

**LIKE A FLY AGAINST A PANE OF GLASS: SIMONE WEIL  
IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF SUFFERING**

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**Abstract**

*The last five years have seen a welcome rise in philosophical research on suffering. In this paper I will introduce the main new proposals and point out their respective weaknesses. All accounts focus on an important aspect of suffering, but each one is too narrow. I will sketch an account of suffering as being forced to endure the unendurable, based on Simone Weil's writings. I will argue that not only does this account manage to encompass the important aspects of suffering emphasised by current research, but that it much more plausibly brings out the ethical dangers, such as seeking consolations in fabricated narratives of meaning, and the value of suffering, such as enabling the mind to make unfiltered contact with reality.*

**Keywords:** Simone Weil, Michael Brady, Emmanuel Levinas, suffering, affliction

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Affliction is a very central theme in Simone Weil's writings. She knew various forms of it first-hand. She suffered from bad migraines and was often not in good health, she experienced a share of the spiritual and personal oppression that factory workers were exposed to, and she had to endure being uprooted and pursued as a Jew during the second world war. She knew of the badness and the cruelty of suffering, yet she regarded it as a most valuable spiritual tool, a "marvel of divine technique" (Weil 2009, 81). Even though Weil doesn't suggest we should actively seek it for this purpose, she argues that affliction can help us, or rather force us, to decreate – to mirror God's renunciation of being everything by ceasing to be something, somebody, ourselves. Only in decreation, she argues, can we be receptive of God.

Weil put her thoughts down in essays and notebooks in the 30s and early 40s of the last century. Analytic philosophy, with the notable exception of Iris Murdoch, largely ignored her writings, and so it is perhaps not to be wondered at

that in recent discussions of suffering Weil's name is hardly mentioned. But while it may not be surprising, it is regrettable and ought to change. I will try to demonstrate where and how contemporary discussions of suffering within analytic moral philosophy would benefit from taking Weil's thoughts seriously.

In recent decades suffering has featured surprisingly little in analytic moral philosophy. It should be a central topic at least in consequentialist thought, hedonism, animal ethics, and philosophy of emotion, but apart from very few exceptions authors suppose that suffering is a familiar concept and not in need of explication. Recently, however, there has been at least one laudable exception, or, more hopefully, a new beginning. Between 2013 and 2016 Michael Brady led a large and interdisciplinary project about suffering at the University of Glasgow, in the wake of which new theories of suffering have been developed. In this paper I will have a closer look at some of them, i.e., at Brady's monograph *Suffering and Virtue* (2018), some contributions of his co-edited *The Philosophy of Suffering* (2020), and Jennifer Corns's recent article "Suffering as Disrupted Agency" (2022). My aim is fourfold: Against the background of Weil's thoughts on affliction I will (1) demonstrate that contemporary accounts of the nature of suffering pick out important aspects of suffering, but are too narrow, (2) sketch a Weilian account of suffering as a superior alternative, (3) show that Weil has a more profound understanding of the ethical dangers of suffering than contemporary accounts, as well as of (4) the major ethical value of suffering.

### 1. Contemporary accounts of suffering

In *Suffering and Virtue* (2018) Michael Brady offers an elaborate account of suffering and the ways in which it is connected with virtue. Given that suffering can be directed at both the body and states of affairs in the world, it is not clear what all episodes of suffering have in common. Brady believes he has found the unifying component in minding an unpleasant experience. Interestingly, Brady specifies both unpleasantness and minding something as states involving desires. Minding something is having the occurrent desire that a state one is in ceases to occur, while unpleasantness is a state in which one experiences a sensation that one desires not to be occurring. Put together, Brady arrives at this definition of suffering:

A subject suffers when and only when she has (i) an unpleasant experience consisting of a sensation S and a desire that S not be occurring, and (ii) an

occurrent desire that this unpleasant experience not be occurring. (Brady 2018, 55).

While Brady does well in uniting physical and mental suffering under a common definition, there are immediate questions one wants to raise. The first one might be whether there aren't too many desires on too many levels involved. Jennifer Corns (2022) for example doubts that infants, who we presumably would want to describe as being capable of suffering, are able to have desires directed at a desire directed at a sensation. Suffering on this account seems to involve two levels of meta-cognition: mental states directed at one's mental states that are again directed at one's mental states. Isn't this an overintellectualizing of suffering? Brady denies this, arguing that unpleasantness does not require one to have an occurrent desire directed at a sensation, hence suffering requires only one occurrent desire, namely the desire that something unpleasant will stop, which infants are capable of (Brady 2022).

