

Inclusion, Exclusion and Flourishing: The Role of Social Pain and Related Emotions

Marco Meneghin

Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma, Italia; KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

marco.meneghin@kuleuven.be  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5008-1527>

DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-12-25](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-12-25)

SUBMITTED: 30.03.2026 – REVIEWED: 15.06.2026 – ACCEPTED: 21.07.2026

Abstract

This paper argues that human flourishing is not merely individual but interrelational. While recent debates emphasise positive affect or individual capacities in well-being, they tend to underexplore the regulatory role of negatively valenced experiences. Focusing on social pain—the distress associated with social exclusion and disrupted social bonds—I draw on neuroscientific and psychological evidence showing its affective overlap with physical pain as a shared alarm system. I argue that this system signals threats to relational conditions fundamental to agency and well-being. On this view, social pain plays a central regulatory role, parallel to that of physical pain: it tracks social damage, motivates responses primarily oriented towards repair and reintegration, and operates with social and moral emotions that shape norm-sensitive interactions. On this basis, I defend a conception of flourishing as essentially interrelational, in which the maintenance and restoration of social inclusion are structurally central to well-being and moral agency.

Keywords: Social pain, Affective overlap, Social exclusion, Social inclusion, Moral emotions, Flourishing.

CONTENTS

1 Introduction	400
2 Affective Overlap, Evolution and the ‘Pain Alarm’	401
3 The Vital Role of Social Inclusion	403
4 Appraisal, Well-Being and Moral Behaviour	406
5 Flourishing as Interrelational	410
6 Conclusion	412

1 INTRODUCTION

Recent debates on human flourishing have increasingly focused on the role of affect in the good life, particularly whether well-being is best understood in terms of positive emotional states or in terms of more objective or structural conditions.¹ Theories of subjective well-being and positive psychology have emphasised happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect as central to a flourishing life.² By contrast, other philosophical accounts have often stressed the development of capacities, the exercise of agency, or the realisation of objectively valuable forms of functioning.³ This raises a broader question: to what extent does the good life involve feeling good, and to what extent does it depend on conditions not reducible to positive affect?⁴

While these perspectives capture important dimensions of flourishing, they tend to underexplore a crucial aspect of affective life—namely, the role of negatively valenced experiences in tracking and regulating the conditions of well-being. In particular, little attention has been paid to the role of social pain: “the unpleasant experience associated with actual or potential damage to one’s sense of social connection or social value.”⁵ That is, the distress associated with exclusion, rejection, or the disruption of social bonds. This omission is significant because such experience does more than accompany failures of flourishing; it may play a central role in signaling them. In this respect, patterns of social inclusion and exclusion would not only reflect outcomes of flourishing but also constitute conditions that shape and constrain it.

Empirical research supports this perspective by showing that social pain shares important features with physical pain, particularly in its affective dimension. This overlap suggests that social pain recruits pain mechanisms originally evolved to signal bodily damage, functioning as an affective alarm that draws attention to disruptions in social connection as threats to survival.

Integrating these insights, this paper thus argues that human flourishing is not merely individual, but essentially *interrelational*, and that an adequate

¹G. FLETCHER, *The Philosophy of Well-Being: An Introduction*, Routledge, London 2016.

²S. OISHI, E. DIENER, R. E. LUCAS, *Subjective Well-Being: The Science of Happiness and Life Satisfaction*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. by C. R. Snyder et al., Oxford University Press, New York 2018, pp. 254–264; M. E. P. SELIGMAN, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, Free Press, New York 2011.

³A. SEN, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York 2001; M. C. NUSSBAUM, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2013.

⁴L. NOVAK, N. KIKNADZE, *Does the Good Life Feel Good? The Role of Positive Emotion in Competing Conceptions of the Good Life*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 15/1425415 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1425415>.

⁵N. I. EISENBERGER, *Social Pain and the Brain: Controversies, Questions, and Where to Go from Here*, «Annual Review of Psychology», 66/1 (2015), pp. 601–629: 603.

account must incorporate both the cultivation of positive social relations and the recognition and repair of social wounds. Within this framework, social pain plays a central role: it signals threats to the relational conditions that underwrite agency and well-being, while the emotions it elicits—together with other social emotions—help regulate responses to such threats, including morally relevant ones.

