.**

I think that that's true: beauty really is distributive in nature; pain and injury do throw you back on yourself. One thinks of that great definition of aging by Stravinsky as the ever-shrinking perimeter of pleasure, where there's only the felt fact of aversiveness. And yet, beauty wholly carries one out of oneself, as in the descriptions given by Simon Weil and by Iris Murdoch as a kind of de-centering, in which your own preoccupations about yourself fall away. You're actually in the very unusual position of being willing to be secondary to or adjacent to or lateral to the figure, and yet being at the same time in a great state of pleasure. There are lots of things in the world that can make us feel secondary or tertiary or lateral, and there are lots of things in the world that can make us feel acute pleasure, but usually they don't happen simultaneously, and in beauty, they really do. But I hadn't quite seen it so clearly in the way that you've just made me see it, as really clearly the opposite of the soul-destroying throwing back on the adversity of the body that can happen in the brute forms of extreme and sustained physical pain.