

Pleasure, Suffering, and Painless Civilization

Masahiro Morioka,* Beyza Şen,** and Ali Tacar***

Ali Tacar: Dear Professor Masahiro Morioka, first of all, how are you? Thank you very much for accepting our interview offer. The fields that you are philosophically interested in are the fields that also interest us in Turkey, where we think, work and generate ideas. That's why your opinion is very important to us. Professor Masahiro Morioka, could you tell us a little about yourself and your philosophy?

Masahiro Morioka: I am a Japanese philosopher teaching philosophy and ethics at Waseda University, Tokyo. I have published a number of Japanese books and papers on the philosophy of life, the meaning of life, bioethics, gender studies, and so on. When I was young I wished to be a physicist and investigate the mystery of the universe in terms of physical science, but after I went to a university I turned to philosophy and started to investigate the inner mystery of our life and existence. I first studied Western philosophy such as Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Husserl, and then started research on issues in bioethics, such as brain death, organ transplants, and disability. Researching those issues, I realized that I had to examine the essence of contemporary scientific civilization philosophically, and I came up with the concept of "painless civilization." I published the book of that title in 2003 in Japanese.

Ali Tacar: There are some concepts that you used while criticizing today's civilization and making suggestions in your work called *Painless Civilization*, to give an example, such as blindfolding and self-domestication. Can you explain a little more exactly what you want to convey with these concepts?

Masahiro Morioka: My first intuition was that the progress of modern

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civilization did not necessarily give us true happiness we were craving for. In our contemporary civilization we can experience pleasure, pleasantness, and comfort, and can avoid pain and suffering, albeit at the sacrifice of joy of life, which is indispensable for acquiring our life without regret. Of course we have a lot of pain and suffering in our society, so our lives are not painless at all, but I cannot help feeling that our contemporary scientific civilization is progressing in the direction of eliminating pain and suffering irreversibly. We have invented a lot of medications to kill our bodily and psychological pains, we have made our living conditions in the cities comfortable, there is plenty of food and drinks in supermarkets in big cities, and we have entertainment industries that distract our anxieties and worries. On the surface they make us happy, but at deeper levels they make us numb and frigid about the meaning of living our irreplaceable life. I thought that this situation resembles that of the domesticated animals. In the case of domesticated animals we human beings control their living conditions and their fates, but in the case of human beings, we domesticate ourselves; we control our own living conditions and exploit our own lives. I thought that our “desire of the body” deprives us of our joy of life and makes us live in a state of living corpses. The concept of “self-domestication,” which was created by German anthropologist von Eickstedt, is helpful to understand my idea. I think that a painless civilization is a developmental form of the human race’s self-domestication. Of course he did not discuss the deprivation structure that is found between our desire and joy of life. You can see the detailed discussions of my argument in my book *Painless Civilization 1*. There you can also see my discussion of the concept of “preventive pain elimination,” which is one of the key concepts in the theory of painless civilization. On the webpage for *Painless Civilization* I wrote, “The endless tendency to eliminate pain and suffering makes us totally lose sight of the meaning of life that is indispensable to human beings. How are we to battle against this painless civilization?” This is the most concise summary of the concept of the book.

Beyza Şen: When viewed, the foundations of today’s modern civilization were laid with the age of science and enlightenment that emerged in the West in the 17th century. There are many philosophers who criticize today’s modern civilization, Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset, Deleuze, Foucault and many more can be given as examples. In fact, you put forward similar views with these philosophers, albeit at certain points, in your work *Painless Civilization*. Do you

make a connection between yourself and these philosophers and what are your ideas about the past, present and future of modern civilization?