Section 2, then, presents the empirical and theoretical basis for the overlap between physical and social pain, focusing on their shared affective dimension and evolutionary significance. Section 3 explores the implications for social inclusion, showing how social pain signals disruptions in relational conditions and why social inclusion is therefore central to human life. Section 4 examines how appraisal processes shape responses to social pain and links these processes to well-being and moral behaviour through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, Section 5 develops the central claim that flourishing is fundamentally interrelational, showing that social pain and inclusion structure not only external conditions but also the internal affective and motivational processes of agency. By sharing its affective architecture with physical pain, social pain provides a basis for corresponding obligations to repair exclusion and promote inclusion, connecting social, emotional, and moral dimensions of human life.

2 AFFECTIVE OVERLAP, EVOLUTION AND THE ‘PAIN ALARM’

Evidence for the overlap between physical and social pain emerges across multiple domains: neural, psychological, behavioural, and physiological. Neuroimaging consistently shows overlapping activity in brain regions associated with the affective component of pain—most notably the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) and the anterior insula (AI). Crucially, this overlap pertains to the unpleasant, affective dimension of pain, rather than the sensory-discriminative component tied to bodily damage.⁶ Social pain does not activate peripheral nociceptors nor typically involve somatosensory pathways that encode injury location; instead, the convergence lies in shared unpleasant affect.

This conclusion is supported by several additional lines of evidence. Linguistically, social pain is often described using physical pain-related terms, such as ‘hurt’, ‘wound’, or ‘heartbreak’, across languages and cultures.⁷ Neurochemically,

⁶IDEM, *Broken Hearts and Broken Bones: A Neural Perspective on the Similarities Between Social and Physical Pain*, «Current Directions in Psychological Science», 21/1 (2012), pp. 42-47: 43; *Social Pain and the Brain*, cit., pp. 604, 621; K. KAROS, *On the Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain*, in *Social and Interpersonal Dynamics in Pain*, ed. by T. Vervooort et al., Springer International Publishing, Cham 2018, pp. 173-195: 176.

⁷R. POND et al., *Social Pain and the Brain: How Insights from Neuroimaging Advance the Study of Social Rejection*, in *Advanced Brain Neuroimaging Topics in Health and Disease - Methods and*

endogenous opioid systems and centrally acting analgesics appear to regulate both physical and social pain.⁸ There is also evidence of cross-domain sensitivity: individuals more sensitive to social rejection tend to report heightened sensitivity to physical pain, and vice versa. Conversely, social support has been shown to attenuate perceived physical pain.⁹

Further correspondences emerge at the physiological and behavioural levels. Social pain can trigger responses similar to physical pain, including increased inflammatory activity.¹⁰ Both physical and social pain are typically accompanied by fear and anxiety and, when prolonged, are associated with elevated risk of depression.¹¹ However, in each case, the primary drive appears directed towards the healing or restoration of bodily or social damage, respectively. Only under certain conditions may both forms of pain give rise to aggression, particularly when the situation is perceived as severe and reconciliation impossible.¹² Moreover, when intense, they appear to elicit similar facial expressions and non-verbal cues of distress, such as crying or other vocalisations.¹³ Social pain can be as highly distressing as physical pain, impairing cognitive functioning, prompting maladaptive behaviours, and representing a major risk factor for suicide.¹⁴ Fi-

Applications, ed. by T. D. Papageorgiou, G. I. Christopoulos, S. M. Smirnakis, InTech, London 2014, p. 612.

⁸C. N. DEWALL *et al.*, *Acetaminophen Reduces Social Pain: Behavioral and Neural Evidence*, «Psychological Science», 21/7 (2010), pp. 931-937; K. KAROS, *On the Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain*, cit., p. 175.

⁹K. KAROS, *On the Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain*, cit., p. 179; M. ZHANG, Y. ZHANG, Y. KONG, *Interaction between Social Pain and Physical Pain*, «Brain Science Advances», 5/4 (2019), pp. 265-273; 266-267.

¹⁰S. S. DICKERSON, *Physiological Responses to Experiences of Social Pain*, in *Social Pain: Neuropsychological and Health Implications of Loss and Exclusion*, ed. by G. MacDonald, L. A. Jensen-Campbell, American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C. 2011, pp. 81-88; C. J. LESCHAK, N. I. EISENBERGER, *Two Distinct Immune Pathways Linking Social Relationships with Health: Inflammatory and Antiviral Processes*, «Psychosomatic Medicine», 81/8 (2019), pp. 711-719.

¹¹K. D. WILLIAMS, *Ostracism*, «Annual Review of Psychology», 58/1 (2007), pp. 425-452; 443; R. P. RAJKUMAR, *Pharmacological Strategies for Suicide Prevention Based on the Social Pain Model: A Scoping Review*, «Psych», 4/3 (2022), pp. 494-515; 495; R. V. AARON *et al.*, *Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety Among Adults With Chronic Pain: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, «JAMA Network Open», 8(3)/e250268 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.0268>.

