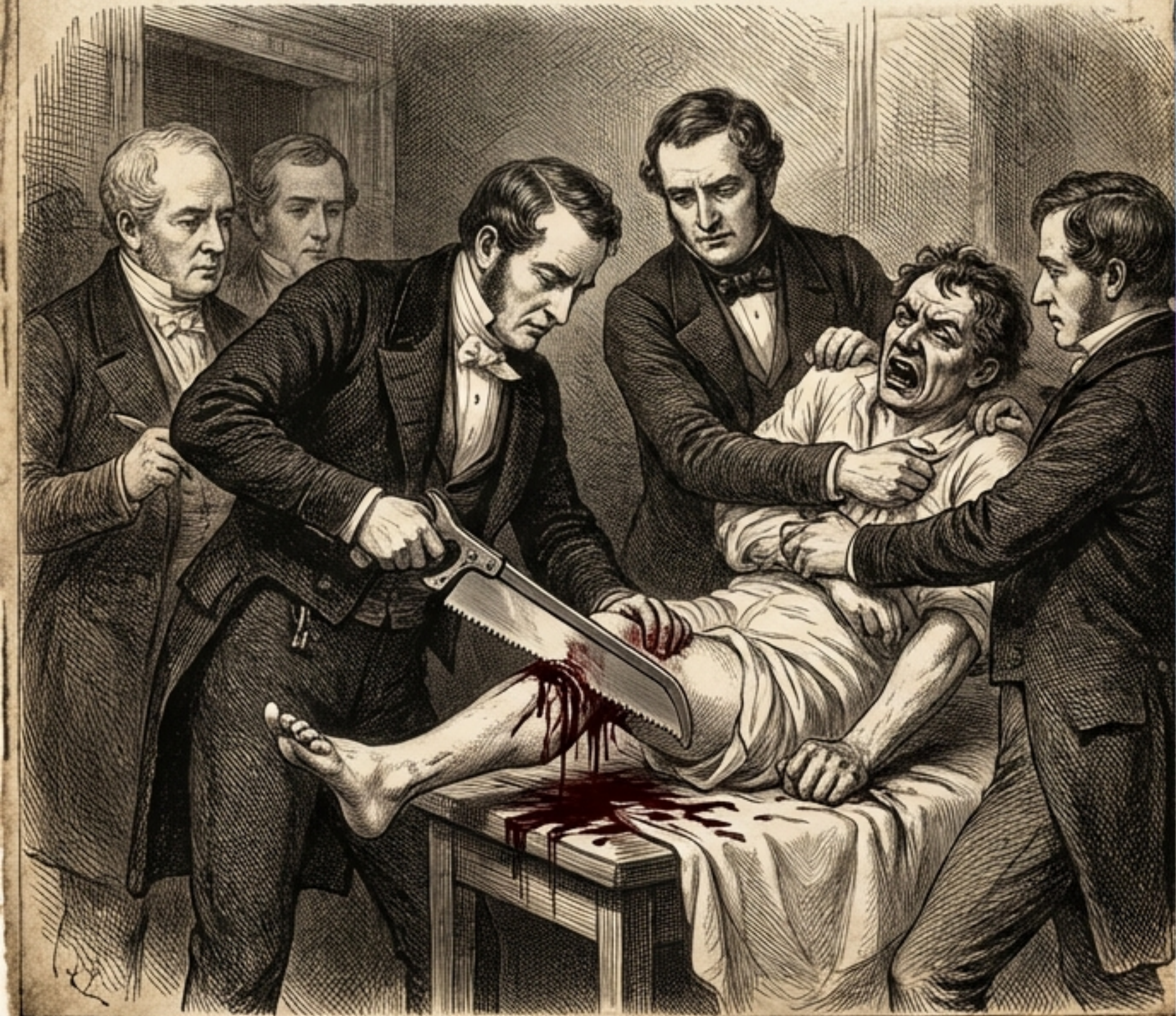


Utopian Surgery?