Masahiro Morioka: Yes, I learned a lot from those thinkers. The important thing is that from the 19th century our society began to function as a huge dynamic system, which is made up of an interconnected web of ideologies, institutions, scientific technologies, economy, and so forth, like an autopoietic system, and each and every human being is swallowed up in that system like a mere gear. Interestingly, that system turns our eyes from the fact that we are actually swallowed up by it, and we are allured to believe that we will become happy if we can avoid pain and suffering in our society. This function is so sophisticated that it is actually very hard for us to recognize it. I discussed it in Chapter 8 of *Painless Civilization* in more detail, which is to be translated into Turkish in the future. I think that a painless civilization began when humans started farming and stock raising and accelerated itself in the 19th and 20th centuries, and will further develop in the future. Almost all societies and the people on the earth will be swallowed up by the tide of painless civilization.

Ali Tacar: In your book *Painless Civilization*, you mention that regional civilizations in Europe, Asia, America and the Islamic world have become increasingly “painless”. Can you explain this a little more? And what exactly do you mean by “becoming painless”?

Masahiro Morioka: Becoming painless means the situation that we are beginning to succeed in avoiding pain and suffering and in acquiring pleasure and comfort in our contemporary civilization, especially in the city areas, and we are beginning to feel unexplainable anxiety and uneasiness being protected by clean environments and human-friendly technologies. The tide of painless civilization easily goes beyond borders and spreads out everywhere, whether it is Europe or the Islamic world or any parts of the world. Although many of us unconsciously understand that mere eliminating pain and suffering and enjoying pleasure and comfort do not necessarily lead us to meaningful and fulfilling lives, we cannot easily escape from the tide of our society progressing toward a more painless one.

Ali Tacar: When we look at today’s societies, people seem to be satisfied with

the society they live in. But despite this, people still seem to be unhappy and uneasy about something they cannot define. You have already touched upon this subject under various headings in your book. The question I want to ask is this: People are in a vacuum and they try to fill this void with various things, yes, but what do you think is the real source of this feeling of emptiness? Was this sense of emptiness always a human thing, or is it a problem unique to today's civilization, which has emerged as a result of today's modern civilization as a result of people's inability to make sense of themselves?

Masahiro Morioka: Yes, what I have investigated is a real source of this feeling of emptiness you just mentioned. As I have mentioned above, I argue that it began when the human race started agriculture and stock raising in the dawn of our civilization, and it has become a serious problem since the 19th century. This suggests that it would be very hard for us to escape from or cope with the pathology of painless civilization in the future.

Beyza Şen: In your book you say that for Buddha "he may have sought to escape from a painless palace lifestyle". What do you think are the reasons why the feeling, the idea, that pushed Buddha to such an escape, is not found in people living in today's society? What exactly is implied by the concept of "painlessness" here?

Masahiro Morioka: Even in the era of Buddha, he was an exceptional person who decided to seek a true life outside his well protected castle environment. He discarded everything, including his wife and son, and became a lonely practitioner. I think this kind of practice would be possible even today, and actually there are many people who follow the ancient Buddha's path, but it does not work well in our modern society because even such a practice could be commodified and incorporated into the system of painless civilization. A very small portion of practitioners might be able to live, being liberated from a painless civilization, but they are exceptions, and they will not be able to transform the strong framework of painless civilization.

Ali Tacar: You mention the Frankfurt School in your book. Do you think, when viewed from today's world, the issues that the Frankfurt School criticizes in general or the solutions they want to bring about the issue have found their

place? Or, on the contrary, does today's civilization continue to reach its desired destination with its own righteousness criteria and value judgments, without losing any blood, despite all kinds of criticism?

Masahiro Morioka: I learned a lot from Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the instrumentalized reason and Fromm's concept of escape from freedom. Their framework is still effective today, but at the same time I feel that today's painless civilization functions in a more sophisticated manner in our industrialized society backed up by digital technologies, so we need a renewed theory to grasp the crux of contemporary society we are living in.

Beyza Şen: There are fields that you are interested in other than civilization studies. To give an example of these; brain death, consciousness communication, life studies. We can directly associate these issues with the person's existential self, but apart from that, what do you think are the social projections of these issues?

