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# Meaning-Making in the Face of Intersecting Catastrophes: COVID-19 and the Plague of Inequality

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## ABSTRACT

Beyond the enormous toll in illness and death, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed multiple additional problems (job loss, evictions, hunger) that are disproportionately borne by those who were already vulnerable. In this essay, I reflect about these *intersecting catastrophes*, which I see as undermining the capacities of many to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. Symptoms of these problems are growing “deaths of despair” due to suicide, drug and alcohol addictions. Drawing on multidisciplinary science, I suggest that these widespread problems cannot be ministered to by focusing only at the individual level. Structural factors, including unfair distributions of resources and opportunities demand attention as well because they are fueling growing disparities between the privileged and the disadvantaged segments of contemporary societies. I examine what meanings and emotions are relevant responses to these troubled times, giving emphasis to the legitimacy of anger and outrage in the face of suffering and injustice. Further insight is sought in historical accounts of longstanding tensions between self-interest and the social contract. Going forward, I suggest that these turbulent times call for greater engagement with and scientific understanding of the arts and humanities in activating the deepest corners of our humanity. Examples from past and current art dealing with human suffering, inequality, and plagues illustrate their possible role in nurturing human capacities to understand, to care, and to act.

## Introduction

My scientific career has focused on the topic of psychological well-being, which I have tried to define and assess so as to illuminate who does and does not have well-being as well as to document how it matters for health (Ryff, 1989, 2014; 2018; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff et al., 2021). In this essay, I offer personal reflections on the two major challenges of our era – namely, the world-wide pandemic and ever-widening problems of socioeconomic inequality. I argue that meaning-making about the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be separated from the enormous vulnerabilities that existed prior to onset of this historic event. These vulnerabilities can appropriately be framed as the *plague of inequality*, which has been playing out on the world stage for

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several decades. Such socioeconomic disparities are getting worse and, ironically, are especially prominent in advanced, technological societies. Thus, among those who are disadvantaged in first-world countries, the pandemic has aggravated the difficulties many were already facing plus added new challenges tied to growing unemployment, loss of healthcare, evictions due to unpaid rent, and food lines (hunger). I use the phrase *intersecting catastrophes* to capture these co-occurring ordeals. What meanings and emotions are relevant in such contexts? Such are the questions of central interest in this essay.

The first section below distills empirical evidence that inequality is growing more dramatic over time, particularly in the United States, home of the abiding ideal that pursuit of personal potential is available to all. In reality, however, the American dream has been deeply sullied, such that many are now dying from “deaths of despair,” due to suicide, drug and alcohol addictions. What sits behind this tragedy are multiple malevolent forces, some of which have been orchestrated by those in positions of power. I argue that these top-down abuses of privilege constitute structural, societal disorders for which it is misguided, if not absurd, to expect meaning-making at the individual level to offer a sustainable life jacket. What these observations mean for science and practice going forward needs far greater attention.

In the second section I then consider the intersecting catastrophes that many are living through and ask what thoughts and feelings constitute relevant responses to these widespread difficulties. Such questions highlight limitations of positive psychology in my view, given its enduring preoccupations with personal strengths and upbeat phenomena. I advance an alternative perspective that sees suffering and negative experience as essential for understanding what adaptive human functioning is and how it comes about. Such ideas align with meaning-making vis-à-vis profound life obstacles as ground zero in many existential approaches. In considering emotions relevant in the face of intersecting catastrophes, I give particular attention to anger and shame. Often depicted as toxic, anger may sometimes be warranted and legitimate vis-à-vis widespread structural inequalities. Aristotle’s wisdom about anger is revisited and new research is called for, focused on the forward-moving power of outrage in response to injustices that demand social change. Shame, in contrast, is put forth as a needed emotional response particularly among the privileged, some of whom are oblivious to the suffering of others.

The final section aims to be forward-thinking in calling for greater engagement with the arts and humanities as critical inputs needed to deal with dramatic, widespread adversity. My essential argument is that art, music, literature, and poetry have great potential to nurture and activate the deepest corners of our humanity. History and philosophy are also critical sources in helping us understand why we need culture to be our best selves. Multiple examples from distant and current art – especially those dealing with human suffering, inequality and plagues – are provided. My concluding messages are that (1) meaning-making must be formulated at both individual and societal levels, (2) diverse emotions, including some outside the purview of positive psychology, are essential in responding to varieties of injustice that define our era, and (3) history, philosophy, and the arts are likely fundamental for building human capacities to understand, to care, and to act. All three point toward needed future science, new directions in clinical practice, and sharpened targets for public policy action.

### ***The other current plague: Widening inequality***

Socioeconomic disparities in health, commonly referred to as health inequalities (Marmot, 2015) now frequently include assessment of psychological and behavioral factors that serve as pathways and mechanisms for understanding the processes contributing to foreshortened lives and increased risk of disease and disability (Adler, 2009; Matthews & Gallo, 2011). The MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.) national longitudinal study, which I have led for the past two decades, has become a prominent forum for investigating health inequalities, given its rich psychosocial, behavioral, and biological assessments (Kirsch et al., 2019). Illustrative findings have shown how lower educational status and lower incomes predict greater risk of smoking and drinking as well as higher levels of chronic conditions and greater psychological distress (anxiety, depression). Other findings have elucidated biological pathways, assessed in terms of stress hormones (salivary cortisol), inflammatory markers (interleukin-6), glucose metabolism (HbA1c), and cardiovascular risk factors (hypertension, cholesterol) and integrated physiological risk (allostatic load) – see [www.midus.wisc.edu](http://www.midus.wisc.edu).

