# Why Am I Being Hurt?

Agnes Callard

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My youngest son was around ten months old when he figured out how to clap. The first time he did it, I watched his thrill at vigorously exercising this new power morph into tears. He held out his palms to me, wailing with accusation: Why am I being hurt? He had cried before, of course, but that was the first time he cried *at* me.

Eight years later, there is a global pandemic, and he suffers daily from loneliness: "I am bored. Why won't anyone play with me?" At the end of the day, he often proclaims, "This was the worst day of my life." We mock him—"Was it the worst day of your life *again*?"—as though it were somehow logically impossible that his life has been steadily getting worse. He is regularly told to stop *whining*—a word chosen, out of irritation, with the precise aim of demoting his articulate pleas to the level of meaningless, droning noise. He is encountering a world averse to complaining.

When, as adults, we ask for help, we are quick to follow up with "if you can't, no problem." The phrase is an implicit promise that if the answer is "no," that will be that; either way, I won't complain. (Even the homeless person says, "Maybe next time.") The requests of children, by contrast, have a sticky, annoying residue. Whatever they ask for—"can I have this toy?," "will you play with me?," "can I stay up a little later?," "it hurts, make it better!"—it's clear that if you say no, it *is* going to be a problem.

As adults, we wish to project resourcefulness, initiative and toughness; we become proficient at erasing the sticky residue. Kant tells you, severely, that "Complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain, is unworthy of you," and Aristotle disparagingly associates complaints with "the weaker sex, and the effeminate sort of man." Friedrich Nietzsche is equally dismissive: "Complaining is never of any use: it comes from weakness." The censure of complaint seems to come as naturally to adults as complaint itself does to children.

And yet there was one philosopher, Simone Weil, who saw complaint as beautiful—even sacred. She wrote:

Whenever a man cries inwardly, "Why am I being hurt?" harm is being done to him. He is often mistaken when he tries to define the harm, and why and by whom it is being inflicted on him. But the cry itself is infallible. ...

The part of the soul which asks, "Why am I being hurt?" is the deep part which, in every human being, even the most corrupt, remains from earliest infancy perfectly intact and perfectly innocent.[1]

What is complaint, and what would it mean to see it as "infallible"?



[1] I have modified the somewhat awkward language of Rees's translation of this passage. He writes: "The part of the soul which cries "Why am I being hurt?" is on the deepest level and even in the most corrupt of men it remains from earliest infancy perfectly intact and perfectly innocent." Here is the original: La partie de l'âme qui demande: «Pourquoi me fait-on du mal?» est la partie profonde qui en tout être humain, même le plus souillé, est demeurée depuis la première enfance parfaitement intacte et parfaitement innocente.

Weil's essential contribution to the theory of complaint comes by way of her distinction between ordinary suffering and something she calls "affliction." Suffering is pain one can bear, pain that does not imprint itself on the soul. Sometimes, we even choose suffering, as in strenuous exercise, unmedicated childbirth or getting one's ears pierced. Getting beat up in an alleyway by strangers is not like any of those forms of suffering. A violent attack, even one that does minimum physical damage, hurts in a distinctive way—in a way that, as Weil would put it, raises a question.

"The same event may plunge one human being into affliction and not another," writes Weil. Her view is that the kind of suffering that makes a mark on the soul is *incomprehensible* suffering. Even as great an evil as religious persecution doesn't necessarily entail affliction; Weil says that the persecuted "only fall into a state of affliction if suffering or fear fills the soul to the point of *making it forget the cause* of the persecution."

Many of our frustrations with our children lie in the fact that they have not yet learned to find certain forms of—trivial, mundane—suffering to be intelligible. Young children do not seem to understand *any* suffering. Yet even after we exit childhood, we are guaranteed to encounter misfortunes that surpass our understanding. If Weil is right, the form that these experiences take is interrogative: the expression of affliction, because it is a request for understanding, comes in the form of a question.

At a low point in his life, in a cemetery in Greece, my husband cried out to God: "Why am I so lonely?" A puppy approached him—one of the countless starving, wretched offspring of the roving bands of dogs that plague Athens. The puppy was grateful to be petted, and tried to follow when my husband turned to leave. The puppy's pleading eyes tugged at my husband's conscience, and he reports imagining a speech he might give it: "I could take you home, and take care of you, and relieve your suffering. That is within my power. But it would require an overhaul of my life—I'd have to move to a different apartment, for starters. I'm not willing to do all that on your behalf. You can't grasp these reasons, but they are why your suffering will continue." And then he realized perhaps God would have given him a similar speech: "Yes, I could end your loneliness, but I choose not to. I have my reasons; they transcend your understanding."