Another doubt that Corns (2022) and Christian Miller (2021) express, concerns mild experiences of unpleasantness that one would rather not have. Do we want to call a mild but persistent itch that is slightly irritating an instance of suffering? Brady explains why not all such experiences must be classified as instances of suffering on his account. Wanting an itch to stop often involves only one, rather than the required two desires. An itch is a sensation we'd like to end, but that does not mean we're suffering (Brady 2021, 613).

A further question one might want to raise regards the intentionality of suffering, the direction of one's attention. It seems that Brady misdescribes the central focus of what he himself calls mental suffering. If suffering is, essentially, minding an unpleasantness, then we are very much focussed on a sensation we doubly desire to cease. But if we think of grieving people, as Anti Kauppinen (2020) points out, this seems the wrong description. Their minds tend to centre on the world, not their experiences. Their minds are preoccupied with the fact that a beloved person is no more, with all that they miss about that person, with questions of how they may ever cope without them.

Brady might reply that the focus needs by no means to lie on the unpleasantness itself – as indeed, in many of his examples of mental suffering it does not. One of his prime examples is of suffering remorse. What is morally valuable about remorse is its epistemic usefulness in revealing to us that we have wronged others, as well as the fact that it reliably motivates us to make reparations (Brady

2018, 77). And yet, and I think Brady must bite this bullet, what qualifies experiences of remorse as experiences of suffering is the fact that they involve an unpleasantness we desire to cease. I think Kauppinen is right to take issue with this.

Kauppinen himself defines suffering thus: "To suffer is to affectively construe one's situation as negative in a pervasive enough fashion, and thus to experience felt aversion or attitudinal displeasure towards it" (Kauppinen 2018, 32). The immediate advantage over Brady's definition is the world-directedness of suffering, combined with a retention of unpleasantness as a central feature. Furthermore, Kauppinen adds a certain overall mental affectedness which seems to be missing from Brady's account. The negative construal of our situation happens in a "pervasive enough" fashion. This seems an important observation: suffering, if it can be classed as a particular mental state or process, is not one amongst many. It is one that tends to affect other states – the greater the suffering, the greater and more intense its influence on other mental states.

Tom McClelland and Jennifer Corns take up this aspect of mental pervasiveness in their accounts of suffering and make it quite central: McClelland describes suffering as "a disruption of one's conscious mental life by a suffered mental state such that (a) the disruption is holistically unpleasant and (b) its unpleasantness meets a suitable threshold of severity" (McClelland 2018, 42). His core thought is that suffering consists in what he calls the digestion of a mental state, a mental state that is very hard to integrate into the default setting of your mind at the time – your beliefs about yourself and your place in the world, your evaluations, your emotional dispositions, your plans and intentions. Suffering is over, according to McClelland, when the disruptive mental state, e.g. the belief that a person you love is gone, is integrated in such a way that your mind is no longer disturbed. Given there are mental disruptions of a mild or positive nature, such as, say, an irritating smell that makes it hard for you to focus on anything else, or the sudden belief that you're expecting a child after having lost hope that this would happen, McClelland adds the condition of severe unpleasantness. Jennifer Corns focusses on a different kind of disruption in her account of suffering, which she describes as "significantly disrupted agency" (2022). In her view it is not that we have to get used to some severely unpleasant mental state that causes havoc in our mind, but rather that our agency is impaired in a major way. When we suffer, we find we cannot do the things we usually do, stick to the plans we had made, carry out intentions. One interesting consequence of Corns's account is that

experiential and non-experiential suffering is of the same mould: when something significantly disrupts my agency, even though I might not be much aware of this – perhaps because I'm too young, perhaps because the change comes on very gradually – I can still be said to suffer, and much in the same way as I suffer when I am aware of the disruption and experience many of the negative affects that typically accompany it.