Numerous indicators show that inequality is worsening over time (Piketty & Saez, 2014), particularly in the U.S. Reeves (2017) describes the “hoarding” of the American Dream illustrated by evidence that the top 20% of income earners have privileged access to better educations, jobs, income, and wealth as well as greater likelihood of stable marriages to successful partners, thriving neighborhoods, and healthier lifestyles. Graham (2017) has linked such discrepancies in life opportunities and income to compromised levels of optimism, life satisfaction, and happiness among disadvantaged segments of society. The Great Recession, which began in 2008, exacerbated these problems, thereby fueling dramatic increases in poverty rates (Bishaw, 2013) and accompanying health costs due to job loss, unemployment, and financial strain (Burgard & Kalousova, 2015).

A unique feature of the MIDUS study has been its recruitment of two national samples situated on either side of the Great Recession. The baseline sample (aged 25 to 74) was recruited in 1995, followed by recruitment of a new national sample (same ages), known as the refresher sample, in 2012; details of both samples are provided in Kirsch et al. (2019). Over the time period covered by these two samples, educational attainment in the U.S. improved: college educated adults increased from 24.8% to 33.2% and those with less than high school decreased from 15.3% to 11.3%. Despite such educational gains, we found that the post-Recession refresher sample reported less household income (after adjusting for inflation) and lower financial stability than the pre-Recession baseline sample. The refresher sample also reported worse general health, more chronic conditions, higher BMI, more functional limitations, and more physical health symptoms than the baseline sample. With regard to psychological health, our findings showed that the post-Recession refresher sample had significantly lower levels of positive affect and life satisfaction as well as lower levels of autonomy, self-acceptance, personal growth, and sense of control than the pre-Recession baseline sample. Interaction analyses revealed a steeper educational gradient in the post-Recession compared to the pre-Recession sample for body mass index, functional limitations, and physical symptoms (Kirsch et al., 2019). That is, differences in educational attainment predicted heightened gradients in these health outcomes for adults assessed after the Great Recession.

Additional findings from MIDUS (Goldman et al., 2018) compared these two cross-sectional samples on mental health measures that capture negative emotions such as sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness, along with positive emotions such as happiness, fulfillment, and life satisfaction. The key finding was that mental health was more compromised in the refresher sample compared to the baseline sample among those with lower socioeconomic position (measured with a composite including education, occupation, income, and wealth). Such evidence of worsening mental health among disadvantaged Americans was framed in the context of the opioid epidemic, growing alcoholism and increased death rates, including suicide, among middle-aged white persons of low SES standing (Case & Deaton, 2015; Grant et al., 2017; Kolodny et al., 2015; Schuchat et al., 2017). The nomenclature used to describe these trends has been *deaths of despair* (Case & Deaton, 2020).

What to do about these dire changes appears to be a realm of controversy. Some advocate for higher taxes on the rich, but others disagree. For example, Case and Deaton (2020) do not favor taxing the rich; indeed, they are not “disturbed by inequality in and of itself” (p.246). Instead, they see the fundamental problem as *unfairness* – “that the great wealth at the top is seen as ill-gotten in a system that gives no chance to many” (p.262). Their solutions call for “limiting rent-seeking (patents) and reducing plunder – without high taxes on income or wealth that is widely seen as fairly earned” (p.262). My observation is that such a discussion frames deaths of despair exclusively in economic terms and sees capitalism as an immensely powerful force for good. So doing neglects personal traumas at the center of the tale – i.e., data on causes of death fails to capture the human tolls involved along the way.

Narrative accounts, such as *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope* (Kristof & WuDunn, 2020) fill in heartbreaking details revolving around several friends who grew up in Yamhill, Oregon during more prosperous times when middle-class families could lead fulfilling lives. The first author was among them; he went on to be educated at a prestigious university and became a writer for the New York Times. In contrast, many of those with whom he rode the school bus and ran track in high school had lives that descended into drugs, alcohol, vehicle accidents, and suicide. A main message was that the upward mobility of their parents’ generation collapsed for many of the children. What comes through in this work is the disappointment, discouragement, and despair that economic research implies but does not attend to or illuminate. Such internal experiences, which constitute the psychic tolls of widening inequality, are critical tales that need to be told in our era.

Before addressing those imperatives, which I frame as lost personal potential, it is important to consider other structural forces sitting over widening inequality – namely, corporate action and decision-making at the top. What we know is that corporate profits have soared in recent times, while worker paychecks have lagged – effectively labor shows a declining share of total income in the U.S., while business profits continue to climb (Cohen, 2018). Economists have identified the culprit behind the post-Recession recovery that benefits corporate profit at the expense of worker wages: it is called “monopsony power” – a term referring to the ability of employers to suppress wages below the efficient or perfectly competitive level of compensation (Kruger & Posner, 2018). Workers accept such suppressed wages and substandard conditions

because they have few alternatives and costs of switching jobs are too high. I favor a less sanitized account of monopsony power; to me, it constitutes behavioral enactments of corporate greed.