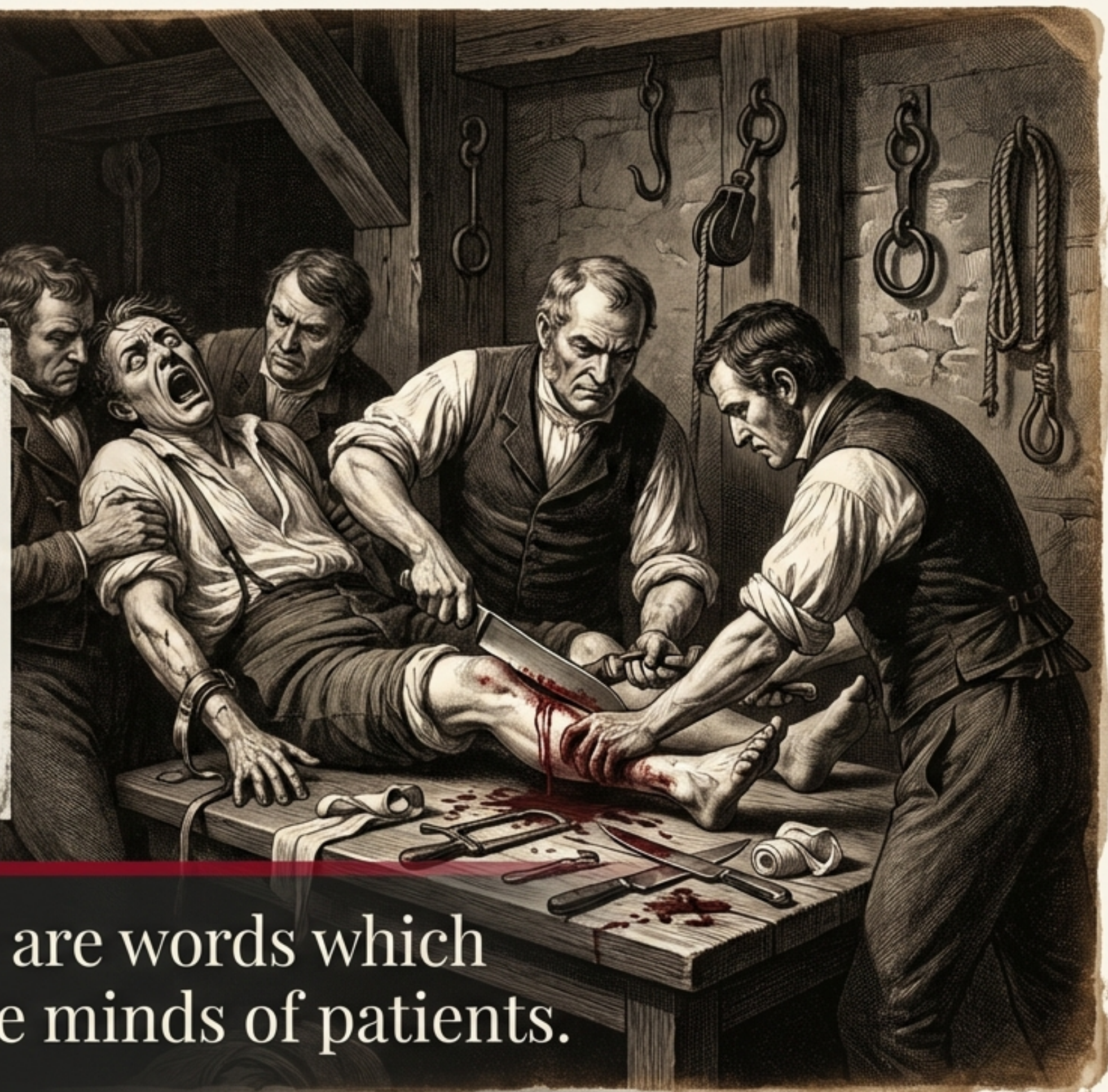
A history of the arguments against pain relief, and what they teach us about the future of suffering.

The World Before Anesthesia

Before the mid-19th century, surgery was a last resort, an experience of indescribable agony.