It is striking how diverse these accounts of suffering are. Given they were all written within a short time of one another, by people who had been discussing the topic with each other, the diversity must be wondered at. Desiring an unpleasantness to cease, seeing the world negatively, experiencing mental chaos, being unable to act – there's hardly a unifying feature between them. It seems that they all put their finger on something, while nobody draws a complete picture. Brady might find answers to questions concerning the presence of two desires in suffering, and to his account's seeming applicability to experiences that are not generally thought of as suffering; but the underlying problem remains: he posits as central features states that do not figure prominently, if at all, in standard experiences of suffering. A description of someone's condition in the days and weeks after he received the news that he is suffering from a terminal illness cannot be accurate if it centres around wanting to be rid of an unpleasantness. Not only is such a description incomplete, it seems to be off the mark. It seems to focus on a side issue, rather than what is crucially at stake. I take it that the other descriptions come closer to what is crucially at stake, but none of them hits it on the head. It is true that we construe the world negatively in light of an event, but is that not a symptom of suffering, rather than its essence? We do not enjoy food the way we used to, we are not entertained by our favourite TV show, we cannot laugh about witticisms like we used to. The world has a darker shade, but how come? What has happened? What is the underlying condition? These questions remained unanswered. They also remain unanswered by the disruption theories. They, as well, seemingly focus on symptoms rather than the essence. It is true that we plan, intend and act in a much more limited way than we did before we suffered, if at all; and it is true that our mind is often plunged into chaos on the reception of awful news or the beginning of a period of serious physical harm. But what sort of chaos is it: what is it that keeps us from thinking, feeling and acting like we used to? I take it that a good account of suffering must give answers to these questions. In

the next section I will demonstrate that many of these answers can be found in Weil's writings.

## **2. A Weilian account of suffering**

Suffering and affliction are central in Weil's thinking. My aim is to show that Weil's treatment of them not only encompasses the aspects we encountered in the contemporary accounts, but it gives them a rootedness in a common phenomenon: that of violence against, and the possible destruction of one's personality, of being forced to endure something one cannot endure.

Weil is most interested in affliction, a kind of extreme suffering that is destructive of our personality. Occasionally it sounds as though affliction is something different from suffering altogether, but I think Weil means to say that both are on the same spectrum, with affliction being located at the far end:

In the realm of suffering, affliction is something apart, specific, and irreducible. (Weil 2009, 67)

There is both continuity and the separation of a definite point of entry, as with the temperature at which water boils, between affliction and all the sorrow that, even though they may be very violent, very deep and very lasting, are not affliction in the strict sense. There is a limit. On the far side of it we have affliction but not on the near side. (Weil 2009, 68-69)

Affliction is the extreme form of suffering and that which suffering potentially leads to, just as water being heated leads to the boiling point. Just as water can be taken off the hob or may only warm up a little in the sunshine, things may occur to prevent suffering from cumulating in affliction. Yet warm water shares essential characteristics with boiling water; and, similarly, suffering shares essential characteristics with affliction. A description of the nature of suffering will be enriched by examining the extreme form it can take.

Weil's descriptions of affliction centre around powerful impacts, experiences of violence and force, an inability to escape, and social degradation:

Affliction is a device for pulverising the soul, the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog-wheel. (Weil 2005, 90)

"When we hit a nail with a hammer, the whole of the shock received by the large head of the nail passes into the point without any of it being lost, although it is only a point. If the hammer and the head of the nail were infinitely big it would

be just the same. The point of the nail would transmit infinite shock at the point to which it was applied.

Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of the soul, and social degradation, all at the same time, is a nail whose point is applied at the very center of the soul, whose head is all necessity spreading throughout space and time." (Weil 2009, 80-81)

Let us note first that extreme affliction is said to encompass "physical pain" and "distress of the soul", two aspects we find in the contemporary accounts under the names of unpleasantness and mental disruption. Both receive further characterization here:

Even in the case of the absence or death of someone we love, the irreducible part of sorrow is akin to physical pain, a difficulty in breathing, a constriction of the heart, an unsatisfied need, hunger, or the almost biological disorder caused by the brutal liberation of some energy, hitherto directed by an attachment and now left without a guide. (Weil 2009, 67)

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack of immediate apprehension of physical pain. If there is complete absence of physical pain there is no affliction for the soul, because our thought can turn to any object. (Weil 2009, 68)