Human history shows longstanding awareness of and concern about greed. The ancient Greeks thought about problems of greed and injustice (Balot, 2001), which they saw as violating virtues of fairness and equality and thereby, contributing to civic strife; ancient Greeks and Romans both called for public criticism and censuring of greed. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308/2006) placed sins of greed and gluttony, along with fraud and dishonesty, in his nine circles of hell. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1776/1981) made the case for self-interest and capitalism, but recognized the problem of greed, framed as the limitless appetites of the vain and insatiable. Despite awareness of these problems at upper ends of the SES hierarchy, most research on health inequalities has focused on the stressors and varieties of disadvantage experienced by those in lower SES positions (Marmot et al., 2008). Comparatively little attention has been given to motivations and behaviors of those at the top.

Varieties of psychologists are, however, beginning to examine these questions. Nikelly (2006) draws on psychoanalytic perspectives to probe what lies behind the worship of money and selfish wealth gratification, often orchestrated through fraudulent and deceptive tactics. Motivational psychologists examine "the dark side of the American Dream" (Kasser & Ryan, 1993), showing that those motivated by primarily extrinsic factors (financial success) have lower well-being and adjustment compared to those motivated by less materialistic values. Social psychologists have shown, sometimes using experimental studies, that those with higher social class standing have increased sense entitlement and narcissism compared to those from lower class backgrounds; upper-class individuals also behave more unethically than lower-class individuals (Piff, 2014; Piff et al., 2012). Another recent study offers input on the changes that lie behind growing inequality and particularly widespread acceptance of it (Mendelberg, McCabe, & Thal, 2017). Using a large panel study involving over 65,000 U.S. students, the central focus was on degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement: "Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now." The main finding was that students from affluent colleges (defined by family SES background) were more likely than their peers from public or less affluent colleges and universities to disagree with the statement. In addition, such tendencies were more pronounced among those active in fraternities and sororities at affluent colleges.

The seamy underside of philanthropy (Giridharadas, 2018), traditionally thought to exemplify commitment among elites to do good in the world, is also under scrutiny. Some of today's elites are abetting an unjust status quo to protect their own wealth and power. A singular example is the Sackler family, well-known for their philanthropy in art museums around the world. They are owners of Purdue Pharma, which created oxycontin, the highly addictive opioid painkiller. The drug was aggressively marketed thereby leading to massive over-prescribing. To date, more than 200,000 have died from overdose deaths. Along the way, Purdue Pharma marketed new drugs to treat the opioid addiction they had helped create. Lawsuits in 47 states have sued the drug-maker, with the Sacklers' offering to settle all claims for an amount (\$3 billion)

considered miniscule relative to the size of the fortune they will retain (Keefe, 2020). After removing billions of dollars from the company, Purdue filed for bankruptcy, and the Sacklers maintain they are blameless because oxycontin was fully approved by the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA official issuing that approval subsequently resigned and took a position at Purdue for three times his previous salary. This sordid tale brings fairness of the U.S. courts and system of justice into question. As stated by one attorney familiar with the case, “It (criminal liability) should not depend on how rich they are. It’s not right” (Keefe, 2020, p.9). Other forms of action have nonetheless been taken: museums and universities have begun to distance themselves from the Sackler’s philanthropy. Tufts University and the Louvre in Paris have taken down all signs bearing the Sackler name, and protests objecting to contributions from the Sackler family have been staged by visitors to the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

To distill these differing threads, inequality has deepened in recent decades, especially in the United States. Implicated in the growing disparities are decisions by corporate leaders to take disproportionate shares of profits at the expense of worker wages, a practice referred to as monopsony power. Using national data, economists have documented increased rates of death due to suicide, drug and alcohol addiction among working class white adults. Psychologists are studying what motivates the pursuit of wealth and documenting the sense of entitlement shown by higher- compared to lower-class individuals. Particularly troubling is the growing acceptance of inequality among the affluent, and news that the world of philanthropy, once thought to embody the virtuous giving, has in some cases been a forum for protecting personal wealth. The Sackler family, whose pharmaceutical company created the addictive opioid painkiller resulting in thousands of overdose deaths, exemplifies this problem. These realities set the stage on which the pandemic unfolded.