Operating rooms had 'hooks, rings and pulleys set into the wall to keep the patients in place.' Operations were performed against a backdrop of hideous screaming, with patients needing to be held down by several strong men. As the great French surgeon Alfred Velpeau stated in 1839:

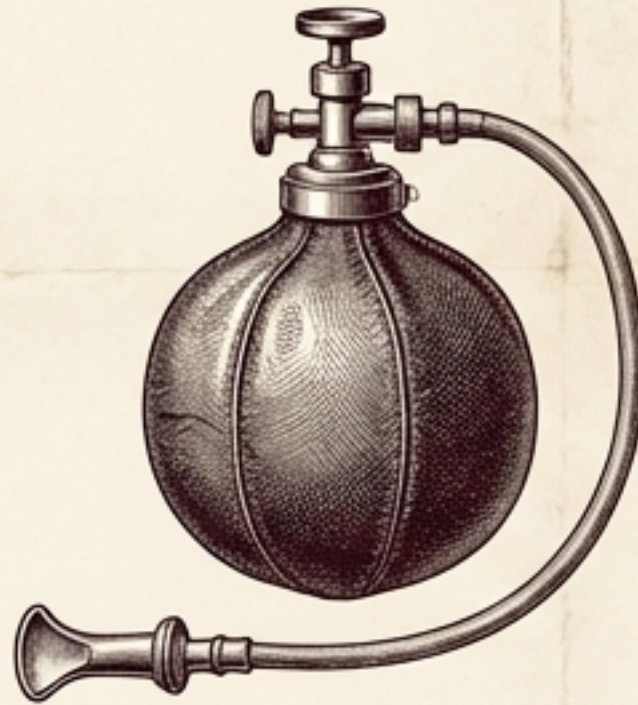
As the great French surgeon Alfred Velpeau stated in 1839:



'Knife' and 'pain' in surgery are words which are always inseparable in the minds of patients.

A Nameless Fantasy Becomes Reality

For centuries, reliable pain relief was an impossible dream. The path to its discovery was indirect, beginning not in the lab, but in social gatherings and public entertainments.