We do not usually feel able to speak in this way to another human being—to ask after the cause of our suffering, as my husband did when he spoke to God, or to answer such a question with the brutal directness with which my husband imagined answering the dog.

It is not the homeless person's voice but their face that asks you "Why am I cold?" and "Why am I hungry?"—or, worst of all, "Why is it that no one will ever expect anything of me?" Imagine really asking this question, out loud, with words; imagine really trying to answer it, out loud, with words.

In the (admittedly small) contemporary philosophical literature on complaint, one finds a sharp distinction that I will mark with the terms "protest" and "venting." Protest is complaint that calls out injustice and demands what is morally due. It aims at concrete social change, and operates within the constraints of a normative system that dictates who is owed what, by whom, under what circumstances. Venting is complaint as emotional expression. When we are in distress, whether justifiably or not, we often turn to our intimates for a sympathetic ear, and to get things off our chest.

Though these two activities can be mixed with one another—a given instance of protest may include an emotionally expressive element; venting is often infused with accusations of wrongdoing—it is nonetheless striking how much they intrinsically differ. The expressive courting of empathy and the indignant moral demand don't, on the surface, seem to have much to do with each other. Why are both of these things called "complaint"?

Protest depends on the existence of a normative relationship: we stand to the people around us in relations determined by rights, duties, agreements, promises. Venting, by contrast, depends on the fact that we stand to others in kinship bonds of emotional connection and sympathetic communion. I propose that the reason these are both called "complaint" is that both normative and sympathetic relations can, under conditions of suffering, become parasitic on a deeper one: the interrogative relation. In addition to being someone I respect, or someone I care about, a third role that another person can play, for me, is that of being a source of questions or answers. We are familiar with this role in the context of intellectual inquiry; the phenomenon of complaint proves that it has a place in the ethical sphere as well.

The basic content of complaint is a question about why some bad thing is happening. Protesters and venters ask this question rhetorically. The venter asks it of her intimate friends, expecting not answers, but empathy; whereas the protester asks it of fellow citizens of some normative community, expecting not answers, but change.

Venting and protesting are sophisticated permutations of something that is simpler, more direct and nonrhetorical. Originally, a complaint is a question. And while it is possible to protest unreasonably or to vent improperly, the source of protest and venting is something that is immune from these kinds of error. One cannot go wrong in noticing one's own pain, and one cannot go wrong in wanting to know why one is being made to feel it. A rhetorical question is a disguised assertion, and so it can be true or false; a real question doesn't have a truth value, and this is why there is something buried inside every complaint that is, just as Weil says, infallible.

Weil thought it was also somewhat ineffable. She describes the question as existing, hidden and buried, only within the recesses of the deepest part of the soul: "the cry hardly ever expresses itself, either inwardly or outwardly, in coherent language." Weil thought it took a genius to articulate the question of affliction:

to find the words which express the truth of their affliction, the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: 'Why am I being hurt?' ... they can count only upon men of the very highest

genius: the poet of the *Iliad*, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare as he was when he wrote *Lear*, or Racine when he wrote *Phèdre*. There are not very many of them.

The Greek chorus complains, in a detached, impersonal and universalist vein, of man's short, painful destiny and of his fickle, ignorant nature; and Shakespeare's heroes and antiheroes complain, often in private, inward monologue, of the torments of their own existence. Elsewhere Weil mentions the laments of Job, which I would note are peppered with interrogatives—for example, "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" Great art is great partly because it gives us direct access to the heart of complaint—true complaint, expressed nonrhetorically. But if, outside works of art, such questions are typically buried and hidden and unspoken, what is the import of recognizing their presence?

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Railing against American political correctness in the 1990s, the Australian critic Robert Hughes disparaged what he saw as an "infantilized culture of complaint," in which "to be vulnerable is to be invincible. Complaint gives you power—even when it's only the power of emotional bribery." At one point, Hughes references, as the universal target of complaint, an embattled character he calls "that Blond Beast of the sentimental imagination, the heterosexual middle-class white male." That is but one of the many indications that his critique of complaint traces back to Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was a great complainer—one of the greatest who ever lived. I believe that many of those who praise his writing style are responding to how well he can recruit our emotions in the service of attending to his myriad complaints. Unfortunately, Nietzsche's understanding of complaint was not on par with his skill at engaging in it. Nietzsche's account of complaint is that it aims to spitefully infect others with one's own emotional pain—"there is a subtle dose of revenge in every complaint"—as well as to fabricate grounds for moral condemnation. Beneath a façade which "insists on 'right,' 'justice,' 'equal rights' with such beautiful indignation," the protester's true motive is to find an excuse to pin the blame on someone: "it must be somebody's fault that he's feeling bad." Venting is really sadism: "all poor devils like to whine—it gives them a little thrill of power."