### ***Enter COVID-19 and its sequelae: Responding to intersecting catastrophes***

At the end of 2020, over 130 million cases of COVID-19 had been reported around the world with close to 3 million deaths. The U.S. had over 30 million cases and more than 550,000 deaths. Accompanying these numbers were overwhelmed healthcare systems and widespread grief and bereavement. Additional evidence (Pew Research Center two years of the Great Recession, 2020) underscored that the economic fallout from COVID-19 hit lower-income Americans the hardest, 46% of whom had trouble paying their bills compared to 16% of upper-income adults. Similarly, 35% of lower-income adults had gotten money from a foodbank compared to 1% of upper-income adults; 32% of lower-income adults had problems paying rent or mortgage compared to 3% of upper-income adults. Overall, data from 2020 conveyed that 25% of U.S. adults said they or someone in their household had been laid off or lost their job because of the coronavirus outbreak; lower-income adults who were laid off due to the coronavirus were less like to return to work compared to middle- and upper-income adults who lost their jobs. Among those who did not lose a job, many had to reduce their hours or take a pay cut due to the economic fallout from the pandemic. Those whose ability to save money had been curtailed by the economic upheaval were mostly lower-income adults (51%) compared to middle and upper income groups (35%, 21%). Another

trauma has been eviction – loss of home due to inability to pay rent. Desmond's (2016) Pulitzer Prize Winning book brought attention to this problem in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; he now runs the Eviction Lab ([www.evictionlab.com](http://www.evictionlab.com)) at Princeton University where data from across the U.S. are being tracked. Early in the pandemic, landlords filed for over 312,000 evictions, translating to about 4,000 per week. The problem became so extreme, given the dire consequences that follow for families forced out of their homes, that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued a moratorium on evictions, which has been complicated to implement.

What psychological responses make sense in the face of these intersecting catastrophes bearing down on many who were already vulnerable before the pandemic struck? What assistance can psychologists and the helping professions offer? My first observation is that the usual admonition from positive psychology to think positive thoughts, cultivate positive emotions and attitudes, and focus on strengths seems both heartless and tone deaf. The tendencies of this movement to trumpet the positive while promulgating negativity about the negative was called out (Held, 2004) well before the recent calamitous events. Over a decade ago, Bruckner (2010) wrote about *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, which signaled the advent of banality akin to Voltaire's *Candide*, wherein felicity and vacuity went hand in hand. The intersecting catastrophes through which many are now living call for something different, beginning with acknowledgement of the enormous suffering that is occurring for so many. Here I find it useful to revisit how psychologists have previously thought about putting negative *and* positive parts of the human experience together.

William James (1902/1958) wrote eloquently about “healthy-mindedness” as well as the “the sick soul,” thereby covering a powerful range that he knew personally. He, however, did not elaborate on their interplay apart from indicating the disdain each camp held for the other. In contemporary science, positive emotion has been formulated as an *antidote* to negative experience (Fredrickson, 1998), and experiences of well-being have been invoked to ways to prevent relapse of depression or anxiety (Fava et al., 1998; Ruini & Fava, 2009). Others have framed the negative as the *path to the positive*, hence research on post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 1998), with related examples emphasizing expression of negative emotion as a way to nurture relational intimacy (Reis, 2001), reduce physical and mental symptoms of cancer patients (Spiegel & Kimmerling, 2001), and via skilled parenting, foster emotional development in children (Gottman, 2001).

Other approaches, which I have embraced, see the negative and positive as *inextricably linked*, bound together as strands of a rope. Thus, within every positive there is a negative and within every negative there is a positive. This dialectical emotional style (Miyamoto & Ryff, 2011) has been found to be more prominent and a better predictor of health in Japan than the U.S. Similarly, my model of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989; 2014; 2018) formulated adaptive psychological functioning as an *embedding of the negative within the positive*. For example, the dimension of *purpose in life* draws on Frankl's (1959) inspirational message that though we cannot always protect ourselves from suffering, we can formulate our responses to it and indeed, have the existential responsibility to search for and create meaning vis-à-vis terrible events that may befall us. *Personal growth* is about using and developing one's talents and capacities, with



recognition that such becoming often unfolds in contexts of challenge where inner efforts are required to actively transform obstacles into new insights and self-knowledge. *Environmental mastery* involves striving to create work, family and community contexts that are suited to personal needs and capabilities. So doing demands effort and action, often in response to unfolding problems. Proactively seeking person/environment fit is thus a continual, lifelong task. *Autonomy* is about living in accord with one's own convictions, marching to one's own drummer. This challenge of well-being sometimes requires life choices that go against conventional wisdom; it is thus about having the courage to stand alone if need be. *Positive relations with others* captures the interpersonal world, ties to significant others, and close connections; realms inherently bound up with managing relational ups and downs. Intimacy and family ties demand engagement with the negative at times to work through interpersonal conflicts and difficulties. Finally, *self-acceptance* goes notably beyond self-esteem and positive self-regard into more demanding tasks that require honest awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, drawing on the Jungian (1933) formulation of the shadow as key to the individuation process. Similarly, Erikson's ego integrity requires coming to grips with the triumphs and disappointments of one's life. In combination, this eudaimonic approach is fundamentally about adaptive psychological functioning emerging from encounters with life difficulties.