I interpret Weil as saying that suffering always manifests in certain bodily changes associated with pain, the registration of which features somewhere in consciousness. Somewhere we feel a physical yearning, a deprivation, a heartache. She seems to suggest that in suffering our consciousness is held hostage by these pains: it is they that ensure that our mind stays fixed on the evil we are experiencing, as in the example of the loving energy heretofore directed upon a person that is now, in its sudden aimlessness, a source of torment. I find it important to stress, however, that Weil's physical pain need not be at the centre of our consciousness. It does not need to be experienced *as* painful, it need not form the content of a mental state. It suffices, I take it, that our consciousness is constrained, modified, configured by our pain. Emmanuel Levinas congenially points out that "suffering is at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself" (Levinas 1988, 156). Often, we are aware of that which disturbs order, but the disturbance alone – either in form of a mental omnipresence of the evil experienced or in form of a profound mental disruption – suffices to manifest suffering. Suffering, according to Weil, consists then in some physical manifestation of pain that ensures that our mind keeps coming back to the evil that has happened to one,

such that all other thoughts and objections of attention remain fleeting at best. But the "distress of the soul" is still broader than physical pains constricting our consciousness. When talking about affliction, Weil's vocabulary is stark: "Suffering is violence" (Weil 2005, 262), suffering is "brutal", a "destruction" similar to death, an "uprooting of life". How far removed this is from an "unpleasantness that we mind". Let us try to get a clearer idea of the violence and destruction involved. What does Weil mean when she says affliction "deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things" (Weil 2009, 73)?

I take it that what she means here contains a stronger form of Corns's idea of suffering as disrupted agency, combined with a decrease in or ultimate absence of preferences and enjoyments of any kind, and an ultimate reduction of one's social standing. What is it that makes up our personality? It is the historically, biographically grown assortment of likes and aversions, meaningful narratives, drawn up hopes and plans for the future. Extreme suffering or affliction takes them from us – not symptomatically, but essentially. Suffering is the force that destroys the coherence of narratives, that makes enjoyments flat and crushes plans. It turns us into things. Others see us as things, in the best kind of scenario. A worse, but very common, scenario has others not see us at all when we suffer. Weil describes this as perfectly natural – so much so that the compassion that enables us to see another's suffering is "supernatural" (Weil 2009, 90). Seeing another's suffering

means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.' (Weil 2005, 90)

Saying this to ourselves is almost impossible. I will come back to this in section three.

One might object at this point that Weil offers an insightful description of affliction, but surely more ordinary suffering has nothing to do with such violence or the destruction of personality. Our friend with chronic back pain, our uncle with an incurable hearing problem, our nephew who is distraught because he's failed the entry exams to the university of his dreams – we want to say they suffer, but surely their personalities are intact, surely they're not reduced to things? Is



boiling water essentially different from hot water after all? I think not. It is very difficult to pin down a precise description of the nature of suffering, especially when one wants to avoid offering an account that, in order to achieve precision, settles on one neatly describable aspect – an aspect which really is only one of many. Weil ably describes the end point, the culmination, the far end of suffering. Often, we speak of people who, after for example the loss of a loved one, don't rally again, as "broken". They cannot return to being at least similar to their former selves, and sometimes remain so dejected that they are unable to enjoy food, music, social relations, to take interest in others, themselves and their future. I take it that it is such metaphorical brokenness that Weil refers to when she speaks just as metaphorically about destroyed personalities. If this is the end point of the spectrum, how does this end point relate to a point much closer to a well-balanced middle point?

I think a closer look at Levinas's thoughts on suffering can help to get clearer here. Levinas, though "notoriously, a severe critic of Simone Weil" (Reed 2013, 25), offers a description which seems capable of connecting the less extreme forms of suffering to the extreme ones, of finding a core phenomenon:

For the Kantian 'I think' – which is capable of reuniting and embracing the most heterogenous and disparate givens into order and meaning under its a priori forms – it is as if suffering were not only a given refractory to synthesis, but a way in which the refusal opposed to the assembling of givens into a meaningful whole is opposed to it: suffering is at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself ... Taken as an 'experienced' content, the denial and refusal of meaning which is imposed as a sensible quality is the way in which the unbearable is precisely not borne by consciousness, the way this not-being-borne is, paradoxically, itself a sensation or a given. (Levinas 1988, 156)

Levinas speaks of suffering as both a modifier of consciousness and a possible content of consciousness. As a modifier, suffering refuses to assemble "givens into a meaningful whole" – conscious impressions, sensations, thoughts, which heretofore might have easily found their place in a meaningful whole, do so no longer. The sorting has stopped, things don't make sense anymore. McClelland's descriptions of a mental state that disrupts, that needs to be digested, come to mind here. Something has happened to prevent such a digestion. There is disorder or dejection, things are as they shouldn't be and no narrative comes to hand that may weave the individual components into a neat and comprehensible whole. Weil puts it thus:

