

A Good Life is Painful

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Can we live a good life without suffering?

Notice that I used the word “good” and not “happy.” It doesn’t make any sense to ask whether we can suffer and be happy at the same time, but can we live a full and meaningful life without *certain* kinds of suffering? That’s a much harder question.

I just watched an episode of *The Twilight Zone* that explores this in a way only that show could. It’s about a gangster who dies and wakes up in a place that has all the markings of heaven — or at least what a guy like that would imagine as heaven. He has all the sex and money and power he wants. He loves it at first. But then he grows bored and aimless and starts to hate it. So he asks his guide if he can go to hell instead, and that’s when he learns he’s already there.

A new book by the psychologist Paul Bloom, called [*The Sweet Spot*](#), says this story captures the strangeness of human psychology about as well as anything can. It’s a deep dive into the relationship between suffering and meaning, and why living a purposeful life means caring about much more than happiness.

The book isn’t pro-suffering, and Bloom is very careful to distinguish “chosen” suffering from “unchosen” suffering, but it is an attempt to explain why we sometimes seek out hardship and struggle, and why the conventional image of humans as purely pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding isn’t so much wrong as incomplete.

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