What is the relevance of these observations for the intersecting catastrophes now endured by many? I see a central message being the importance of *turning into rather than away* from the suffering in hopes of recognizing and expressing pain that may pave the way for new forms of meaning and understanding. This is not a new insight, particularly for existential and humanistic scholars. What is different, however, is the critical need to recognize that many traumas now being experienced reflect deep structural, systemic problems that are inflicting deep deficiency needs (Maslow, 1954) in the lives of many. Stated otherwise, job loss, eviction, and hunger do not constitute opportunities for personal growth; instead, they make life unlivable. Stark structural dysfunction thus demands something unique, particularly from the privileged, namely, a commitment to participate in new forms of meaning-making and action at societal levels. The discipline of psychology, in contrast, has a longstanding tendency to conceive of solutions at individual levels. My point is that core problems are sometimes structural in nature and demand action to address injustice and unfairness at the macro-level, particularly with regard to distribution of resources and opportunities. This is dramatically true for traumas of COVID-19 and its sequelae because they are not prominent among the privileged, but instead are being inflicted on the disadvantaged, many of whom were already vulnerable due to the Great Recession (Kirsch & Ryff, 2016). Counselors, educators, and the helping professions must thus grapple with disparities in the distribution of trauma. When inequality is rampant and its life destroying forces are culminating in widespread suicide and addictions (deaths of despair), formulations of constructive help need to be rethought.

It is worth recalling that toward the end of his three-year ordeal, Frankl observed that many in the camps were succumbing, not to deprivation and pestilence, but to the loss of hope. An important question is whether the loss of hope is ever warranted? Frankl is perhaps a beacon in arguing that hope should never be lost. Perhaps this is

why his observations and insights have, for decades, ministered to millions of suffering people all over the world. Here, however, it is useful to remember that Frankl was unique: he was a well-educated man with psychiatric training. These capacities likely helped him to make sense of horrors at arguably higher levels, such as his capacity to recognize the sadism of some guards. His prior life was also likely part of his capacity to envision a unique future in which he would publicly speak about his experiences and use them to formulate new approaches to therapy. Other great leaders of courage and insight who have dramatically impacted the lives of oppressed peoples all over the world – Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela – were also highly educated, even though some were autodidacts whose self-learning occurred in prison. These observations underscore a key point: critical resources such as education and knowledge may be essential in making meaning of unprecedented adversity.

What then of those who lack such resources? How are they to transform trauma into growth? Such questions have no easy answers, but examining them is imperative for numerous reasons, including to illuminate who and what may be missing in clinical practice as well as in scientific studies. Decades ago, Schofield (1964) articulated bias in the mental health professions, something he labeled the YAVIS syndrome – preferred patients are Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent, and Successful. Similarly, Henrich et al. (2010) argued that social and behavior sciences are skewed toward the WEIRD – people who are from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. A central challenge faced by privileged (defined in terms of their educational attainment and professional status) clinicians and researchers, many of whom are caring and compassionate individuals, is to ensure that the therapies they provide and the scientific findings they generate are widely inclusive and not tailored to the privileged.

I thus conclude this section with a plea to see and feel the pain, suffering and outrage of others. This requires embracing vulnerabilities and weakness in the lives of those who are overwhelmed, exhausted, and discouraged. It is a call for deeper levels of empathy and understanding motivated by genuine concern for others, arguably the core of what it means to be human. A perceptive contemporary historian (Lepore, 2020) has observed that the greatest threat during times of plague is not the loss of life, but the loss of what makes us human. Being deeply human thus demands serious engagement with the negative, including the emotion of anger, which Aristotle reminded is – at the right time, to the right degree, and for the right reasons – a powerful and legitimate response. Indeed, in its neural underpinnings, anger looks more like positive affect than depression or anxiety (Harmon-Jones et al., 2011). This observation draws on the distinction is between “approach” versus “avoidant” emotions and what they activate in the brain. Should we embrace anger and outrage as uniquely justified reactions to profoundly unequal life opportunities? Mishra’s *Age of Anger* (Mishra, 2017), a dazzling integration of history, philosophy, literature, politics, economics, and cultural studies, answers in the affirmative. He begins with this: “Individuals with very different pasts find themselves herded by capitalism and technology into a common present, where grossly unequal distributions of wealth and power have created humiliating new hierarchies. This proximity is rendered more claustrophobic by digital communications and the improved capacity for envious and resentful comparison” (p13). Drawing on Arendt, Mishra describes *existential resentments* that are poisoning

civil society and fueling authoritarianism. Bringing in Tocqueville, he reminds that living in freedom requires getting used to a life of agitation, change, and danger.

Most powerful, however, is Mishra's portrayal of the dramatically distinct philosophies of Rousseau and Voltaire, eighteenth century interpreters of life. Voltaire praised material prosperity and consumerism; indeed, he boldly professed his love of conspicuous consumption, while flouting Rousseau's dictum that the rich have a duty to never make people conscious of inequalities in wealth. Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), written in close proximity to Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1776/1981), reminded that the ancients spoke incessantly about morals and virtue whereas the French *philosophes* spoke only of business and money. He saw the new commercial society as acquiring features of class division, inequality, and callous elites whose members were "corrupt, hypocritical and cruel with [their] prescribed values of wealth, vanity, and ostentation" (p.87). According to Mishra:

"What makes Rousseau, and his self-described 'history of the human heart', so astonishingly germane and eerily resonant is that, unlike his fellow eighteen-century writers, he described the quintessential inner experience of modernity for most people: the uprooted outsider in the commercial metropolis, aspiring for a place in it, and struggling with complex feelings of envy, fascination, revulsion, and rejection" (p.90)