¹²D. S. CHESTER, C. N. DEWALL, R. S. POND, *The Push of Social Pain: Does Rejection's Sting Motivate Subsequent Social Reconnection?*, «Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience», 16/3 (2016), pp. 541-550.

¹³M. BOTVINICK *et al.*, *Viewing Facial Expressions of Pain Engages Cortical Areas Involved in the Direct Experience of Pain*, «NeuroImage», 25/1 (2005), pp. 312-319; 318; M. KUNZ, K. KAROS, T. VERVOORT, *When, How, and Why Do We Express Pain?*, in *Social and Interpersonal Dynamics in Pain*, cit., pp. 101-119.

¹⁴J. F. GUNN III, *The Social Pain Model: Understanding Suicide Through Evolutionary Psychology*, «Crisis», 38/5 (2017), pp. 281-286; R. P. RAJKUMAR, *Pharmacological Strategies for Suicide Prevention*, cit.

nally, like physical pain, it can also become chronic, especially when repeatedly experienced or prolonged.¹⁵

Collectively, these findings suggest a plausible evolutionary explanation. Affective mechanisms originally signalling physical injury may have been co-opted during mammalian evolution to detect and respond to social disruptions.¹⁶ As sociality became increasingly central to survival—especially in highly cooperative species like humans—exclusion would have posed a serious life-threat, increasing vulnerability to predation and limiting access to essential resources.¹⁷

From this perspective, it would have been advantageous for natural selection to recruit an already efficient alarm system—one capable of rapidly capturing attention and strongly motivating corrective action. The affective dimension of pain provides precisely such a mechanism: it generates a salient aversive signal that prioritises damage detection and promotes its repair. In this sense, positive emotions associated with successful social interaction, or milder unpleasant signals, may well reinforce social bonding; however, they would be insufficient alone to signal social threats with the same urgency.¹⁸

This perspective suggests that social pain should not be understood as merely derivative or metaphorical in relation to physical pain. Rather, given their shared affective dimension, they would operate within a common alarm system that tracks both types of damage. The central claim of this paper builds on this point: if social pain shares the affective alarm of physical pain—and thus its relevance for survival—then threats to social inclusion acquire a significance that is not merely instrumental but foundational for human well-being. As the following sections will argue, this perspective supports not only the importance but the centrality of social bonds in human life and, consequently, their role in understanding flourishing as fundamentally interrelational.

3 THE VITAL ROLE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

In light of the overlap outlined above, social pain can plausibly be regarded as genuinely—and not merely metaphorically—painful. Like physical pain, it can produce intense distress and significant disruption. If, as suggested, affective mechanisms originally signaling bodily injury have been co-opted to

¹⁵M. L. MEYER, K. D. WILLIAMS, N. I. EISENBERGER, *Why Social Pain Can Live on: Different Neural Mechanisms Are Associated with Reliving Social and Physical Pain*, «PLOS ONE», 10/6 (2015), pp. 1-20.

¹⁶J. PANKSEPP, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 262; N. I. EISENBERGER, *Broken Hearts and Broken Bones*, cit., p. 42.

¹⁷K. D. WILLIAMS, *Ostracism*, cit., p. 429.

¹⁸For an interesting case about leprosy and the ineffectiveness of non-pain stimuli in preventing injuries, see P. BRAND, P. YANCEY, *The Gift of Pain: Why We Hurt and What We Can Do about It*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids (MI) 1997, pp. 191-196.

detect threats to social bonds, then social relationships acquire not merely instrumental but central importance for human beings. This is reflected in the high degree of cooperation characteristic of our species.¹⁹ On this view, belonging is not simply advantageous but a fundamental human need.²⁰ Exclusion therefore represents a serious threat to well-being and survival, making inclusion correspondingly vital.

In general, physical pain serves a primary adaptive function in preserving the organism. It not only triggers immediate reactions to bodily damage but also elicits emotional responses—such as fear, anger, anxiety, or sadness—that regulate behaviour beyond the moment of injury.²¹ These responses promote protection, recovery, and avoidance of further harm. A similar pattern occurs in social pain. Exclusion and rejection likewise give rise to fear, anger, sadness, and anxiety, suggesting a comparable regulatory function in the social domain.²² Of course, physical and social pain differ in the events they detect: physical pain typically arises from nociceptive processes tracking actual or potential tissue damage, whereas social pain is more cognitively mediated, involving appraisal of relational damage.