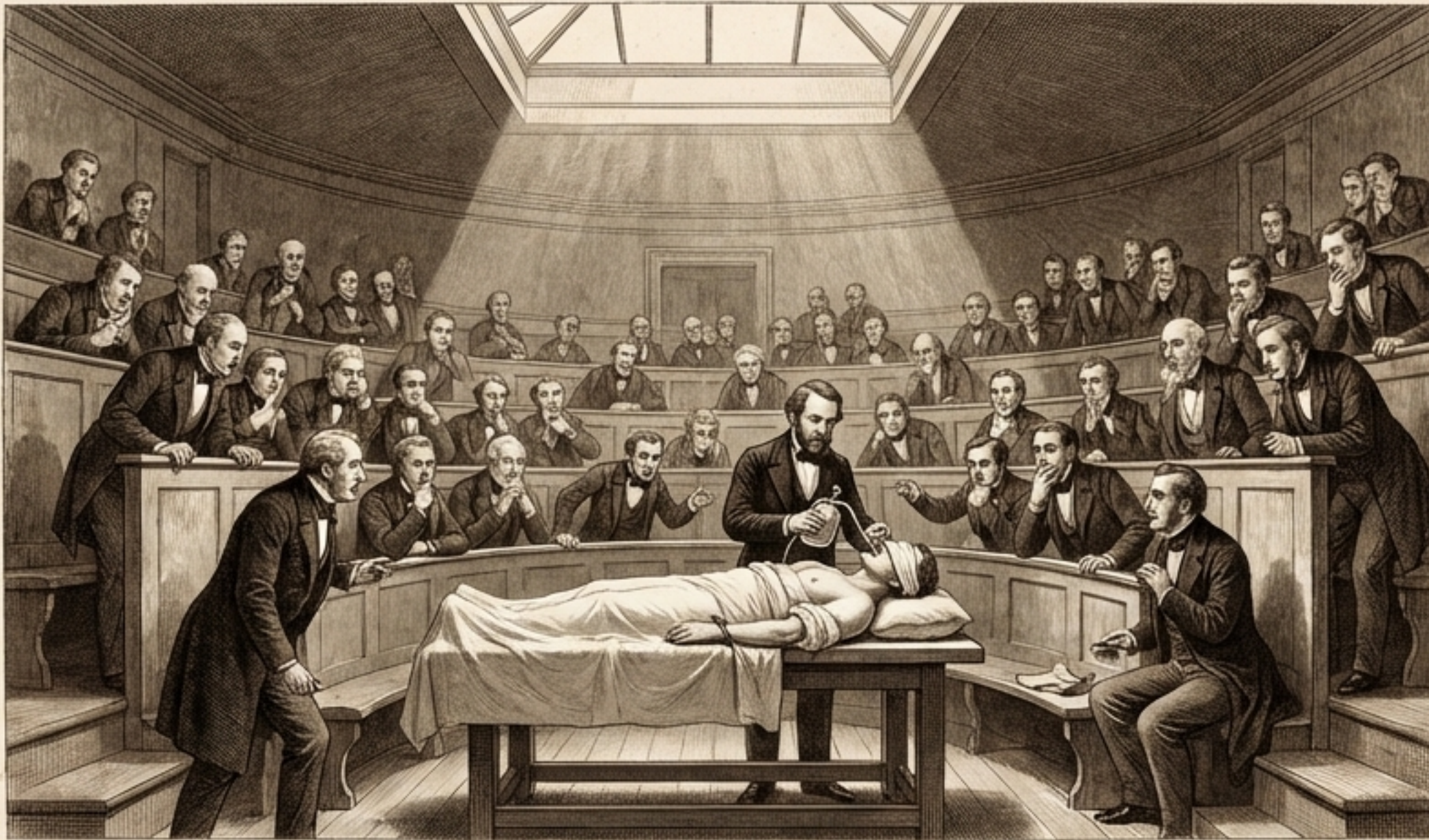


Sulphuric Ether: Used in 'ether frolics' for intoxication, its anaesthetic properties were known but not applied to surgery until pioneers like Crawford Long and William E. Clarke performed isolated procedures in the early 1840s, failing to publicize their work.



Nitrous Oxide ('Laughing Gas'): First isolated by Joseph Priestley, its exhilarating effects were explored by Humphry Davy, who noted its power 'in removing intense physical pain,' a suggestion that went unheeded for decades.

October 16, 1846: The Ether Dome



The era of surgical anaesthesia was inaugurated at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Dentist William Morton, advised to use the more potent ether, administered it to patient Gilbert Abbott for the removal of a tumor.

The audience of surgeons and students, who had jeered an earlier failed demonstration by Horace Wells, watched in amazement as the patient remained peaceful throughout the ten-minute operation.

Upon completion, the skeptical surgeon Dr. John Collins Warren turned to the astonished gallery and declared: "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."



The Case Against Relief, Part 1: Divine Will & Moral Hazard

Theological Objections

Core Belief: Pain was seen as a divine instrument, a punishment for sin or a test of faith that was wicked to circumvent.

Quote: *'Pain is a natural and intended curse of the primal sin. Any attempt to do away with it must be wrong.'* - Zurich City Fathers, who initially outlawed anaesthesia.

Childbirth: The most intense opposition concerned childbirth, citing Genesis 3:16: 'in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.' Ministers denounced chloroform pioneer James Young Simpson as a heretic.

Moral Objections

Core Belief: Suffering was considered essential for building character, dignity, and even maternal love.

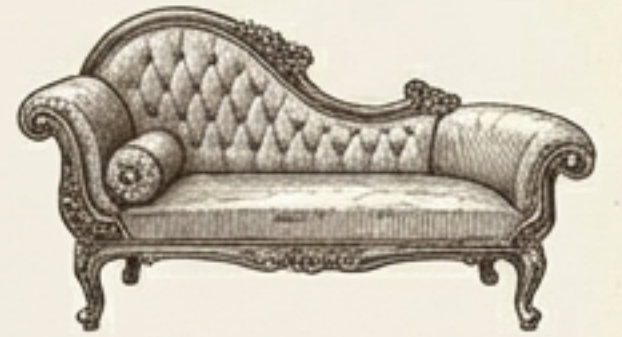
Quote: *'The very suffering which a woman undergoes in labor is one of the strongest elements in the love she bears for her offspring.'* - Anonymous Clergyman.

Manliness: Surgeons-general in the Canadian army refused anaesthetics, believing their soldiers were manly enough to endure the pain.





The Case Against Relief, Part 2: Medical Dogma & Social Fear



Medical Objections

Core Belief: Pain was considered a vital diagnostic sign of life and an indicator of a patient's vitality. Its absence was equated with death.

'I think anesthesia is of the devil... I do not think men should be prevented from passing through what God intended them to endure.'
– Dr. William Atkinson, 1st President of the American Dental Association.

'Life Force': Prominent physicians like Dr. Charles Meigs argued that anaesthesia weakened a 'most desirable, salutary and conservative manifestation of the life force.'