Rousseau's books were best sellers in his era, although they are rarely invoked in current discourse. Alternatively, it was Voltaire who greatly influenced Catherine the Great's westernizing of Russia, with its aristocrats emulating the elites in France. Meanwhile, Rousseau pursued a deeper discourse on "perennial questions: how human beings define themselves, what holds societies together, and divides them, why the under privileged majority erupts in revolt against the privileged few, and what roles intellectuals play in these conflicts" (p.95). Worth noting is that Rousseau deeply castigated the Enlightenment *philosophes* for their self-love and self-interest, something Voltaire saw as an instrument of self-preservation. Rousseau, in contrast, wrote that *amour propre* (McLenden, 2009) was a dangerous craving to secure recognition for self over others and an insatiable ambition to raise personal fortunes, not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others. Such behaviors are arguably shameful and should be recognized as such – Balot (2001) reminds that the ancient Greeks believed in public censuring of greed. It is worth contemplating whether the gaping inequalities of our era have reached proportions that warrant public shaming. When does the degree of excess wealth become so extreme it cannot be justified or tolerated?

To recapitulate key points, the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed numerous enduring traumas, such as job loss, financial strain, food scarcity, and homelessness. Psychologists (clinicians, researchers, educators) need to reflect about what constitutes appropriate and constructive responses to these ordeals. The usual positive psychology mantras are inadequate to the task; hence, my call for greater emphasis on the role of the negative in understanding adaptive human functioning, and thereby, a return core existential challenges of finding meaning in adversity. Meaning-making in the face of major structural problems, defined as grossly unfair distribution of resources and opportunities, demands attention. The relevance of anger and outrage – as

legitimate responses to vast inequities – has a rich history, with the distant writings of Rousseau notably prescient and informative for our current circumstances.

### ***Needed inputs: Encounters with the arts and humanities***

Looking ahead, I see the arts and humanities as critically needed inputs for contending with the intersecting catastrophes now surrounding us. The arts, broadly defined, have long nourished human flourishing during difficult life periods. Much is also gained from consulting philosophy and history, key pillars of the humanities, in deciphering the meanings of culture and why we need it. The power of comedy, especially in the form of biting satire, is relevant as well. Central issues across these domains are why and how such inputs activate awareness and compassion, particularly needed among the privileged, so as to prompt action toward social change, while also affording comfort and inspiration among the beleaguered, so as to transform suffering into insight, meaning, and growth. What follows is unavoidably selective, beginning with insights to be found in the humanities and then moving to varieties of art forms, past and present, that depict trauma in the human condition.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Matthew Arnold (1861/1993) observed that nations are great, not because individuals are free and active, but when these numbers, this freedom, and this activity are employed in the service of a higher ideal. Democracies, he argued, face enduring challenges to find and keep their high ideals particularly during times of great peril, such as pandemics and wars. During such periods ideals of caring and compassion – as expressed through societal institutions – are essential. In *Culture and Anarchy* (Arnold 1867/1993), Arnold contrasted culture with the scientific passion for pure knowledge to see things as they are:

“There is a view in which all the love of our neighbor, the impulses toward action, help and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it – motives eminently such are called social – come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described as not having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection*. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good” (p.59).

Contemporary historians offer further guidance. Jon Meacham’s *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (Meacham, 2018) reminds that the current political polarization and partisan fury is not new. Further, he makes a compelling case that *the better angels of our nature*, Lincoln’s phrase during the fighting and death of the Civil War, have repeatedly won the day. Numerous other turning points in U.S. history, including women’s suffrage, two world wars, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, and the anti-communist witch hunts are revisited to reveal the power of asserting hope over fear, while showing compassion and concern for all. In Meacham’s account, the evidence shows a sustained belief in progress even in the gloomiest of times. Aiming to reach a wider public with messages about how we have come through the darkness before, Meacham has created two exceptional podcasts: *Hope Through History* and *It Was Said*. The words he speaks and the knowledge he imparts are soothing the nation’s soul in its present peril.

Shifting to the arts, there is growing research interest in investigating the benefits for well-being and health of creating and consuming music, dance, literature, poetry, film, visual arts (Fancourt & Finn, synthesis report 67, 2019; Lomas, 2016; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Tay, Pawelski, & Keith, 2018). Having addressed those topics elsewhere (Ryff, 2019; Ryff & Kim, 2020), I focus here is on examples of arts as venues for nurturing compassion and insight in the face of social inequalities, now exacerbated by COVID-19, as well for jolting the comfortable out of their complacent indifference. Beginning with contemporary film, the loss of home provides context for *The Florida Project* (2017), which portrays down and out mothers and their children living in a low-end motel. Struggling to find money for food, the main character is forced into prostitution, while her child plays in the bathtub in the next room. The heart of the film is the resilience of the adventurous children in this grim setting, along with the fierce commitment of their mothers, and the compassion of the motel manager who feels their pain and enjoys the children about whom he is especially concerned. Another film, *Paterson* (2016) depicts a city bus driver named Paterson who lives and works in Paterson, New Jersey. In his private time, he writes poetry and lives with a loving partner brimming with musical and artistic talents. Both struggle to pursue their creative capacities in the face of limited resources and difficult daily responsibilities. In the background is the knowledge that the famous poet William Carlos Williams lived in the same city. By day, he was practicing physician, caring for the working class inhabitants of Paterson. By night, he wrote about the setting and the people, observing that much misery comes from not knowing what is in great poetry. Deeply sensitive in tone, the film underscores that keen sensibilities and close observing, essential for beautiful poetry, are not the exclusive purview of the privileged; they are also powerfully present among those of modest means.

