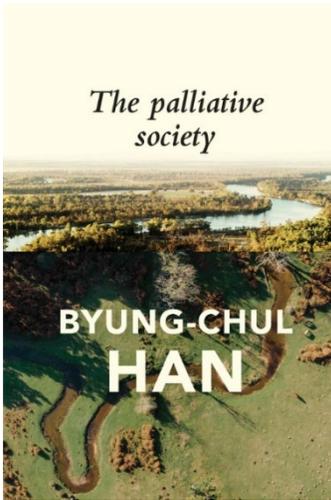


Book Review



The palliative society: Pain today

Written by Byung-Chul Han,

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“Our relation to pain reveals what kind of society we are.” (p. 1)

Byung-Chul Han, a Korean-born Professor of Philosophy and Cultural Studies and one of the most well-known social thinkers and cultural critics, writes *The Palliative Society: Pain Today* eloquently to display profound insights into the presence of pain in modern society currently facing an unprecedented global health crisis. This thought-provoking book comprising eleven essays was originally published in German as *Palliativgesellschaft* in 2020 and was then translated into English by Daniel Steuer the following year. From critical perspectives to creative stylistic expressions, Han’s fine-grained analysis centered largely on pain and this palliative society can find its way into the use of metaphor—a powerful language device that prompts us to understand one entity in terms of another—and this is the highlight of his book.

At first glance, the title manifests itself as an intriguing summation of society which is palliative, arousing the readers’ curiosity and desire to know why today’s society figuratively requires analgesics for mitigating suffering without treating its underlying sources. Han constructs this creative, fresh-and-new metaphor grounded by the pre-existing idea of special medical care to elucidate philosophical, psychological, and cultural premises of pain in contemporary society. To deconstruct this metaphor, *The Palliative Society* carries the readers toward a sense of extinguishing any negativity we live by—all painful conditions which are indeed crucial parts of social reality. This kind of society forces us to escape from negativity and embrace (an excess of) positivity instead. Pain signifies weakness and hence is not eligible to be given its own narrative

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character. Since the ability to tolerate pain has diminished due to increasing algophobia or fear of pain, even politics and arts have stepped up into the palliative comfort zone to avoid conflicts and controversies which might be prone to any form of pain. These politics and arts are driven by likeability which has dominated social media and cultural spheres. By holding on to positivity and inhibiting negativity such as alienation, irritation, or disturbance, we eventually are “in the hell of the same” (p. 6).

Han uses his critical faculties to address the palliative society in relation to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. He deems the palliative society to be a wellbeing zone yet one that is ultimately based on survival. It lacks a sense of good life since individuals have a greater fear of death. We sacrifice happiness and faith for survival. The virus has changed our life into a mere biological process, one that is seen through the lens of what can be measured: we count the number of Covid-19 cases, physical proximity turns into a risk of infection, and social distancing becomes mental distancing. The pandemic is like “terrorism” (p. 18), i.e., people at the airport are like terrorists since they are suspected to be carriers of the virus, and the virus itself is labeled as a terror in the air. In view of such comparisons, the pandemic has turned into a quarantine zone, thus not yielding any different form of life. Our hysteria for survival proliferates. Our sense of life has been withering day by day and is thus replaced with “comfortable survival”; health turns out to be of the highest value, our “new goddess” (p. 36).

That the pandemic has swept across the globe for over a year and has caused insecurities in every aspect of life brings about the phenomenological question of the contemporary experience of pain. Han, therefore, gears readers towards insightful realizations of pain which run in parallel to the palliative society, along with the ideas of Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Jünger, and other great personalities who both reinforce and refute his argumentation. The book mirrors our modern society in which neoliberalism, capitalism, digital media, and medical advancement are situated. Here are striking examples. Han sparks controversy surrounding the meaninglessness of pain in different contexts by making a distinction between meaningless pain which directs to biology, and meaningful pain which needs “a narrative which situates life” (p. 22). The presence of pain corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s saying: “only pain can then be a navigable river which never dries up and which leads man down to the sea” (p. 22).

It is worth noting that pain can serve as a tool that draws a line between what is “genuine” and what is “fake,” as seen in the idea that “without pain, we are therefore blind, incapable of establishing truth and knowledge” (p. 30). We avoid painful relationships and, at the same time, turn to the palliative zone. In painful relationships, however, living togetherness differs from the dead because of an ability to feel pain; that is, “without pain, we have neither loved nor lived” (p. 31). Pain determines differences in body organs: “without pain, the body, as well as the world, sinks into in-difference” (p. 31) and we, undoubtedly, learn and perceive through pain. Han views the reality of pain as a painful resistance. The anesthesia the palliative society injects into our life in the form of digitalization weakens such resistance and makes the world “unreal” (p. 32). The pervasiveness of “like” remains, but the antagonistic opposition derived from “anti” suffers.

Here comes the interesting question: is there a poetics of pain? According to this book, we have been so much at the mercy of the powerful anesthesia of the palliative society that, unfortunately, it suppresses any aesthetics of pain. Pain has been deprived of its own language. We forget how it is narrated—how to give language to it. No longer do we realize that our imagination is enlivened by pain which, in turn, serves as a power to heal. With pain, there is

a passion for writing that arises from the mind—one of the ultimate methods to communicate with the world, as seen in the example of Marcel Proust: “Pain guides Proust’s pen” (p. 35).

Han clarifies the close relationship between pain and mind by emphasizing that pain is life: “only the negativity of pain keeps the mind alive” (p. 39). He continues by maintaining that we cannot acquire knowledge or experience that breaks with the past without pain. The palliative society shapes us to be desperately the same, without negativity of transformation. Changes, indeed, emerge from pain—an entity that makes a distinction between thinking and calculating. It deepens our thinking, Han continues, because “only what is living, what is capable of experiencing pain, can think.” (p. 40). In this regard, he holds that artificial intelligence is just a computing machine that tends to obtain intelligence from deep learning; pain itself is what converts intelligence into mind—turning the mind to be more perceptive. The palliative society flees from lingering with negativity, but without pain, “there is no revolution, no departure from the old, no history” (p. 41).

The last part of the book captures human conditions driven by a biopolitical surveillance regime that undermines liberalism—the crisis of our own freedom. We are treated as a dataset exploited for gaining profit, and capitalism has become surveillance capitalism. This is for the sake of survival: “In order to survive, humans are abolishing themselves. They may succeed in becoming immortal, but only at the expense of life itself” (p. 60). Han finally makes it crystal clear that pain is part of being human: “Life without death and pain is not human life; it is undead life” (p. 60).

In the face of the pandemic, the book directs a spotlight on the presence of pain in the palliative society. Han’s philosophy serves as a crucial pathway to understanding various facets of humanity. This ground-breaking resource is highly recommended for those interested in perennial modern conditions driven by capitalism, neoliberal market forces, democracy, and digital technology. This book will also ignite one’s interest in the philosophy of pain, promote extensive and more critical discussions on contemporary political, economic, and cultural issues, and raise awareness regarding prevailing social ideologies motivated by the pandemic, which, according to Han, represent a more major threat to humanity than one might ever think.