Some emotions initially linked with physical pain may then have been recruited to regulate behaviour in the social domain as well. A similar extension can be observed in other affective systems, such as disgust, which extends from pathogen avoidance to social and moral contexts.²³ Thus, I suggest that, just as pain-related emotions were organised around the bodily dimension in cases of physical harm, they may also have become organised around social threats once the pain alarm system was engaged by damage to social bonds. This helps explain the interaction between the two domains, including the modulation of physical

¹⁹K. STERELNY, *The Pleistocene Social Contract: Culture and Cooperation in Human Evolution*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021, p. 13.

²⁰C. N. DEWALL, T. DECKMAN, R. S. POND, I. BONSER, *Belongingness as a Core Personality Trait: How Social Exclusion Influences Social Functioning and Personality Expression*, «Journal of Personality», 79/6 (2011), pp. 1281-1314.

²¹P. RAINVILLE, Q. V. H. BAO, P. CHRÉTIEN, *Pain-Related Emotions Modulate Experimental Pain Perception and Autonomic Responses*, «Pain», 118/3 (2005), pp. 306-318; H. SHARIF-NIA *et al.*, *The Relationship of Fear of Pain, Pain Anxiety, and Fear-Avoidance Beliefs with Perceived Stress in Surgical Patients with Postoperative Kinesiophobia*, «BMC Psychology», 13/1 (2025).

²²M. R. LEARY, *Emotional Responses to Interpersonal Rejection*, «Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience», 17/4 (2015), pp. 435-441.

²³C. M. VICARIO, R. D. RAFAL, D. MARTINO, A. AVENANTI, *Core, Social and Moral Disgust Are Bounded: A Review on Behavioral and Neural Bases of Repugnance in Clinical Disorders*, «Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews», 80 (2017), pp. 185-200; X. GAN *et al.*, *Common and Distinct Neurofunctional Representations of Core and Social Disgust in the Brain: Coordinate-Based and Network Meta-Analyses*, «Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews», 135/104553 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.104553>.

pain by relational and contextual factors.²⁴

At the same time, increasing social complexity has given rise to a broader range of emotions and capacities dedicated to regulating interpersonal relations. Emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and jealousy monitor one's standing within a group and help prevent behaviours that might threaten social bonds. Others—such as love, gratitude, compassion, trust, or empathy—facilitate cooperation, bonding, and mutual support.²⁵ Together, these emotions and capacities form a broader architecture oriented towards navigating the social world and maintaining social cohesion. Notably, because of its close link to pain-related neural systems, this architecture not only regulates social interaction but also influences how pain itself is experienced: negative emotional states tend to intensify perceived pain, whereas positive ones can mitigate it.²⁶

Within this broader framework, the shared alarm function of physical and social pain becomes more intelligible. The overlap highlights the seriousness with which threats to social connection are treated by the human affective system, while the broader repertoire of social emotions allows for more differentiated, context-sensitive responses. To clarify this further, consider the distinctive role of physical pain within the affective domain. It functions as a high-priority alarm signalling immediate threats to bodily integrity, such that ignoring it when intense can quickly lead to severe injury or death. For this reason, its urgency ensures that it remains salient until the underlying damage is addressed. Pain-related emotions support this process by motivating behaviours that overall favour healing, protection, and avoidance of further harm—for instance, sadness-withdrawal may reduce activity and facilitate recovery, anger may motivate defensive action to overcome the source of injury, and fear may promote avoidance of additional dangers.²⁷ These emotions

²⁴K. GRAY, D. M. WEGNER, *The Sting of Intentional Pain*, «Psychological Science», 19/12 (2008), pp. 1260-1262; Z. TROST *et al.*, *An Experimental Investigation of the Effect of a Justice Violation on Pain Experience and Expression among Individuals with High and Low Just World Beliefs*, «European Journal of Pain», 18/3 (2014), pp. 415-423; K. KAROS, *On the Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain*, cit., p. 186.

²⁵C. SCRIVNER *et al.*, *Social Emotions Are Governed by a Common Grammar of Social Valuation: Theoretical Foundations and Applications to Human Personality and the Criminal Justice System*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Evolution and the Emotions*, ed. by L. Al-Shawaf, T. K. Shackelford, Oxford University Press, New York 2024, pp. 79-98: 79-86.

²⁶J. L. RHUDY, *Emotional Modulation of Pain*, in *Neuroscience of Pain, Stress, and Emotion*, ed. by M. al Absi, M. A. Flaten, Elsevier, San Diego 2016.