Masahiro Morioka: Yes, those were some of my research topics. I published two books and a lot of papers on brain death and organ transplantation, and a book on consciousness communication, that is, a special type of communication in the age of information society. Life studies is a methodology of investigating our own lives, which I have continued researching until today. Actually, the book *Painless Civilization* is an outcome of my philosophical research that was done using the method of life studies. In some parts after Chapter Two of the book you will see a mixture of the investigation of our society and the investigation of my actual life, which is one of the characteristics of a life studies approach. All the above studies have a strong connection with my own existential self. A critic once said that the book *Painless Civilization* was a mixture of a systems theory and existentialism. I think his criticism is correct in this sense.

Ali Tacar: When we look at it, there were many different civilizations all over the world until the 17th century, and these civilizations had their own concepts with their own past knowledge and cultures. Thanks to these concepts, they had their own world of thought. But when we look at the modern civilization we live in, there is a "standardization" across the world. The same is true for these concepts. The music listened to in any European country is the same as the music listened

to in any Asian country. The clothes worn, the topics discussed, etc. All of them are completely uniform. Of course, the share of technology plays a big role in this sense (Instagram, Twitter, etc.). How do you evaluate this issue?

Masahiro Morioka: This is a huge problem that requires detailed analyses in the field of social sciences. What I can say now is that a painless civilization also has a similar potentiality of universalization. The tide of painless civilization can be found in any parts of the world and in any small corners of our society. Painless civilization is a universal phenomenon. To begin with, any civilization had a power of universalization and assimilation. Contemporary technologies, including digital ones, have spurred that inclination in contemporary civilization.

Beyza Şen: Again, there are fields such as bioethics and media theory among the fields you are interested in. Can you tell us a little bit about the concept of bioethics? And again, can we get your views on the relationship of today's modern civilization with technology through media theory?

Masahiro Morioka: Bioethics has progressed as the ethics of medical practice in the late 20th and 21st centuries. At the first stage of bioethics, it had the meaning of the ethics of life, including many forms of life on earth, which means it contained today's environmental ethics and animal ethics, but it threw that aspect out of its academic scope at some point in the 1980s. This is really regrettable. I want to investigate the life and death of human beings and the relationships among various forms of life on earth at the same time. With regard to media theory, I published the book *Consciousness Communication* (1993), a philosophical analysis of digital media at that time, which was awarded a Japanese social science prize of the year, and the book helped form the foundation of the book *Painless Civilization*. Bioethics, digital media theory, and painless civilization are closely connected by the same thread.

Ali Tacar: In your article titled "Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society", you say, "In Japan, as well as in other countries of East Asia, and in many different parts of the world, there are ordinary people who do not believe that their deceased family member has completely disappeared from this world. They are of the opinion that the deceased family member continues to exist anywhere

in the world and sometimes comes to the place where they died or lived, and they are in contact with the spirit of these deceased family members. Some people say that our society is not only made up of the living, but also of the dead.” When looked at, the subject of ‘death’ is a subject that is discussed both in the literature of philosophy and on the basis of religions. How do you think a connection can be made between the concept of death and metaphysics? Could the death of a person’s body mean that that person no longer exists?

Masahiro Morioka: I published the English paper “Animated Persona: The Ontological Status of a Deceased Person Who Continues to Appear in This World” in 2021 (downloadable from the Internet), and argued that deceased persons sometimes continue existing in this world as animated personae on the surface of the dead bodies, some objects the deceased persons loved, and even in the air or in the environment. Personally, I do not believe in the existence of souls as entities, so an animated persona is not equal to a dead soul. It is a kind of a personhood that appears on the surface of something or somewhere in the environment. I believe that it is not a mere illusion. Interestingly, there are many people who say they can understand the concept of animated personae in Japan and in East Asian countries. I am curious whether there are similar concepts in Islamic countries like Turkey. The ontology of a dead person is a very interesting and important topic for future philosophy. We have yet to investigate it.

