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The Cost of Numbness

“When alerted to rumors that the camp in which he was incarcerated would be evacuated the next day, Primo Levi felt no emotion, just as for many months he had ‘no longer felt any pain, joy, or fear’ except in a conditional manner: ‘If I still had my former sensitivity, I thought, this would be an extremely moving moment.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“A world without humor, laughter, playfulness, flirtatiousness, as well as aggression and fear, would simply be impoverished, let alone unrecognizable as human. Simply to be an emotional creature and to live with others on an emotional plane…is an intrinsic part of living humanity.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are situations in life that force us to numb to our surroundings; the soldier in combat, the doctor in the emergency room, the victim of repeated abuse. The emotions that accompany these situations may be so damaging that individuals choose to insulate themselves. However, these extreme scenarios are not the only ones in which people assume some degree of numbness to their surroundings. Avoidance of the highs and lows of everyday life can provide comfort and consistency.

In this paper I argue that emotional numbness may be temporarily necessary in cases of trauma, but ultimately is incompatible with a satisfactory life as well as recovery from trauma. I draw from two works. “Outliving Oneself” by Susan Brison discusses numbness in the context of trauma and self-identity. Nancy Sherman’s chapter on Aristotelian virtue gives an account of the importance of emotions to our moral lives. I first discuss the benefits and necessities of emotional numbness – when and why it can be useful – and then contrast this with an account of the costs and harms of numbness. Throughout the essay I use examples from the novel *All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren. I will here simply define emotional numbness as the deliberate removal of emotional reactions to the things that happen in our lives.

The primary benefit of numbness is that it can shield us from damage by removing emotional threats. Brison argues that trauma, when “of human origin and intentionally inflicted…severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.”[[3]](#footnote-3) People ordinarily live with certain expectations about how others will treat them, and when these expectations are violated, one’s sense of safety and consistency is “shattered.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These expectations live in Sherman’s “emotional plane” in that they are not just calculated statistically based on the regular behaviors of others but are derived from shared morals. By disengaging from the emotional sphere, one can attempt to remove these expectations about the behavior of others and create some independent sense of consistency.

Jack Burden, the narrator of *All the King’s Men*, shows how this numbness can be employed. Burden is betrayed by Anne Stanton, a friend and love interest since childhood, when she has an affair with Burden’s boss, a politician. Burden writes, “that fact was too horrible to face, for it robbed me of something out of the past by which, unwittingly until that moment, I had been living.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This past that Burden was living in was one in which he had certain expectations of Anne Stanton. When those expectations are shattered Jack Burden reacts by driving all the way across the country, from the deep south to Long Beach, California, and sitting on a hotel bed, sinking into numbness, fleeing from his problems and emotions.

The stories of trauma survivors show the ways in which emotional numbness is employed as a coping mechanism. For some this manifests in a “splitting” of the self – concentration camp survivors literally rename themselves and rape survivors report a “separation from their former selves.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This splitting into two people is a way of numbing from the emotional damage that the event caused – in a way it is passing that damage onto another self that does not have to engage emotionally with others. Jack Burden, lying on the hotel bed in Long Beach, experiences this splitting: “I felt that, in a way, Anne Stanton did not exist. The words *Anne Stanton* were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden.”[[7]](#footnote-7) He transfers his shattered expectations to a past self and discovers that he can create a new one, revealingly referenced in third person, that is uninfluenced by any idea of Anne Stanton.

While numbness clearly plays a role in the lives of those who experience trauma, it also a tempting tool for avoiding the potential risks of our ordinary emotional lives. Sherman identifies several Aristotelian objections to the idea that emotions play an important role in our moral lives, two among these being that emotions “make us vulnerable and threaten our self-sufficiency.”[[8]](#footnote-8) We experience emotions because we hold things to have value, and so we expose ourselves to the emotional risk that something negative could happen to what we value.[[9]](#footnote-9) By cultivating a degree of emotional numbness, one can try to avoid these risks. In addition, when we participate in emotional life we express feelings that can be taken advantage of. Sherman mentions the Aristotelian view that “the inner core of character… can get corrupted by emotional states.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Numbness can be in aid in behaving in a moral way that is free from the fluctuations of emotions. Sherman addresses these objections in a compelling way that reveals how emotional numbness deprives us of a rich moral life.