Social Fears

Sexual Disinhibition: A primary anxiety was that anaesthetics provoked 'carnal fantasies' and 'sexual orgasm,' particularly in women, robbing them of their virtue.

Case Study: Dr. Tyler Smith reported a young woman who dreamt of intercourse under ether, leading opponents to claim that women would 'suffer death itself' before risking such an 'exhibition.'

Assault: These fears were not entirely unfounded, as a minority of doctors did exploit insensible female patients, blaming their recollections on the drug's side effects.

The Verdict of History Was Unambiguous

Despite the fierce theological, moral, and medical resistance, the benefits of anaesthesia were too profound to deny. The practice spread rapidly after Queen Victoria used chloroform for the birth of Prince Leopold in 1853, making it fashionable. The objections faded into historical footnotes.

~1 in 2,500

Mortality in Victorian Britain



~1 in 250,000

Mortality Today

**THE OBJECTIONS WERE OVERCOME.
THE SUFFERING WAS PREVEENTED.**

A Mirror in Time

The 19th-century arguments against abolishing physical pain seem archaic, misguided, and cruel.

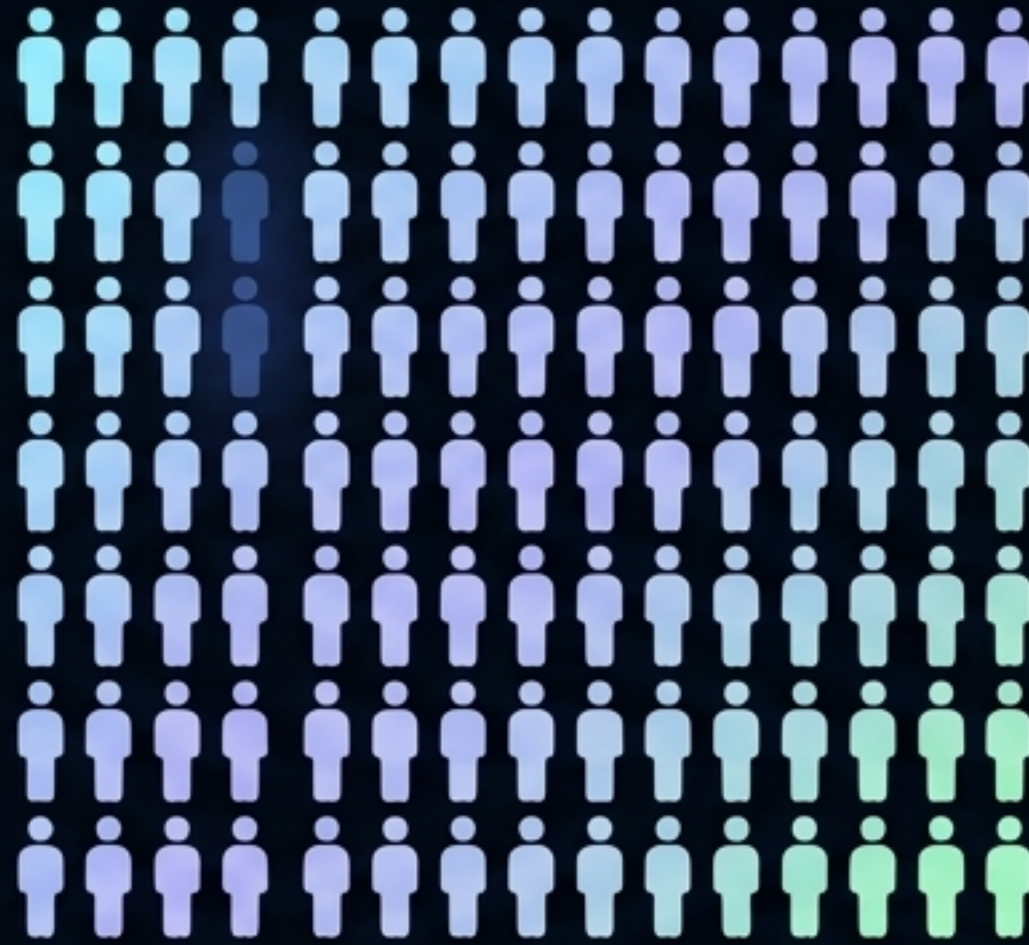
Are we making the same mistake today with emotional pain?

