How can we understand suffering?
Point of view of a both clinical and phenomenological psychologist

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Abstract

Context: suffering is a living personal experience (it is such an inescapable fate) inherent to humankind (only human beings can think of suffering as self impacted pain: I am suffering, I know that I am suffering, I can feel it). At last, suffering is meaningless since it escapes every logic (why me ?) Suffering leaves us facing the mystery of reminiscence: something does exist but we don’t have a prior idea. How to seize this feel?

Method: We will try to outline a phenomenological description of suffering starting with some theories based on the drastic phenomenology of Michel Henry’s life. Some clinical examples will illustrate our statements.

The results: Far from being a suffocating experience, suffering challenges us so that we scrutinize our soul: the essence of life.

As a conclusion: In a clinical reflection of the meaning of suffering, you should not lean only on the word suffering or on the undergone or acted act. When we utter suffering we mean a human who is trying to endorse each lived experience. For the clinical psychologist the outcome is very relevant: His task is to help the suffering person free up the forces of his own transformation.

Keywords: understanding, phenomenology, psychologist, meaning, suffering, life.

1. Context

Humans, at the very end of their personal journey, are able to experience the universality of suffering. This journey is unique because it is based on an individual’s lived experience. Suffering, therefore, leads us to an intimate, personal experience (suffering happens to me personally); a form of recognition since it is specific to humans (only humans consider the problem of suffering from a self-affective position: I
suffer and I feel that I suffer); and, lastly, meaninglessness because it defies all logic (why me?). Thus, suffering confronts us with the mystery of reminiscence: something is there but we have no prior idea of it. This contribution aims to highlight what suffering reveals or manifests: it leads to a certain freedom of being, where the boundaries of the world no longer exist. From this perspective, suffering, far from being a suffocating experience, is an invitation to take a closer look at the self and develop what is already embedded within: the essence of life. This change implies a beneficial shift, an opening up to fate. Faced with the chaos of the world, suffering becomes the place where humans can find a meaningful sense of unity. To put it more clearly, suffering becomes a pedestal from which something continues afterwards and remains open to the future. Whatever is at work then unravels the individual’s relationship to the world and others: to tolerate, to endure, to never waver, beyond their unpleasantness, is to resist. It is a sign of courage, vigilance, human respect, and the ability to overcome the unknown. In short, a sign of virtue. It should be noted that the virtus (virtue) is derived from the word vir, meaning “man”. Virtue is thus essential for anyone who wants to be human. By adopting this logic, suffering questions not only what it means to be human but our perception of evil, the other, solidarity. In short, suffering examines all the great questions or ideas that define “humanness” or a certain interpretation of the human subject. This contribution is not limited to a phenomenological description of suffering, but rather seeks to look further, beyond comfort.

2. Methodology

2.1. Suffering: phenomenological aspect

Everything humans “live through” and that causes pain hinders possibilities, making them feel fear and despair. Being on Earth, faced with this worldly suffering, would be pointless. Thus, to endure suffering, people seek a foundation on which they can live or die, a personal truth. “And what if mankind had not drunk from the cup of wisdom but rather had fallen into it?” (Kierkegaard, 1849/1949, p. 16).

Let us look at the problem differently. Everyone agrees on the phenomenon itself and with an inevitability that is self-evident: as soon as a person is thrust into the world, they are destined to die. No one can escape this fate. What this canon expresses is the powerlessness to get rid of the suffering-human condition or even to grasp it verbally somehow: forced to hear that nothing can be done when faced with the death of a loved one can drive a person “crazy,” leading them to instruct their soul to continue without them. This statement aptly reflects the state of my own ego when I personally encountered such an event. Faced with the pain, no description or words are of any comfort, nor can they explain what happens within you when you feel it. In this case, words become a collection of incidental reactions, a social ritual for appearance’s sake. It is possible to hide behind words, but any natural and, therefore, legitimate effort that would seek to eradicate this pain becomes a further descent into despair and chaos: why them? Suffering is essentially a personal experience that happens to a person first-hand, and to no one else: Why? Why me? Why me specifically? In other words, nothing can compare with this “living feeling” of suffering. By asserting that, what may seem like a curious paradox appears: Suffering allows me to experience life. From this perspective, which has been discussed at great length by others (Gély, 2009; Henry, 2003), this Suffering is more original than day-to-day suffering: it is at the root of everything experienced, and it is its very condition. What does that mean in practice? While shedding tears for the departed, there
is a suffering that cannot be reduced to the hardship from loss: it is at the very origin of the dynamics of life, deeper than the content of life, even exceeding the self-affection that the subject makes of their power to live. At their very roots, suffering and enjoying life make people feel radically alive in each of their experiences. Simply put, that means that each lived experience, however painful it may be, becomes a part of them and makes them the human beings they are.

Thus, it is because people suffer that there is an eternal renewal of life. Hence, faced with the challenges of existence, they should not abandon themselves to resentment, passivity, and mourning: they must individually or collectively manage to turn their gaze, a gaze full of faithful remembrance, to this “self-revelation” that makes them love life and themselves. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. How many times do people think they have forgotten? Let us reflect on everything that a person believes they have lost as a result of considering everything behind us as gone forever. In fact, people refuse to forget so quickly and radically.