Another film, *American Honey* (2016), portrays challenges of disadvantaged youth growing up with addicted parents. They come together as workers for a subscription business that involves traveling around America and knocking on doors to generate sales. The plot unfolds via a cross-country road trip during which relationships develop, difficult pasts are revisited, and youthful aspirations are revealed. These come forth amidst the beauty of the passing landscape and singing the music of their generation. Ever in the background is the juxtaposition of hope and love in the face of a cruel, ungenerous world. Finally, *Parasite*, winner of the 2019 Award for Best Film, portrays grotesque contrasts between life at the top and bottom of in contemporary South Korea. These two groups are brought together via a wealthy family that hires a tutor, a child-minder, a cook, and a driver, unbeknownst to them, all from the same family. Their disadvantage is powerfully evident in the degrading environment in which they live, combined with persistent employment difficulties. Nonetheless, those without power and resources have a winning cleverness that co-exists with the obliviousness and insensitivity of the elites above them who observe that these people working for them smell bad. This film is thus an inside look at relationships between those at opposite ends of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Its genius penetrates to levels of tension, sensory perceptions, and comedy entirely missing in the scientific literature on health inequalities.

What of the visual arts? Among infinite examples, I note the scientific journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, which showcases major art on the cover of each issue and has collected these covers in a volume titled *Art in Science* (Potter, 2014). An example is the self-portrait of the Austrian painter, Egon Schiele, painted in 1912 and looking ill before his death at age 28 from the Spanish flu, which also took his wife and their unborn child. I also note another painting created in the midst of the Russian Revolution: Kandinsky's *Troubled* (1917) is an abstract work of turbulence and trauma brought to life while he was living in Moscow and had a child die of malnourishment. During World War II, the Russian News Agency TASS employed artists to produce posters intended to reassure and rouse the Soviet citizenry. Their works have been collected in an exhibition volume titled *Windows on the War: Soviet TASS Posters at Home and Abroad 1941-1944* (Zegers & Druick, 2011). Powerfully evident is the remarkable, relentless creativity among artists attempting to find purpose while working in and for a totalitarian state. A last example comes from the more than 1000 watercolors, using three primary colors, created by Charlotte Salomon from 1940 to 1942. These are brought together in a volume titled *Charlotte Salomon: Life? Or Theatre?* (Salomon, 2017). Born in 1917, she was a student at the Berlin Fine Arts Academy. There were multiple suicides in her family (mother, grandmother, sister, aunt) during her brief lifetime. In 1938 she fled to southern France, after which an intense period of creativity unfolded. Much of the work depicted people from her life, accompanied by narratives. One captures herself as a despondent woman, accompanied by the words, "I've no one left now. Fate, Fate, how harsh you are. And..." Another series of paintings depicts multiple faces with dramatic eyes and sad countenances. Next to one she wrote the following:

"But I realized that this was not so easy. I realized that no heaven, no sun, no star could help me if I did not contribute by my own will. And then I realized that actually I still had no idea who I was. I was a corpse. And I expected life to love me now. I waited and came to the realization: what matters is not whether life loves us, but that we love life."

Her insight about loving life had tragic salience, given that she was transported to Auschwitz in 1943 where, at age 26 and five months pregnant, she died.

Literature is another powerful realm for observing the human condition and making sense of it in the face of trauma. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens 1859/2004), Charles Dickens brought horrors of the French Revolution to the hearts and minds of those who read his masterpiece. Via characters from London and Paris, we learn of the awful lives of those imprisoned within the Bastille and after it is stormed, we follow executions by guillotine at the Place de La Concorde in Paris. This bloodbath of class retribution took more than 1,200 lives, including the French Queen and King. Here is how Dickens described the context: "...the frightful moral disorder born of unspeakable suffering, intolerable oppression, and heartless indifference" (p.344). At the core of the book is Madame DeFarge, the tigress quietly knitting, observing, and overseeing the acts of vengeance. Near the end, we are given insight into her fury, learning that her younger sister was subjected to horrific abuse by shameless male aristocrats who carelessly exploited her and destroyed her life and family. Dickens thus took us inside the emotional trauma that fueled this dramatic time in human history.

Two contemporary books of fiction address the current migration crisis. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (Hamid, 2017) describes the awful realities of refugees whose lives have been stolen out from under them, only to be subjected to endless trauma as they try to find another home. Another recent work, *Call Me Zebra* (Van der Vliet Oloomi, 2019), winner of the 2019 PEN/Faulkner award for fiction, tracks a family escaping from Iran by foot. The mother dies along the way, but the father and daughter eventually make their way to New York. The family is described at the outset as a group of anarchists, atheists, and autodidacts who took refuge in books; their distilled philosophy: "Love nothing except literature, the only magnanimous host there is in this decaying world.... The depth of our knowledge, the precision of our tongues, and our capacity for detecting lies is unparalleled" (p. 8). Memorization is key; thus, sprinkled throughout the book are quotes from Nietzsche, Omar Khayyam, Dante, Goethe, Rilke, Kafka, Cervantes, Garcia Lorca, Dali, and Picasso – "These writers' sentences deposited me at the edge of the unknown, far from the repulsive banality of reality others refer to as life" (p.205). The theme of survival through literature is novel and relevant in ministering to human trauma of all eras.