The New Frontier of Suffering: Emotional Pain

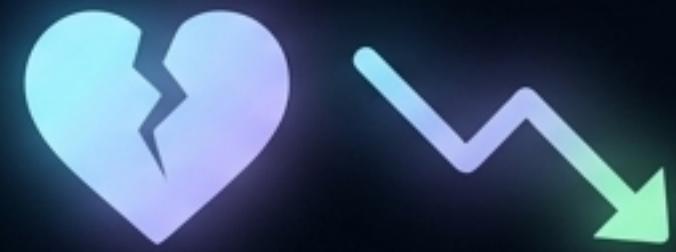
While we have conquered the agony of the surgeon's knife, we still live in a world defined by Darwinian pathologies of emotion.

Intuitively, we may consider physical pain 'worse,' but the statistics tell a different story.

The Modern Crisis



It is unbearable '**emotional**' pain that causes almost a million people in the world to kill themselves each year.



Emotional pain causes millions more 'para-suicides' and cases of self-injury.



Tens of millions suffering from depression periodically wish they could die.

The Modern Case for Keeping Pain

The arguments against the abolitionist project to end emotional suffering parallel the 19th-century case against anaesthesia.

The Moral Argument: "Suffering Builds Character"



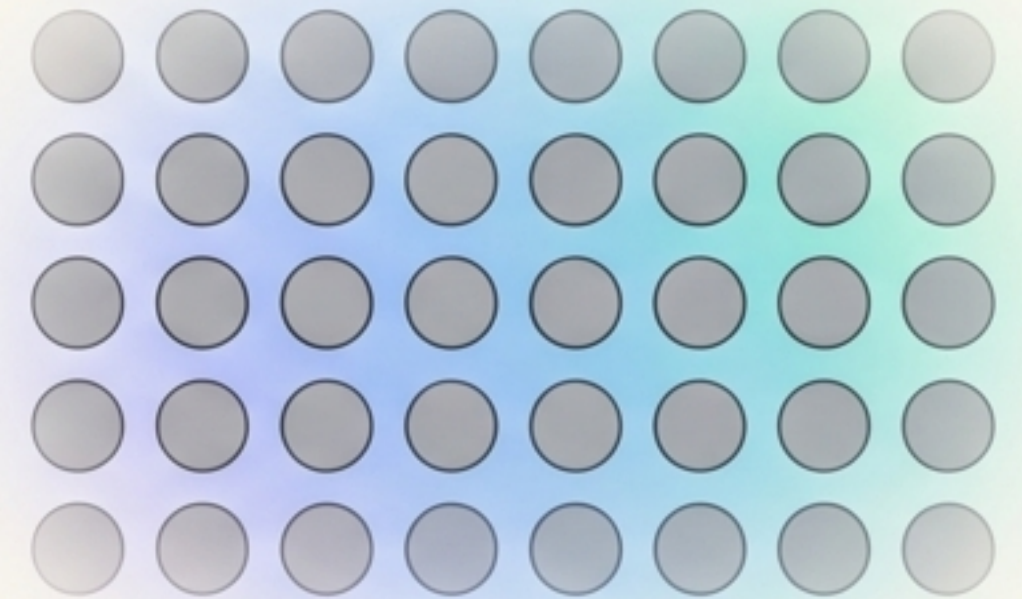
The belief that emotional pain is essential for art, growth, authenticity, and our fundamental humanity. Pain is seen as more **authentic** than happiness.

The "Medical" Argument: "Pain is a Useful Signal"



The claim that negative emotions are indispensable diagnostic tools, and their removal would be harmful.