²⁷A. N. BALDWIN *et al.*, *Acute Pain-Related Depression of Operant Responding Maintained by Social Interaction or Food in Male and Female Rats*, «Psychopharmacology», 239/2 (2022), pp. 561-572; S. BECKER *et al.*, *Emotional and Motivational Pain Processing: Current State of Knowledge and Perspectives in Translational Research*, «Pain Research and Management», 1 (2018), pp. 1-12; D. S. CHESTER *et al.*, *The Interactive Effect of Social Pain and Executive Functioning on Aggression: An fMRI Experiment*, «Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience», 9/5 (2014), pp. 699-704: 699.

contribute to survival, but do so in a less direct and urgent manner than the primary pain signal.

A parallel structure can be observed in the social domain. Just as physical pain is accompanied by a range of emotions that support appropriate responses to bodily harm, social pain is embedded within a repertoire of social emotions that regulate responses to threats to social bonds. Moreover, social pain recruits mechanisms that share the urgency and motivational force of physical pain. Thus, within this architecture, it plausibly plays a parallel role, signalling threats to conditions fundamental for survival, while other social emotions act more indirectly. In this sense, social inclusion emerges not as one good among others but as a condition that underwrites well-being at a more basic level. If exclusion activates an alarm system of this kind, then maintaining and repairing social bonds becomes essential, making social inclusion a central condition for both well-being and moral flourishing, as the following sections will argue.

4 APPRAISAL, WELL-BEING AND MORAL BEHAVIOUR

Social pain, as noted, is more cognitively mediated than physical pain in detecting harm. Whereas physical pain is typically triggered by direct bodily injury, social pain depends on the interpretation of behaviours, gestures, and contextual cues that signal damage to social bonds. This, however, does not render it arbitrary or merely subjective. On the contrary, social pain is reliably elicited by events that indicate exclusion. This is demonstrated by the robustness of experimental paradigms—such as Cyberball, in which participants are systematically excluded from a virtual game²⁸—where even minimal cues of exclusion produce consistent distress. At the same time, physical pain is not independent of cognition: expectations, context, and social factors significantly shape its intensity and unpleasantness.

Evaluative processes are therefore central to social pain, both in identifying disruptions to social bonds and in determining their significance. This can be clarified in terms of appraisal processes,²⁹ which shape how exclusion is interpreted and how individuals respond. In this sense, appraisal helps to explain how social pain contributes to well-being and moral behaviour, showing: (i) how social pain tracks normatively relevant features of social interaction and (ii) why it can give rise to different behavioural responses, from prosocial repair to aggression. These functions, I suggest, can be understood in terms of two levels of

²⁸K. KAROS, *On the Overlap Between Physical and Social Pain*, cit., pp. 177–178.

²⁹F. CLÉMENT, D. DUKES, *A Difficult Introduction to Affective Social Learning*, in *Foundations of Affective Social Learning*, ed. by D. Dukes, F. Clément, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, pp. 1–22: 3–7.

appraisal, corresponding to the distinction in appraisal theories of emotion between rapid, automatic evaluations and more reflective assessments.³⁰ Williams' three-stage model of ostracism provides a useful framework for articulating this distinction.³¹

The first stage is *reflexive* and involves the immediate 'hurt feeling' associated with social pain. This response is rapid and largely insensitive to contextual factors such as the identity of the excluder—whether a friend, a stranger, or even a computer—or the triviality of the episode. This invariance thus suggests a pre-reflective appraisal of exclusion cues, which activates the affective alarm system independently of more elaborate interpretation.

The second stage is *reflective*. Here, individuals evaluate the meaning and significance of exclusion. This appraisal modulates the initial distress and, crucially, shapes behavioural responses aimed at restoring the thwarted needs. When exclusion is appraised as reparable—for instance through reconciliation or re-admission into the group—individuals tend to engage in affiliative, prosocial behaviour in order to restore the damaged bond. When reinclusion is perceived as nearly impossible, however, aggressive or retaliatory responses become more likely, especially in individuals with reduced self-regulatory capacities. In this way, appraisal mediates between the initial alarm and behavioural outcome, modulating whether social pain supports or undermines cooperative interaction.

Nonetheless, if exclusion persists or is appraised as irreparable, individuals may enter a third stage of *resignation*. At this point, coping and reintegration efforts fail, and social pain can become chronic. As mentioned earlier, such conditions are strongly associated with depression and impaired self-regulation, and constitute a major risk factor for suicide. Importantly, as indicated, this progression is not merely a function of the intensity of the initial pain, but of how the situation is appraised over time—particularly with respect to the possibility of restoring social bonds.