Ali Tacar: You also talk about the concept of “environmental ethics” in your article titled “Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society.” Could you briefly explain this concept, its importance and its place in your philosophy?

Masahiro Morioka: As I have mentioned above, environmental ethics is an important constituent of the philosophy of life. For example, we have our own bodies, and through our bodies we interact with our environment and other humans, creatures, and natural objects. In this sense, as long as we have the body we cannot escape from environmental ethics. As far as I know, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, and Japanese philosophy have thick traditions of their environmental philosophy and ethics, so it is very important to look back on at least these Asian traditions and rethink our relationships with the environment in the age of scientific technology.

Beyza Şen: I wonder, what is your relationship with literature as a philosopher? Who are your favorite poets, storytellers, for example?

Masahiro Morioka: When I was young I read a lot of novels and poetry; however, I have not read so much recently. My favorites include Goethe, Kafka, Mishima, and other big names.

Ali Tacar: The last question I would like to ask is as follows: The concept of pain is the backbone of your book. There are many concepts you focus on, such as pleasure, pain, joy, and a sense of achievement. Do you think we are becoming more and more callous and far from being “human” as a result of technology and its derivatives that we encounter in almost every field in today’s civilization? Or are we already like that?

Masahiro Morioka: This is also a difficult question to answer. As you have just pointed out, in a painless civilization we become far from being human. But at the same time, we more and more start to consume entertainment commodities that are full of joy, sorrow, tears, laughter, and other human emotions. The problem is by buying those emotions we might start losing true emotions that could dismantle the negative aspects of our painless civilization.

Appendix: An Excerpt from the book [*Painless Civilization 1*](#)

Living in a civilization without suffering or hardship may seem like humanity’s ideal state of being. But in a society packed with pleasure and surrounded by systems to keep away suffering, will people not on the contrary lose sight of joy and forget the meaning of life?

The phrase “painless civilization” first came to me when I was listening to a nurse talk about her job. At the time she was working at one of the biggest hospitals in Japan.

One day an elderly female patient was brought into this nurse’s intensive care unit. Her brain had been damaged. She was attached to a monitor, given nutrients and medicine through an intravenous drip, and carefully looked after in a

temperature-controlled room. She entered a stable state in which her symptoms did not get any worse. But the nurse said that while caring for this patient she began to feel something indescribable. While giving her patient a sponge bath or repositioning her body, the nurse began to wonder, “What exactly am I doing?”

The patient had no lucid awareness, but it wasn't as though she were dead; her state was one of “sleeping peacefully.” She was receiving appropriate treatment and care, so she seemed perfectly happy, resting peacefully in an endless slumber. It was unlikely that she would ever again open her eyes and wake up. She would presumably just go on sleeping pleasantly in her temperature-controlled room, her body sustained by intravenously administered nutrients and medicine and kept clean by the careful ministrations of the nurses.

A human being who sleeps with a peaceful expression, her body enveloped in a perfectly controlled environment. She need neither work nor study. There is nothing for her to worry about. She is untroubled by the tiresome task of looking after herself. She has neither pain, nor worry, nor fear. Protected from all of these things, she need only go on existing in the midst of a pleasant, comfortable sleep.

The nurse said, “In the end, isn't this the form of human existence modern civilization is trying to create?”

Is modern civilization not indeed an attempt to create this kind of person sleeping soundly in an intensive care unit on a society-wide scale? Are people who seem to be working vigorously and happily enjoying themselves not in fact soundly asleep somewhere in the depths of their being? And are such people not being systematically created within the intensive care units we call “cities”? If so, who was it that laid this kind of trap? Why has civilization proceeded in this direction? (...)

Painless Civilization 1 (open access book) is available here:

<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painless01.pdf>

The Turkish translation of this interview:

<https://www.mahallemektebidergisi.com/mahalle-mektebi-64/>

The Turkish translation of *Painless Civilization 1* was published by:

<https://www.loraskitap.com/>