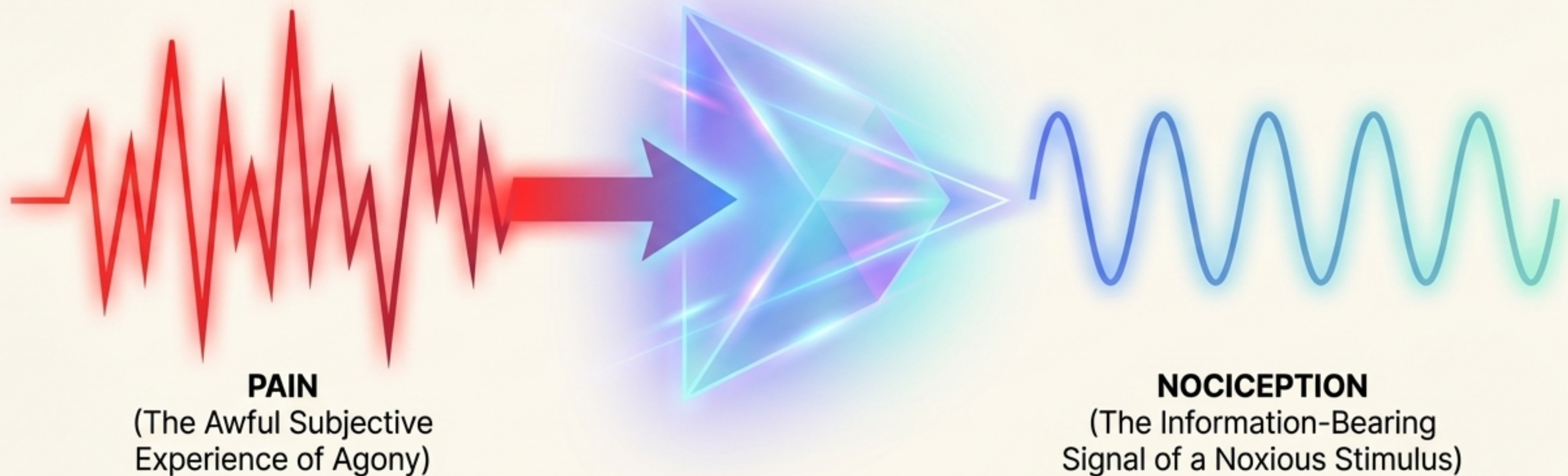
The Social Fear: "A Brave New World"



The dystopian spectre of a society where the abolition of pain leads to a flat, meaningless, soma-driven existence, robbing us of freedom and dignity.

We Can Keep the Signal Without the Suffering

A critical error in the modern case for pain is the conflation of the signal with the experience. The abolitionist project does not propose to eliminate information, but to eliminate the cruel 'raw feel' of suffering.



Advanced biotechnology can preserve and even enhance the functional role of signals, while replacing the raw texture of pain with a different mechanism.

The Architecture of Well-Being

Intelligent life does not require aversive experience. Gradients of well-being can signal information as effectively as gradients of misery. Two primary pathways exist to recalibrate our 'hedonic set-point.'

Path 1: The 'Wetware' Solution

Genetic engineering and germline therapy to rewrite the biological substrates of misery. We can recalibrate our opioid and mesolimbic dopamine systems to create a high, stable baseline of well-being.

A biology where 'danger' is signaled not by pain, but by a dip in a gradient of bliss.



Path 2: The 'Cyborg' Solution

Advanced neuro-implants and prostheses that provide hyper-efficient sensory feedback and damage-avoidance signals without any cruel phenomenology.

Augmented intelligence, founded on gradations of blissful awareness.



Beyond Darwinian Misery

The abolition of the biological substrates of suffering is a moral imperative that would enable a transition to a new phase of evolution.

A Post-Darwinian Civilization Could Feature:

- * Life based on gradients of bliss rather than gradients of malaise.
- * The end of genetically-coded misery and the repair of the deficits of natural selection.
- * A new ethical foundation for parenthood, ensuring no child is brought into the world destined to suffer.
- * An expansion of consciousness into states of well-being orders of magnitude richer than anything accessible today.

Crossing the Threshold

Just as our 19th-century forebears decided to abolish one class of physical ills upon discovering controllable anaesthesia, we are now poised to abolish another.

Sceptics will argue that suffering is an eternal part of life, just as surgeons like Velpeau argued that pain and the knife were inseparable. But the obstacles are no longer primarily technical.



“The reasons for the persistence of suffering in the world are now more ideological than scientific.”

The cultural amnesia that has overtaken the arguments against anaesthesia may one day befall the arguments used against abolishing emotional anguish.

Source & Further Reading

Attribution

This presentation is based on the analysis and text found in 'Utopian Surgery? The case against anaesthesia in surgery, dentistry and childbirth' by David Pearce.

Full Source

<https://www.general-anaesthesia.com/>

Explore Further

- * [The Abolitionist Project](#)
- * [Paradise Engineering](#)
- * [Critique of Huxley's *Brave New World*](#)
- * [History of General Anaesthesia \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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