Nietzsche's understanding of complaint is one on which both the moral connection foregrounded in protest and the empathetic connection foregrounded in venting take a pathological turn: the complainer stands in a dysfunctional normative and emotional relationship to the person addressed by the complaint. In particular, this relationship is adversarial; complaint, according to Nietzsche, is a mechanism by which sufferers abuse those people to whom they have moral or emotional ties.

Strikingly, Nietzsche correctly identifies the intellectual problem at the heart of complaint: he says that the complainer "cannot grasp why he really suffers," and that this is what leads him to cast around for someone to blame. But Nietzsche refuses to take seriously the human need to render suffering intelligible.

Nietzsche is right that the moral and the empathetic relation can become adversarial; what he fails to note is that the interrogative relation is precisely the one that cannot. Insofar as I see you as an answer-haver, I cannot see you as my enemy. The interrogative element is not only fundamental to the complaint but also the infallible part of it; silencing it perverts the communicative act of complaint into something that is liable to become abuse. Like every form of cynicism, Nietzsche's leads one to treat people in such a way that their responses will confirm one's theory; a Nietzschean approach to complaint causes the very pathologies it describes. If we currently live in what Hughes disparaged as a "culture of complaint," or what Julian Baggini calls "a grievance culture," this culture is born partly from a Nietzschean misunderstanding of complaint. We would do better to start taking our cue from Weil.

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A standing trope in heterosexual relationships is that women become annoyed when men respond to their venting by trying to fix the problem. This is often cast, by men, as a mysterious and irrational proclivity for communal anguish. So Aristotle: "the weaker sex, and the effeminate sort of man, welcome those who join in their groans." Perhaps the more Nietzschean among men even see women as taking pleasure in forcing others to suffer. Drawing on Weil suggests a different approach; let me illustrate with my own life.

I am involved in a long-standing relationship that causes me substantial suffering. When I complain about it—as I do, regularly, to my husband, my ex-husband, my friends, my sister—I can feel, on their part, a standing temptation to respond with "just break it off!" And sometimes they yield to this temptation. But I'm grateful for all the times they don't—for all the times they not only put up with but even actively elicit, from me, my newest and sharpest account of why and how I see myself as being mistreated. You might wonder why I subject myself to such a relationship—I wonder about it, too, and the people I love, instead of cutting off that wondering, are willing to help me do it.

We often speak, vaguely and somewhat vacuously, of the importance of being a good listener, but Weil gives us a substantive grip on what this might mean. A good listener does not merely hear what you say, she listens for the underlying question that animates your words—the question hidden inside your complaint. Listening well isn't, in the first instance, about empathetic connection or moral accountability. It is about occupying the interrogative position.

So much for venting; now consider an example of protest. In the spring and summer of 2020, people around the world carried signs that read "Justice for George Floyd." A plausible interpretation of those signs—it was mine, at any rate—was as demanding that Derek Chauvin, the police officer seen on videos to be suffocating Floyd, be held accountable for his actions. However, a year later, when Chauvin was convicted of Floyd's murder, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, echoing the sentiments

of many, described the verdict as "not justice" and "not a substitute for policy change." She also said, "Justice is George Floyd going home tonight to be with his family."

A Nietzschean interpretation of Ocasio-Cortez's reaction is easy to construct: the idea that a protest aims at a concrete, achievable social improvement is mere pretense. Bait and switch is built into protest, because its true aim is the unlimited infliction of suffering by the powerless on the powerful. On a Nietzschean picture, the idea that protest aims at concrete social improvement involves false consciousness. When protesters speak as though some "policy change" would satisfy them, a Nietzschean might say that they're using that term so expansively that its chances for realization within our lifetimes are about equal to those of Floyd's being brought back from the dead.

If we use Weil to interpret reactions to the verdict, we can accommodate shifts in the target of protest with a much less nefarious rationale. Protest speaks in a translated language, the original of which was complaint. What gets lost in translation is the part of the complaint that could not be formulated as a request, or as a demand, or as a right, or as an entitlement. Complaint is what animates protest; protest politicizes complaint—but never fully, because the protester's demands must capture, in the language of a demand, something whose form is essentially that of a question. We should expect variation, over time, with respect to what the question projects into the normative and political sphere.

Commenting on the verdict, Floyd's brother Philonise said, "We ought to always understand that we have to march. We will have to do this for life. We have to protest because it seems like this is a never-ending cycle." And yet he also said, holding back tears of relief, "We are able to breathe again." His experience is, on the one hand, of having gotten the outcome he asked for, and, on the other hand, of knowing that he will for the rest of his life be continuing to pose the question: "Why are we being hurt?"

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