These dynamics further suggest that social pain and its associated appraisals serve an adaptive function primarily by promoting prosocial responses. Social exclusion can operate as a signal that certain behaviours are detrimental to the group, thereby motivating behavioural adjustment on the part of the excluded.³² In this context, social pain does not merely register harm but also contributes

³⁰A. KAPPAS, *Appraisals Are Direct, Immediate, Intuitive, and Unwitting...and Some Are Reflective...*, «Cognition & Emotion», 20/7 (2006), pp. 952-975; R. KALISCH *et al.*, *Levels of Appraisal: A Medial Prefrontal Role in High-Level Appraisal of Emotional Material*, «NeuroImage», 30/4 (2006), pp. 1458-1466.

³¹K. D. WILLIAMS, *Chapter 6 Ostracism: A Temporal Need-Threat Model*, in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 41, Elsevier, San Diego 2009; K. D. WILLIAMS, S. A. NIDA, *Ostracism and Social Exclusion: Implications for Separation, Social Isolation, and Loss*, «Current Opinion in Psychology», 47/101353 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101353>.

³²K. D. WILLIAMS, *Ostracism*, cit., p. 429.

to the regulation of behaviour within shared normative frameworks. It primarily drives individuals towards reintegration, while social emotions regulate this motivation through more specific tendencies—such as guilt for harming others, shame for norm violations, gratitude for benefits received, and compassion for others' suffering. These emotions, in turn, involve social appraisals that motivate behaviour in ways conducive to maintaining cooperative relationships.³³

From this perspective, the overlap between social and physical pain and such emotional architecture, as developed above, highlights the fundamental importance of social inclusion for both well-being and moral behaviour. Just as physical pain signals threats to bodily integrity, social pain signals threats to relational standing. Consequently, insofar as social pain shares the affective unpleasantness that renders physical pain morally significant, the unnecessary infliction of social pain raises moral concerns comparable to those associated with the infliction of unnecessary physical pain.³⁴ Although minor exclusion may sometimes serve legitimate regulatory functions, such as sanctioning behaviours that undermine group norms, exclusion that is disproportionate, unjustified, or offers no prospect of reintegration is morally problematic in virtue of the painful distress it produces. This supports a corresponding obligation not only to avoid causing such harm but also to address its primary source—namely, damaged social bonds.

This issue is central to both well-being and moral flourishing. Persistent or irreversible exclusion can undermine self-regulation and cognitive functioning, thereby compromising autonomous agency.³⁵ It also increases vulnerability to maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse.³⁶ At the same time, evidence suggests that chronic exclusion weakens motivation to comply with social and moral norms. When reintegration appears unattainable, the perceived costs of antisocial behaviour diminish, as the benefits of prosocial behaviour seem disproportionate to the severity of the social pain endured.³⁷ Over time, exclusion can thus erode both personal development and the capacity to engage constructively in social life.

Conversely, facilitating social inclusion is a primary means of alleviating these effects. Acceptance and social reconnection seem to be the most reliable

³³D. SINGH, B. BHUSHAN, *Understanding Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment and Pride: A Systematic Review of Self-Conscious Emotions*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 16/1678930 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1678930>.

³⁴D. DEGRAZIA, J. MILLUM, *Nonmaleficence and Negative Constraints*, in *A Theory of Bioethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 58-96.

³⁵R. POND *et al.*, *Social Pain and the Brain*, cit., p. 609.

³⁶*Ibidem*, p. 624.

³⁷K. T. POON, W. Y. WONG, *Turning a Blind Eye to Potential Costs: Ostracism Increases Aggressive Tendency*, «Psychology of Violence», 9/6 (2019), pp. 634-643; K. T. POON, Z. CHEN, C. N. DEWALL, *Feeling Entitled to More: Ostracism Increases Dishonest Behavior*, «Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin», 39/9 (2013), pp. 1227-1239.

ways to alleviate social pain over the long term.³⁸ These approaches appear more effective than proxy strategies that aim to reduce distress without genuine social reintegration or that merely foster positive emotions.³⁹ Even minimal signs of acceptance can reduce aggression, while the perception that reintegration is possible helps restore self-regulation and curbs retaliatory tendencies.⁴⁰ These effects are therefore significant not only for psychological well-being but also for the restoration of moral agency.