Emotions, for Sherman, play key roles in our moral lives as recorders and transmitters of what we value.[[11]](#footnote-11) They are “mining tools that dig up and reveal what we already care about,” meaning they can help us discover things about ourselves that we do not otherwise acknowledge.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jack Burden “unwittingly” discovers how he viewed Anne Stanton when his past image of her is broken. We come to know ourselves through emotions. In addition, emotions can create value – for example, the emotions that we feel when reading a novel can cause us to become attached to the characters in the story. We will keep reading because we truly care about what happens to the characters, despite their fictitiousness. Sherman holds that this value-creating aspect of emotions has “crucial importance for moral development” because it allows us to learn from the people and things we value.[[13]](#footnote-13) One who is emotionally numb does not deal with the ups and downs attached to the things they care about, which can be a critical experience for moral maturity. Although loss can be upsetting, it can also be a source of growth in that it reveals to us what we care about most.

Sherman holds that Aristotle’s *eudiamōn* life, or good life, is incomplete without emotion. The quote at the opening of this paper expresses that view. One necessity for *eudiamōnia* is friendship, which is almost synonymous with a shared emotional life. Emotional numbness can make this type of friendship inaccessible. We know intuitively that emotions provide motivation for action – Sherman writes that we act “*out* of compassion, *out* of friendliness, *out* of sympathy” – and often this motivation is toward moral action. [[14]](#footnote-14) To deliberately ignore these motivational emotions, or to cultivate an attitude in which they are suppressed, is potentially to ignore cues about how to act morally.

According to Brison, recovery from a traumatic event requires participation in this emotional life that Sherman describes. Brison holds that the “self is created and sustained by others” and it is also “able to be destroyed by them.”[[15]](#footnote-15) When recovering from trauma, one must have their story heard and understood by others in order to reconstruct an “autonomous self.” Others’ attitudes toward the trauma survivor therefore have a deep effect on recovery. The “splitting” of the self in the aftermath of trauma requires empathy with the self that underwent the trauma. Brison believes that when we lose this traumatized part of ourselves that we must find parts of it in other people. Empathizing with others in this way allows us to “reintegrate one’s selves into a coherent personality.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The arguments of Brison regarding trauma recovery imply that one cannot fully mend while remaining emotionally numb. For her, recovery entails the recreation of the self, which occurs primarily in relation to others in the emotional plane. Although numbness might be a necessity to deal with emotional pain, eventually recovery requires that one empathize with their traumatized self, meaning one must acknowledge the emotional damage that the event caused. Anne Stanton’s brother, Adam, kills Burden’s boss out of rage about his sister’s affair, and Adam is soon after shot by another at the scene. Anne later admits to Burden that in some way, she was responsible for Adam’s death, and remarks, “I knew I had to tell somebody. Sometime. I knew it would come, but there wasn’t anyone for me to tell. Till you came.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Anne Stanton cannot try to recover from the trauma of what occurred without another person there to just listen to her. Her recreation of self begins with emotional openness.

Emotional numbness in varying degrees can be a necessity or a comfort but comes with high costs. When one trains themselves not to have emotional reactions, they reduce their risk of experiencing emotional pain. However, the price payed for this stability is too high. They repudiate some of the most important parts of the human experience – moral development, friendship, and life on a shared emotional plane that connects us with others that we care about. In the case of trauma, the victim may be forced to “split” their self to numb from emotional damage. In the recovery, though, the survivor must engage emotionally with others. In order to rebuild shattered expectations about the world, one must expose themselves emotionally and find support and trust that was eliminated by the traumatic event. Susan Brison, herself the survivor of a horrific assault, writes that the return to some degree of trust in her world was enabled by engaging with her child: “He is so trusting that he stands with outstretched arms, wobbling, until he falls…certain that the universe will catch him. So far, it has, and when I tell myself it always will, the part of me that he’s become believes it.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. Brison, Susan J. “Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity.” Feminists Rethink the Self, by Diana T. Meyers, Westview Press, 1997, pp. 12–37., 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Chapter 2: The Emotional Structure of Aristotelian Virtue.” Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue, by Nancy Sherman, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 24–98., 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brison, 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brison, 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Warren, Robert Penn. All the King's Men. Mariner Books/ Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001., 433 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brison, 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Warren, 434 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sherman, 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sherman, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sherman, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sherman, 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sherman, 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sherman, 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sherman, 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brison, 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Brison, 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Warren, 571 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Brison, 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)