Here worth noting are links to a new series of sculptures, titled *100 Heads*, by the British artist, Marc Quinn. Finding inspiration in the Greek Islands and the birthplace of individual portraiture in classical antiquity, Quinn has created concrete portrait busts (using 3D scans) of actual refugees to challenge the perception of them as undifferentiated masses. Instead, the busts emphasize their strengths, uniqueness, and individual identities. This series is a prequel to *Our Blood*, which will also emphasize refugees in a major public artwork to be launched at the New York Public Library in 2022. Through the sale of the artwork, both endeavors are raising funds for refugees in need of food, shelter, healthcare and schooling.

I conclude this section with examples that underscore the power of satire vis-à-vis awful experiences of oppression and want. Jonathan Swift's, *A Modest Proposal*, written in 1729, was put forth with the stated intent of preventing the children of the poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or the country, as well as to make them beneficial to the wider public. Swift begins by describing female beggars in Dublin followed by their many children, all in rags, importuning every passing person for alms. He then elaborates on the numerical scope of the problem and observes that these young children cannot be fruitfully employed until they are around age twelve. Swift thus suggests that these children, if well nursed for their first year, be sent to England to provide "a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasee, or a ragout" (p.3). He goes to great lengths to support his proposal, including calculations on the financial benefits to follow. This satirical hyperbole mocked heartless attitudes toward the poor among the British as well as their policies toward the Irish in general. It is widely recognized as one of the greatest examples of sustained irony in the history of the English language.

Moving to the present, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (Beatty, 2015) won the Man Booker Prize and has been praised as "Swiftian satire of the highest order." The book revolves around race relations in the fictional township of Dickens (meaningfully named), California, a place where residents are left to fend for themselves. The main character

growing up this agrarian ghetto has a single black father who practices social scientific experiments on him and is a beacon (“nigger whisperer”) of the failing community. With masterful humor, Beatty parodies everything – from contemporary psychology (to combat prior science showing that both black and white children prefer playing with white dolls, new *inaction figures* are created, modeled on Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman), to “slapstick racism” (recalling episodes of *The Little Rascals*), to great literature (e.g., *The Dopeman Cometh*, *Measured Expectations*, *The Great Blacksby*, *The Charge of the Light-Skinned Spade*, *Zen and the Art of Bus Riding*) to depict the obstacles of being poor and black in racist America. Sister cities for Dickens are also identified: Chernobyl, Juárez, and Kinshasa – all known for their pollution, poverty, and dysfunction. This satire and razor-sharp wit reveals what it is to exist in a culture saturated with negative stereotypes.

To summarize key points in this section, I have tried to make a case that to cope with and understand the intersecting catastrophes now unfolding, we need the arts and humanities. Historical accounts remind us of how bad times have been survived in the past and underscore the central challenges during times of plague are to prevent the loss of humanity and failure to act on the best ideals of democracy. The arts are now empirically studied for their contributions to well-being and health, but here I emphasize their potential role in awakening the wider public to human suffering. Numerous examples from contemporary film portray lives of the disadvantaged with a poignant depth that scientific studies about inequality cannot reach. The visual arts through time have expressed the emotional trauma of war and loss but also a profound love of life in horrific circumstances. Great literature, past and present, helps to illuminate the humiliation and outrage of the oppressed, whether due to poverty or flight as refugees. Satire, in the right hands, is a powerful weapon for revealing unacceptable social orders desperately in need of change. The central question for science and praxis including public policy is whether these inputs can effectively increase needed supplies of compassion and empathy, while also provoke awareness of and disdain toward complacency among some of the overly comfortable.

## Concluding points

The preceding sections included summaries of key points that I will not repeat here. Instead, I offer three concluding points. First, regarding limitations of this essay, the scope of what has been covered is admittedly wide and thin – much that is relevant and important is missing. I tolerate this imperfection in pursuit of an attempt to integrate disparate domains that are too often left disconnected and standing alone. Second, in railing against privilege, I have said nothing about remarkable individuals, foundations, and companies that actively do good in the world and are guided by virtuous principles. Stated otherwise, not everyone at the top is greedy though growing socioeconomic disparities are undeniable, and they are wreaking havoc on the lives of many. These realities should not be tolerated – they demand social change. Third, I have been guided by an intentional imbalance in the positivity/negativity ratio. Underscoring experiences of anger, outrage, and shame, I intend as antidote to the overdone cheeriness of the positive psychology movement, and as an entreaty to those



largely protected from the intersecting catastrophes now unfolding to feel other people's pain, to seek to understand their outrage, and to be critical of complacency and indifference among the comfortable. The varieties of the arts I have showcased are thus intended, above all, as incitements.

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