Finally, because the maintenance and repair of social bonds are largely mediated by social emotions, this perspective also highlights their role in moral development. Such emotions incorporate social and normative evaluations that help regulate behaviour by motivating individuals to conform to shared standards and by signalling their violation. In this sense, many social and socially recruited emotions can be understood as *moral* emotions.⁴¹ This is evident in the way some non-social affective responses acquire a normative dimension in social contexts. Anger directed at a physical threat may function primarily as a defensive reaction; when directed at perceived injustice, however, it expresses an evaluative judgment and contributes to the regulation of social behaviour. What distinguishes these cases is not the underlying affect alone, but its integration into systems concerned with social relations.

Within this framework, I suggested social pain occupies a structurally central role. If mechanisms originally evolved to signal bodily damage have been recruited to detect threats to social bonds, then the affective processes organised around them can also underpin forms of moral regulation. Social pain provides a salient experiential signal that motivates relational repair and supports responses oriented towards cooperation and relational stability. This also helps situate other affective extensions. Moral disgust, for instance, is often understood as an extension of pathogen-avoidance mechanisms into the social and moral domain. Unlike responses organised around social pain, however, it tends to motivate avoidance rather than repair.⁴² By contrast, self-conscious moral emotions such as guilt and shame illustrate particularly clearly how the regulation of social bonds and moral development converge. By motivating repair, reconciliation, and humility after wrongdoing, these emotions help restore damaged relationships while reinforcing

³⁸J. PANKSEPP, *Affective Neuroscience*, cit., p. 275.

³⁹K. D. WILLIAMS, *Chapter 6 Ostracism*, cit., p. 308.

⁴⁰C. N. DEWALL, S. B. RICHMAN, *Social Exclusion and the Desire to Reconnect*, «Social and Personality Psychology Compass», 5/11 (2011), pp. 919-932: 923.

⁴¹J. HAIDT, *The Moral Emotions*, in *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, ed. by R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, H. H. Goldsmith, Oxford University Press, New York 2003, pp. 852-870.

⁴²S. SCHNALL *et al.*, *Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgment*, «Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin», 34/8 (2008), pp. 1096-1109; C. A. HUTCHERSON, J. J. GROSS, *The Moral Emotions: A Social-Functional Account of Anger, Disgust, and Contempt*, «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 100/4 (2011), pp. 719-737.

ing the individual's commitment to moral norms.⁴³

In sum, social pain and the emotions structured around it play a fundamental role in regulating human social and moral life. By signalling threats to social bonds and motivating their repair, I argued that these processes sustain the cooperative relationships on which the development and maintenance of well-being and moral agency depend. This, in turn, will support the claim—developed in the next section—that human flourishing is not merely individual, but essentially interrelational.

5 FLOURISHING AS INTERRELATIONAL

The consequences for well-being and moral behaviour outlined in the previous section help to clarify the broader significance of social pain for human flourishing. They also support a more fundamental claim: flourishing is not merely individual, but centrally *interrelational*. This follows most clearly from the proposed parallel with physical pain. The need to avoid and remedy social exclusion—and thus secure inclusion—is not simply one factor among others, contributing to a good life. Rather, just as responding to the damage signalled by physical pain is a basic precondition for such a life, so too is the maintenance and restoration of social inclusion.

Even when flourishing is understood in terms of the development or realisation of an individual's rational and moral capacities,⁴⁴ it cannot be adequately characterised in purely individual terms. Social inclusion is not merely a favourable context for the exercise of virtue, nor simply one *external good* among others—such as those emphasised in Aristotelian accounts of flourishing, including friendship—without which flourishing is impeded.⁴⁵ Its role is more fundamental. Social exclusion gives rise to a particularly disruptive form of distress, which, like physical pain, can significantly impair agency, self-regulation, and the pursuit of long-term ends. For this reason, inclusion is best understood not just as an external condition for flourishing, but as a necessary safeguard against a painful experience that can directly undermine these capacities and, with them, the possibility of flourishing itself.

The argument, however, does not remain at the level of external conditions. The overlap also indicates that inclusion and belonging are *internally* connected to flourishing. The distress associated with exclusion is not an incidental feature of human life; it arises from the disruption of relational structures that are

⁴³J. P. TANGNEY, J. STUEWIG, D. J. MASHEK, *Moral Emotions and Moral Behavior*, «Annual Review of Psychology», 58/1 (2007), pp. 345-372.

⁴⁴X. SYMONS, T. VANDERWEELE, *Aristotelian Flourishing and Contemporary Philosophical Theories of Wellbeing*, «Journal of Happiness Studies», 25 (2024), p. 14.

⁴⁵*Ibidem*, pp. 2, 14.

partly constitutive of our affective and motivational architecture. Accordingly, the maintenance and repair of social bonds are not merely supportive of flourishing but are integral to the processes through which it is realised. The inter-relational dimension is therefore not peripheral, but belongs to the core of what flourishing consists in for beings like us.