God . . . plants [suffering] in the soul as something irreducible, a foreign body, impossible to digest, and constrains one to think of it. The thought of suffering is not of a discursive kind. The mind comes slap up against physical suffering, affliction, like a fly against a pane of glass, without being able to make the slightest progress or discover anything new, and yet unable to prevent itself from returning to the attack. (Weil 1956, 483–84)

Something is forced upon us from which we cannot escape, but which we also cannot endure. This is the core of suffering. The directions which such forced endurances of the unendurable can take can easily be made out: the unendurable may become endurable, as when our nephew begins to see that there are valuable paths in life other than obtaining a degree from his dream university; or we refuse to endure the unendurable by denying its existence, as when our uncle insists that the problem is not his failing health, but that no one speaks loud enough; or the unendurable ultimately leads to a personal breakage, as when our friend's back pain ultimately takes from her the ability to enjoy, to seek company, to take interest.

Is there a particular group of events, facts, thoughts that tend to make up the unendurable? I am not sure. Weil says that the "degree and type of suffering which constitutes affliction in the strict sense of the word varies greatly with different people" (Weil 2005, 90). The same presumably holds for the events, facts, thoughts that prompt and make up less extreme suffering. Weil mentions sudden releases of energy that were hitherto bound by attachments which, because their recipient is suddenly no longer, now roam wild in a very painful manner. We can furthermore think of facts, such as the fact that one won't live longer than a certain short period of time, and thoughts about the impossibility of realising images of a future self that go with it. In Eric Cassell's words, a central element of suffering are "threats to the intactness of person" (Cassell 1994, 33). I think Weil can agree with this, if we make the proviso that the threats themselves make a start at undermining the intactness of the person. As mentioned above, these threats can be averted, diverted, or the threatened state can come to pass. And the intactness of the person we are or take ourselves to be, of our personality, our biographical self-understanding and evaluative outlook, can be threatened by all sorts of things: from the termination of life, to the termination of our dearest life plan and the loss our central capabilities and life partners.

Recall the questions at the end of section one: why are Brady's answers to why itches tend not to constitute suffering, and how it is that animals and infants are capable of suffering, unsatisfactory? Why is it we construe things negatively,

what lies at the bottom of our mental disturbance, why is it that our agency is disrupted in suffering? We can now give the right answers: being forced to endure what we cannot endure has destructive tendencies, threatens the intactness of our person. Itches usually don't do that. Children and animals can be befallen by the unendurable just as much as anyone else. We construe things negatively because our meaning-making faculty is broken. We are disrupted because the unendurable takes up the mental space of, and silences, the trains of thought, perception and evaluation that hitherto formed our usual mental proceedings.

### **3. The ethical dangers of suffering**

On the Weilan account of suffering just sketched the danger of suffering is apparent enough: it can lead to the destruction of our personality, it can ultimately break us. The ethical dangers of suffering, however, are present long before we've reached our breakage point. Here I want to focus on three: the tendency to distort the truth, the tendency to pass our suffering on to others, and the social invisibility of the sufferer.

Above I mentioned three directions suffering can take: we can aim at, or time will help with, making the unendurable endurable; we can bring about, consciously or unconsciously, a denial of its reality; or we live with its reality, which may lead to a breaking point. A central danger that we must arm ourselves against, according to Weil, is the second of these directions: the denial of the reality of the unendurable. This denial may be a flat denial of the factuality of the cause of our suffering, but usually it is more artful. It usually consists in the attempt to read meaning into suffering, even though, according to Weil, "Suffering has no significance. There lies the very essence of its reality." (Weil 1956, 484). We weave narratives that feature our suffering as turning points, as challenges, as character tests, but: "Unconsoled affliction is necessary. There must be no consolation" (Weil 2002, 12). Consolations in the mentioned narratives distort our vision. They soothe our suffering, and by doing this they smooth over what Weil calls the void, the darkness, the vacuum of meaning that suffering can be. It is incredibly hard to remain truthful when afflicted, but this is exactly what we must try. Murdoch, taking up Weil's thoughts here, writes that instead of succumbing to false consolations, "we must hold on to what has really happened and not cover it with imagining how we are to unhappen it. Void makes loss a reality. Do not think

about righting the balance, but live close to the painful reality and try to relate it to what is good" (Murdoch 1992, 503). We must not leave reality and enter into comfortable fantasies about things being not as bad as they seem, or being so bad for a particularly good reason. Things are often unbearably bad and for no good reason at all. We must try to confront this.

