

The Cruelty of Living in a Painless Civilization

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It was 19 years ago that I published *Painless Civilization* in Japanese. This is a book to which my entire existence has been devoted. It has also been read abroad, and parts of it were translated into Turkish and published this year.

Our society has moved in the direction of eliminating pain, suffering, and discomfort. At first glance, this may seem like a good thing, but I believe that the meaning of life is being increasingly lost in the process.

The state of our modern civilization is one in which mechanisms to eliminate pain have been spread to every corner of society. I have called it a “painless civilization,” and criticized it.

After being forced to face something painful and experiencing suffering, we sometimes have the sensation that we have been reborn as a new self. The joy we feel when our old self collapses, and we are transformed into a new self, forms the meaning of human life at the deepest level of our being. A painless civilization is one that preemptively eliminates the chance to be reborn by depriving us of this type of joy.

However, it is very hard to fundamentally criticize a painless civilization. This is because everyone, myself included, is deeply entangled in it and accustomed to it. No one can actually stand “outside a painless civilization.” I have not found the answer to this conundrum in the book, but I did write, “Let’s not close our eyes in the face of this problem.”

I used the word “pain” instead of “suffering” or “discomfort” perhaps because pain is something we all have no choice but to feel directly, something we cannot escape. For suffering or discomfort, we can say “it is not so, if we look at it differently,” can’t we?

Over the past 19 years, Japanese society has devoted increasing attention to

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the issue of economic inequality. For those in the midst of the suffering caused by poverty, the elimination of that suffering itself would be of primary importance. In this sense, the painless civilization is fundamentally a problem for the affluent.

However, there are also aspects of a painless civilization that promote social improvement. This is because it seeks to remove poverty and other suffering from society. But after a long time, those who are freed from the pain of poverty are once again faced with the reality that the meaning of life has been stolen from them in advance in that society. A painless civilization is such a cruel system.

For me, the book *Painless Civilization* is unfinished. I would like to write a sequel.

Interviewer: Yutaka Shiokura, Editorial Board Member, *Asahi Newspaper*.

*The English translation of Chapter One of *Painless Civilization* (open access PDF) is available here:

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