2.2. When the clinic gets involved: a clinical point of view

First, I would like to emphasize that there is no such thing as good or bad existence. It is through our relationship to the world and others that a certain pride and meaning to our life can be found. If most people complain about their existence or manage to endure the unbearable, it is because they believe they do not have the choice. However, suffering restores what is lived through with difficulty: the loss of meaning. Clinical practice can be the occasion to glimpse at what is hidden. Here are some examples:

- In a cross-cultural or metacultural clinical situation, when a subject from the island of Mayotte in a phase of acute anxiety starts talking about supernatural spirits drawn from their cultural references, in this case jinns, the interpretation may be based on a misunderstanding. Far from being a mental disorder, the subject – by alluding to their magico-religious beliefs – draws on a “supplement of being” to maintain their cosmic, social, and mental balance that has been disrupted by a calamity (Blanchy & al, 1993). In other words, this subject needs to make sense of a world whose exteriority they feel threatened by, and they do so by referring to their foundations, their ethos, their cosmogony, everything that is not disconnected from humanity, and without which they lose any sense of their own reality.

- Similarly, risky behavior in adolescents may indicate something other than an initiation rite or transgressive (even pathological) behavior (Pedinielli, 2005). Behind the pursuit of thrills and spills, there is a form of pleasure that goes beyond the human, to the limits of life and death. For the teenager who considers that risking their life makes sense, it is also to go beyond time. For those who are aware of their own mortality, it is to posit that there is something worth more than life that, in such a way, goes beyond mortality. This need for transcendence, even if it escapes scientific logic, demands to be recognized. The issue of meaning and the sacred are inseparable here. Sacred means that for which we can sacrifice ourselves (death and the sacred are closely intertwined).

- The act of suicide reminds us that we are on an equal footing in life, and that its negation requires a response, a responsibility that forces us to reformulate the suicide victim’s suffering beyond authoritative arguments. These arguments are generally based on a very ideological selection of knowledge and practices. The conclusions of the Council of the European Union on mental health and well-being, encourage
“where possible and relevant, community-based, socially inclusive treatment and care models” (European Commission, 2005). In this text, patients are referred to as “users of mental health services.” Mental suffering, then, becomes a “stigma” or “handicap” like any other, thus justifying social measures. Under the guise of compassion, this argument mainly becomes explanatory and functional: for example, a suicidal subject would not only be a vulnerable subject but also, according to studies on the psychological autopsy of suicide victims, be plagued by severe mental illness that must be identified and treated. However, this type of narrative ignores the mystery of irreducible suffering. To suffer is to face the vulnerability within us and to fall back on this vulnerability to continue living. In this respect, the idea of suicide can appear to be neither sheer chaos nor disorder: it may represent a last-ditch attempt to provide an ultimate material of combustion to suffering in the face of the fear of losing the very possibility of living. Therefore, suicide does not consist in conferring death on oneself but it can be a final response to death. Anyone who chooses to commit suicide, thus, refuses by the same token being mortal: they refuse the idea that death could come from outside them (Dastur, 1998).

Finally, we will briefly discuss criminal acts. Reference criteria aside, it can be hypothesized that the essence, or eidos, of this act may not be relegated to an attack on one’s life, or to a form of protest or denial. Killing can express a means of escaping from a world perceived as alien and terrifying, a desperate attempt to find life through contact with death: the killer is looking for a call, a received sign, a voice, an invocation, a “vocation” that would give them a place and a sense of being in a world from which they have been uprooted. Criminals are monsters because they are terribly human (Tribolet, 2004, p. 136). They are overwhelmed by their humanity since they speak to a person by referring them to their own view of themselves, possibly even to an obscure unquestioned part. This may be a premature assessment, as Hegel (1807/2007) said: “to see nothing in the murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality”.

3. Toward a criticism of a “ready-to-think”

I have not reduced these examples to the occurrence of a trigger event, a biochemical explanation of moods, or a brain circuit specialized in unpredictability and the instability of actions. But it is already sufficient to give a glimpse of their existential configuration with these questions I asked myself: where does the questioning come from that urges these subjects to ask to be heard? Do not all tangible actions offer humankind a hereafter, a hope? Rather than being a flaw, does crisis not provide human beings with a unique opportunity to be in touch with themselves insofar as possible? Lastly, can refuge be refused on the pretext that it represents a form of withdrawing or disengaging?

What I question is the dogmatic closedness, the violent rhetoric that seeks to control and standardize individual and collective behavior, silencing narrative speech, blocking the path of thought, proclaiming the end of the “I.” It is, therefore, in the...
Difference, in the narrative knowledge, where human experience is relayed each time the suffering subject, involved in the singularity of its own fate, can be seen.

4. Conclusion

In a political consideration on the very meaning of suffering, it is important not to rely solely on the word “suffering” or the act suffered or inflicted. The term suffering refers to a Person who is seeking to work on themselves, to accomplish a certain reflexive endeavor. This is where the responsibility begins, with this recognition and desire to accompany the person in this lengthy process undertaken in a realm of discomfort, far from usual schemas for fear of being overwhelmed by security-based ideologies or the “furor preventendi” (rage to prevent) that invade the psychosocial disciplines. It requires a holistic approach to suffering in which the spiritual or transcendental dimension is essential because, once again, there is no cure for the human condition. If each person remains in their field (emotional response, social life, prevention, etc.), there is a risk of dissolving the suffering subject, of preventing them from deciding how they will allow their experience of suffering to adhere to their own lived experience, i.e. how they will release the forces of its transformation from within their suffering. In order for this to be possible, two conditions must hold: 1) suffering cannot be reduced to simply something that is purely negative and 2) we must listen at the threshold of this eminently human experience. This listening must not be selective, it must be transported by words as one is transported by music. If it is to be constantly renewed, it requires a commitment and an ethic: to be able to be attentive to one another, to be concerned and changed. In other words, it requires the ability to emerge from a “speculative bubble” or from the dross that prevents people from listening right up to the end to what the other person has to say, regardless of whether or not what they say is rational. This experience is a way of trying to live with one another in a common spatiality and with mutual trust. It adds nothing to rational, human knowledge since it produces an existential direction that goes beyond all objective circumstances.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