We need not go as far as saying that there must be no consolation whatsoever – even Weil adds that there must only be no "apparent consolation. Ineffable consolation then comes down" (Weil 2002, 12). What this ineffable consolation is will become apparent in the last section. We find other, more immediate consolations permitted in Murdoch's thoughts. When she talks about relating the painful reality to what is good, I think she refers to true consolations rooted in reality. As an example of such true consolations, which presumably tend to be much weaker than false ones, take Elinor Dashwood from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. After learning that her beloved Edward has been engaged for years to the undeserving Lucy, she seeks consolations where there really are some:

I have many things to support me. I am not conscious of having provoked the disappointment by any imprudence of my own, and I have borne it as much as possible without spreading it farther. – I acquit Edward of all essential misconduct. I wish him very happy; and I am so sure of his always doing his duty, that though now he may harbour some regret, in the end he must become so. (Austen 1995, 222)

We can see that Elinor's consolations are, in comparison to her broken heart, not strong. But they are real. By dwelling on them, as well as seeking the companionship of her loving mother and sisters and generally exerting herself, she is to some extent consoled. She knows that she must leave the rest to time. Brady and his commentators do not see the danger of fleeing from reality. On the contrary, it occasionally almost seems like they recommend it. Brady writes

putting a positive spin on one's suffering tends (in the right circumstances) to make one happier and better adjusted. As McAdams puts it 'numerous studies have shown that developing positive meanings from negative events is associated with indicators of life satisfaction and emotional well-being'. Now one way in which a positive meaning can be developed from a negative event is precisely by describing the event in virtue-theoretic terms: as an opportunity to develop and express virtues of strength, or virtues of vulnerability. A virtue-theoretical perspective thus constitutes another form of meaning-making available to those who suffer, and who – as Nietzsche noted – often desperately seek a meaning for or a point to their

suffering, in order to make it bearable. (Brady 2018, 137, McAdams quote from McAdams 2008, 254)

Brady puts this in perspective by commenting that there is, indeed, a danger of submitting to the "tyranny of positive thinking" (Brady 2018, 136) when for example we are criticised for expressing anger against the cancer for causing us to go through chemo therapy with all its side effects. Negative emotions directed at bad objects are appropriate, hence advising against them is a recommendation of vice. Furthermore, Brady adds, while it may be true that asking sufferers to be brave, to fight, to be resilient, could be felt as an additional burden by the sufferer, the encouragement to develop virtues of vulnerability, to learn "how to cope and adapt and adjust to their suffering, by re-evaluating priorities and reassessing goals" is often truly helpful in making the cause of one's suffering "less disruptive, less intrusive, and as a result less burdensome" (Brady 2018, 138).

I think Weil would respond to these thoughts by pointing out that, indeed, "putting a positive spin" on our suffering makes us happier, but it is only possible when our suffering is not severe, and anyway, looking for meaning where the essential features of the experience are meaninglessness and insignificance is very likely misleading, and hence ought not to be encouraged. It is empirically true that tales of purpose and growth can console us, but ethically speaking, truthfulness is more important than mental ease.

There are two further ethical dangers that seem not to get a mention in recent writings, dangers that Weil deems very great. The first is one that she includes in her list of the major components of suffering. As quoted above, she speaks of extreme affliction as "physical pain, distress of the soul, and *social degradation*" (italics mine). This degradation is not, on Weil's view, merely the result of an ethical error on the part of the sufferer's fellow creatures – it is a psychological necessity. This is because it is impossible for the sufferer to articulate, to communicate what he or she is going through to their fellow creatures, and because it is psychologically impossible for the fellow creatures to bear really looking at what the sufferer goes through.

Affliction is by its nature inarticulate. The afflicted silently beseech to be given the words to express themselves. There are times when they are given none; but there are also times when they are given words, but ill-chosen ones, because those who choose them know nothing of the affliction they would interpret. (Weil 2005, 85)

Thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death. A stag advancing voluntarily step by step to offer itself to the teeth of a pack of hounds is about as probable as an act of attention directed towards real affliction, which is close at hand, on the part of a mind which is free to avoid it. (Weil 2005, 85)

Extreme suffering is incommunicable and almost psychologically impossible to be borne by others. Compassion takes a saint, someone like the Good Samaritan – it is "supernatural" (Weil 2009, 90). Once more Weil's words sound harsh, but they are trying to do justice to the reality of affliction. And we, onlookers, bystanders, relations, benefit from realising this because it will prevent us from offering cheap consolations, from comparing the experiences of the sufferer to things we have gone through in the past, from quickly and comfortably thinking that we understand and have done all we could. And, of course, it does not acquit us from trying to support the sufferer. It merely gives us a realistic estimate of the immense difficulty of the task.