This has important practical implications. If social pain is rooted in disruptions of social bonds, adequate responses to it cannot be confined to the individual level.⁴⁶ Coping strategies, therapeutic interventions, or pharmacological aids may attenuate distress, but they do not address its primary source. If social pain functions, as indicated by the overlap theory, as a shared alarm signalling damage at the level of social relations, then responding to it requires attention to the quality, stability, and inclusiveness of those relations themselves.

The broader emotional architecture discussed in the previous sections—including the role of moral emotions in regulating and repairing social bonds—reinforces this conclusion. These social and moral emotions and capacities—such as empathy, trust, gratitude, and guilt—should not be understood merely as facilitating desirable forms of interaction or enhancing an independently defined individual well-being. Rather, they play a constitutive role in sustaining the relational structures within which human agency, evaluation, and practical reasoning take place. These capacities help maintain and repair the bonds that make coordinated action and mutual recognition possible. In this respect, they are not external supports to flourishing but integral components of it, shaping both the relational conditions of well-being and the exercise of moral agency.

This perspective also clarifies the limits of approaches that seek to alleviate social pain solely through individual regulation or substitution. As noted earlier, such strategies, being provisional, may attenuate distress only in the short term. However, their limitation is not merely empirical but conceptual. If social pain signals disruption within the network of relations that partly constitutes the individual's evaluative standpoint, then responses that leave those relations unchanged fail to address the level at which the problem arises. The relief they provide is therefore necessarily incomplete. They may attenuate the experience of distress without addressing the underlying disruption in social relations that gives rise to it—thus failing to restore the relational conditions that underwrite agency and well-being.

Seen in this light, the affective overlap between physical and social pain reveals a structural feature of human flourishing itself. Just as alleviating physical pain requires addressing bodily damage rather than merely suppressing symptoms, alleviating social pain requires repairing damaged social bonds rather than

⁴⁶C. N. DEWALL *et al.*, *Belongingness as a Core Personality Trait*, cit., pp. 1297–1303.

merely modulating subjective states. The emotional architecture associated with social pain thus points beyond the individual, supporting a conception of flourishing as essentially linked to the integrity of relational contexts.

Finally, if social pain is not merely metaphorical but shares with physical pain its affective architecture, it also grounds a corresponding *normative* requirement. Just as there is a duty to avoid causing unnecessary physical pain, the overlap provides a basis for extending this obligation to the social domain. Such obligations may involve trade-offs: preventing harm does not always align with preserving one's own immediate comfort. In the case of physical pain, it is often reasonable to incur costs to alleviate another's suffering; if social pain is comparable in significance, parallel considerations apply. Promoting inclusion, repairing exclusion, and engaging in reconciliation may require emotional or practical burdens. Yet, all else being equal, the urgency of alleviating social pain should outweigh such costs. The distress caused by exclusion has far-reaching consequences for individuals' well-being and moral functioning, whereas temporary reductions in the intervener's positive affect do not carry comparable weight.

In sum, these considerations support a conception of the virtuous life that cannot be confined to individual satisfaction or self-cultivation. Rather, if the affective overlap between physical and social pain is taken seriously, promoting and maintaining social inclusion—and responding to both physical and social vulnerability—becomes central to sustaining the conditions of human flourishing.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for the significance of social pain in human flourishing. If the affective overlap between physical and social pain is taken seriously, social inclusion cannot be understood merely as one factor among others contributing to well-being. Rather, the maintenance and repair of social bonds emerge as structurally central conditions to the possibility of flourishing itself. In this sense, the unpleasantness of social pain does not simply mark a deficit but functions as a signal of disruptions in the relational conditions on which agency and well-being depend.

This supports a conception of flourishing as essentially interrelational. Social relations are not merely external supports to an independently defined good life, nor only sources of positive affect, but are central to the processes through which flourishing is realised. At the same time, because social pain shares the affective significance of physical pain, it also lends weight to the moral importance, for human flourishing, of avoiding unjust exclusion and responding to damaged social bonds.

This perspective also opens further lines of inquiry. It invites a more pre-

cise account of how the normative significance of social pain relates to other dimensions of well-being, and how disruptions of social bonds should be weighed within a broader conception of flourishing. It also calls for a deeper examination of the role of exclusion, particularly in cases where it appears to serve regulatory or normative functions, and of the extent to which such forms can be accommodated within such an account, without undermining the very conditions on which flourishing depends.

© 2026 Marco Meneghin & Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica



Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza [Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale](#).

[Testo completo della licenza](#)

