Suffering For Science

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From chemists poisoned by mercury spills to geologists caught in the path of active volcanoes, countless stories of contemporary scientific practice propose that a life in science may be uncommonly painful, if not downright lethal.\textsuperscript{1} Most remarkable about these tales of pain is that so many focus not on unwitting accident or misfortune (the primatologist who contracts a rare disease, the oceanographer who boards a doomed research vessel) but on individuals’ \textit{willing} embrace of suffering, a deliberate surrender of safety and comfort. To study avalanches, for instance, two civil engineers in Montana repeatedly bury themselves in the rushing tons of snow. “There is a science to all this,” one of the researchers tells an incredulous reporter. “I swear.”\textsuperscript{2} A group of AIDS researchers, declaring that they are not simply suicidal, offer themselves as the first human subjects for an experimental vaccine based on the human immuno-deficiency virus.\textsuperscript{3} A molecular biologist insists that even mundane laboratory work necessarily entails the “sacrifice” of “community, family, and self.”\textsuperscript{4} The author of a recent children’s book condenses these themes to a single, stark sentence: “Science is horrible, and just as you suffer in science lessons, so scientists suffer for science.” Scientists endure pain and suffering, the book concludes, not “to make life more comfortable for the rest of us” but for one overarching reason: “because they think that science is fascinating.”\textsuperscript{5}

Notice that in these stories, science—that standard of all things judicious and disinterested—relies on a curious counterpart: the enthralled investigator willing to endure almost any manner of pain. Science proceeds in no small measure due to scientists’ devotion—devotion at once reasonable and compulsive, voluntary and involuntary. Something about science “gets under your skin,” explains physicist Alan Lightman in a recent edition of the \textit{New York Times}, “keeps you working days and nights at the sacrifice of your sleeping and eating and attention to your family and friends.” Scientists “do what they do because they love it, and because they cannot imagine doing anything else. In a sense, this is the real reason a scientist does science. Because the scientist must.”\textsuperscript{6}

This book is an effort to understand the recurrence of such themes of will, compulsion, and sacrifice in science—a domain of life often depicted as the
epitome of secular reason and liberal political thought. While I hope that the book’s ruminations on voluntary suffering will hold some relevance for contemporary scientific practitioners (as I reconsider briefly in the epilogue), ultimately this is a study of the past rather than the present. For the question I wish to pose is not “Why does science demand sacrifice?” but “Why do we say that science demands sacrifice?” From where did we get the idea that one must suffer in order to “do” science or be a scientist?

In presenting a history of the presumed link between science and suffering, I offer an alternative to those who portray science as a timeless, inhuman force to which we are haplessly subjected. While studying this history surely won’t free anyone from the tendency to couple knowledge and pain, it might help arouse further conversation about aspects of daily life generally left unexamined. Rather than insisting that science requires our sacrifice or compels us to suffer, perhaps we lovers of knowledge will begin to hold one another accountable for the arrangements of social life we create and maintain. Of course, some of us may well continue to subject ourselves to suffering, but at least we might begin to reckon with the forms of pleasure we take in doing so.
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