Finally, Weil warns us of the danger of passing on our suffering to others; a warning which contemporary writers seem not to be aware of.

I must not forget that at certain times when my headaches were raging, I had an intense longing to make another human being suffer by hitting him in exactly the same part of his forehead. Analogous desires – very frequent in human beings. (Weil 2002, 2-3)

Whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering (either by ill-treating someone or calling forth their pity) in order to reduce it, and he does really reduce it in this way. In the case of a man in the uttermost depths, whom no one pities, who is without power to ill-treat anyone (if he has no child or being who loves him), the suffering remains within and poisons him. (Weil 2002, 5)

Weil shows understanding for those who try to pass on their suffering – it's very frequent, it helps to reduce the suffering and those who don't do it are poisoned by their suffering. Nevertheless, it is of course wrong. Weil urges herself to detach herself from pains and passions in order to "[p]revent them from having access to things. The search for equilibrium is bad because it is imaginary. Revenge. Even if in fact we kill or torture our enemy it is, in a sense, imaginary" (Weil 2002, 7). Giving others a share of our suffering seems to smooth the edges of our despair, but this relief is imaginary. It is imaginary in the same way that other passings-on are, namely in that the sufferer's experience of having righted a balance is never truthful. There is no balance to right, no equilibrium to achieve.

My suffering will not be counterbalanced by the suffering of another; it cannot be. We can explain this by reference to the nature of suffering as outlined above: if suffering is being forced to endure something unendurable – how can possibly causing someone else to endure something unendurable right anything? It may make it seem to me that I can now bear the unendurable somewhat better, and this seeming may have a soothing influence. But the unendurable is untouched by this. When I return to seeing things as they are, I will see that the soothing was based on a false belief, or a false image. I suffer as I did before, if not more, because added to my existing burden is now the guilt of having pointlessly caused another to suffer.

#### 4. The ethical value of suffering

In defence of Brady and other contemporary writers it should be noted that their works are the result of a research project entitled "The Value of Suffering", making it perhaps understandable that the ethical dangers of suffering are to some extent overlooked. I want to introduce the main values that are discussed by them and demonstrate that it is a mistake that they do not engage with what Weil deems the central value of suffering: its potential for decreation.

Brady (2018) argues that suffering is instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. It is instrumentally valuable because it enables the habituation of virtues of strength and vulnerability, such as fortitude, courage, endurance, as well as humility and openness towards others. This, I take it, is fairly uncontroversial, if we add the proviso that we must not weave these virtues into falsely consolatory narratives about it being the purpose of our suffering to make us stronger, and if we don't claim that the habituation of these virtues are commonly, or naturally, the result of suffering. Perhaps we should more cautiously say that suffering can be an occasion for the habituation of these values, but as it increases in severity, the less likely this is. And we must avoid at all costs a kind of expectation from sufferers, an expectation that they cultivate strength and humility. Such expectations are neither empirically warranted, nor morally innocent.

Suffering is intrinsically valuable, according to Brady, because "forms of suffering are, in the right circumstances, *appropriate responses* to important objects and events, where appropriateness is cashed out in terms of responses that enable us to best cope with those objects and events" (Brady 2018, 13). Suffering

is intrinsically valuable because it is, in the right circumstances, an appropriate response to what is happening. Brady uses guilt and remorse as examples here. Both can be instances of suffering, and both are appropriate if they are reactions to my having wronged someone, or having done something wrong generally. Both are virtuous, because they are dispositions to respond appropriately to a particular kind of situation which come with motivating powers that steer us in the right direction: guilt motivates me to try to make reparations, remorse to change my ways for the better.

I think we should be careful not to bring negative emotions and suffering too closely together. To be fair, on Brady's definition of suffering as an unpleasantness that we mind, perhaps most negative emotions do qualify as suffering, but on the Weilian definition they very often do not. Guilt and remorse become suffering when they become unendurable, when my mind cannot help returning to them and I am, in consequence, in some kind of mental disarray. It is harder for me to make sense of things – recall Levinas's description of suffering as the opposite of the Kantian "I think". We can no longer bring the manifold together in a meaningful way, the contrary is true. If this is on the right track, then we cannot talk of suffering as a response, even less as an appropriate one. Suffering is not a response, it is a condition that a negative emotion might throw me into. Furthermore, suffering does not motivate me, does not steer me towards appropriate actions – again, it is rather the contrary. Motivation we may usually have is now in doubt. In Murdoch's novel *The Good Apprentice*, Edward suffers due to his guilt of having been instrumental in his friend's death: "He found it difficult, indeed pointless, to get up in the morning; curled up, hiding his head, he lay in bed till noon. There was nobody he wanted to see and nothing he wanted to do except sleep and, when this was impossible, read thrillers" (Murdoch 2000, 10-11). I think we recognise Edward's listlessness as typical of a sufferer. It is due to the inability to find meaning, appeal, and value, which is central to suffering, that we tend to be unmotivated to do even the most basic tasks and activities. Perhaps less extreme suffering can allow for guilt to motivate us, but then this motivation will be there despite the suffering, not part of it.

McClelland, who sees the starting point of suffering in a severe mental disruption, correspondingly sees the end point of suffering in a regained mental equilibrium. Interestingly, and I think mistakenly, he seems to think that suffering itself is the process of bringing about this equilibrium, the digestion of the mental



state that caused the disruption to begin with. He thus ascribes a job to be done to the sufferer, suffering is active. And, he argues, as with any action or activity, there are ways of doing it better or worse, of performing in a skilled or unskilled manner.

The skilled sufferer follows the right urges, in the right way, at the right time. She navigates the landscape of urges in a way that brings her toward mental equilibrium as efficiently as possible (McClelland 2020, 50).

Echoing Brady, this reads like there is a way in which suffering itself is a virtue, if we do it right. But this way of talking of skilled suffering is very wide of the mark, possibly even tasteless. Suffering is typically not motivating, but the condition of being forced to endure something unendurable. We can perhaps talk about better and worse ways of dealing with this condition, but ways of dealing with suffering are not themselves instances of suffering. They are reactions to suffering. If we have managed to regain the mental equilibrium that McClelland talks about, then this is not the result of "skilled suffering", but of factors external to suffering – the soothing nature of time, the edifying effect of friendship, the resilience of fortitude, and often psychological luck.

Weil finds the value of suffering in the destruction of our personality. Just as her language strikes us as brutal when she talks about the nature of suffering, it sounds extreme when she talks about its value: "Affliction is a marvel of divine technique." (Weil 2009, 81). What can she mean? We need to read her in the context of her religious meditations. Weil believes that God, who was everything, in the act of creation gave up being everything so we could be something. If we stop being something, God can again be everything – this, Weil believes, is what we must aim at. "In a sense God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. This is our only good" (2002, 33). Affliction is a "marvel of divine technique", because it affords decreation, our ceasing to be something. By ceasing to be something Weil does not mean death, but being in a state of mind that is, as Murdoch puts it, "alert but emptied of self" (1992, 245). It's a state in which our personality, our needs and wants, our ego have no access to our mind. For Weil, this act of mirroring God's renunciation of being everything enables us to be maximally patient, open and receptive for God and reality. Affliction decreates us in a much more efficient way than any form of regular mediation ever can – and in a much more brutal way. It must not be sought for this purpose. "I should not love affliction because it is useful. I should love it because it is" (Weil 2002,

80). When we happen to be afflicted, if we manage to endure the void and resist filling it with false consolations, and if on top of this we manage to keep loving without an object, we are as receptive of God as it is possible for us to be.

Murdoch describes the benefit of decreation, or what she calls unselfing, as involving "respect, because it is an exercise in cleansing the mind of selfish preoccupation, because it is an experience of what truth is *like*" (1992, 245). Unselfing due to suffering is greeted by her in a much more cautious, less enthusiastic way than by Weil. What is enabled is not a reunion with God, but a confrontation with reality – unsoftened and painful. But given that for Murdoch, just as for Weil, the most important virtue we can habituate is loving attention, i.e. an undistorted, patient, loving gaze at what really is the case, a state of unselfing, however arrived at, will be instrumentally valuable.

But is a characterisation of suffering as essentially being unable to find meaning and as being valuable in bringing us in contact with reality not contradictory? I take it that it isn't, neither in Weil's writings nor in Murdoch's secular interpretation. What is difficult to process is not this tension between intrinsic meaninglessness and instrumental value, but the thought that, morally speaking, attending to reality is more important than the easing of pain. And this is what both Weil and Murdoch are committed to.

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