

Introduction. The Place of Suffering in Ricœur's Thought

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Abstract

In Paul Ricœur's thought, suffering is primarily addressed from an existential and phenomenological perspective, as illustrated in the text of the lecture "Suffering is not Pain," delivered to an audience of psychiatrists. In this thematic issue, we present the very first English translation of this text. The contributions of the various authors explore Ricœur's definition of suffering as well as the dialogue he establishes between the philosophical and clinical approaches. By tracing the genealogy of suffering in Ricœur's systematic work, this introduction highlights the conceptual shifts resulting from methodological changes, notably the transition from eidetic phenomenology to a hermeneutic phenomenology with ontological implications, along with the plurality of his motivations and interests (psychoanalytic, theological). Suffering, as the negativity of existence, while exposed to the risk of a solipsistic affect, nonetheless unfolds a unique semiology, in an openness to the other, which Ricœur inquires in "Suffering is not Pain."

Keywords: suffering; pain; phenomenology; semiology; existentialism

Résumé

Dans la pensée de Paul Ricœur, la souffrance est principalement abordée sous son aspect existentiel et phénoménologique, comme l'illustre le texte de la conférence « La souffrance n'est pas la douleur », présentée devant un public de psychiatres. Dans ce numéro thématique, nous proposons la toute première traduction anglaise de ce texte. Les contributions des différents auteurs examinent la définition de la souffrance chez Ricœur ainsi que le dialogue qu'il établit entre l'approche philosophique et l'approche clinique. En retraçant la généalogie de la souffrance dans l'œuvre systématique de Ricœur, cette introduction met en lumière les inflexions conceptuelles issues des changements méthodologiques, marqués notamment par une transition de la phénoménologie eidétique à une phénoménologie herméneutique aux implications ontologiques, ainsi que la pluralité de ses motivations et intérêts (psychanalytiques, théologiques). La souffrance, négativité de l'existence, bien qu'exposée au risque d'un affect solipsiste, déploie une sémiologie propre, dans une ouverture à l'autre, que Ricœur explore dans « La souffrance n'est pas la douleur ».

Mots-clés : souffrance ; douleur ; phénoménologie ; sémiologie ; existentialisme

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In Ricœur's thought, suffering is primarily addressed from an existential and phenomenological perspective, as illustrated in the publication "Suffering is Not Pain."¹ This is the text of a conference in which Ricœur confronts the phenomenological-existential perspective of suffering with the medical approach of psychiatry.

In this thematic issue, we present the very first English translation of this text. The contributions collected here focused on Ricœur's delineation of suffering, the main topic of "Suffering is Not Pain," and the dialogue, established by Ricœur, between the philosophical and the clinical approaches.

Ricœur's delineation of suffering finds its roots in the very development of its philosophical and systematic work. His first approach to the theme of suffering was the period of his thought between his eidetic philosophy and his philosophical anthropology, between 1950 and 1960. During this decade, his thought underwent a methodological shift. Ricœur's eidetic philosophy was prominently featured in his work *Freedom and Nature*.² In this book, there is the constitution of the method of an eidetic phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary: "pure description and pure understanding of the Voluntary and the Involuntary are constituted by bracketing the fault which profoundly alters man's intelligibility and by bracketing the Transcendence which hides within it the ultimate origin of subjectivity."³ To Ricœur, these methodological parameters leave aside all transcendence, that is, all kinds of reality faced by the human being, the sacred and the factual, and plunge us into the existential sphere. Ricœur's phenomenological description in *Freedom and Nature* is structured in three parts, each of which emphasizes the place of the involuntary: a first part devoted to decision and motivation, a second part devoted to the movement and spontaneity of the body, and a third part devoted to consent. Suffering is treated here mainly in the first and third parts. In the first part, the subject of suffering is explored in the context of the relation between human will and pain. Regarding the decision, what is more important is above all the fear of suffering than the suffering itself: "It is the fear of suffering rather than suffering undergone which is the motive I have to integrate, reject, or accept.

¹ Paul Ricœur, "La souffrance n'est pas la douleur," *Psychiatrie française*, vol. 23 (1992), 9–18. The French version of the conference, with an introduction by Samuel Lelièvre, is published here: <https://bibnum.explore.psl.eu/s/psl/ark:/18469/3tcmb>

² Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 280.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Suffering which becomes accepted and sometimes willed adds its testimony to that which sacrificed need renders to the glory of human willing."⁴ Suffering appears here in a positive way, as that which strengthens will and decision, but because will is distinguished from the body.⁵ This distinction will make the deepening of the involuntary have the effect of intensifying the existential perspective on suffering in the third part of the book dedicated to consent. Consent is the response of human existence in the face of necessity, which implies an absolute involuntary. Here, suffering is something to which every human existence is plunged when confronted with the world, and from which the deepest involuntary structures arise.⁶

In this third part, suffering is not related to a specific event or to a particular real state, but to a characteristic proper to the human being: to be condemned to a kind of factual need. This condemnation has to do with the plural structure that is the human being: "I am diverse, I am legion: and here my future as dust announces itself. Undoubtedly only a composed being is capable of lesions. This negativity is revealed to me by *suffering*."⁷ Suffering is nothing other than the very and necessary negativity of existence: "In suffering, consciousness becomes separated, focused, and sees itself negated. I am subject to pain as extended. Pain reveals the lack of being and the threat included in extension."⁸ Ricœur identifies the split that runs through suffering in the duality between existence and the world.⁹ Suffering is therefore the flip side of will, the mark of necessity in the heart of our existence that makes it unfold in a meaningful space. Once we have reached this level, which is the deepest level of the involuntary because it annuls all will, it becomes necessary to remove the brackets. Thus, the end of this book devoted to the eidetic phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary marks the beginning of the next book which is devoted to the anthropology of fragility. This book titled *Fallible Man* and begins with the suspension of the eidetic method, that is the removal of the brackets around guilt and Transcendence to allow for an

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵ "We could even say that if there is a problem for the will in suffering as undergone it is less one of holding onto its body, restraining the involuntary movement or the cry, than the problem of confronting the approaching suffering, that is, suffering represented before it is undergone. Endurance means continuing to suffer if an idea demands it. In this way desire and fear are united on the same side of the actions they respectively exhibit" (*Id.*).

⁶ "I suffer from being one finite and partial perspective of the world and of values. I am condemned to be the 'exception:' this and nothing else, this not that. Character makes me a 'someone,' a 'Jemeinigkeit;' personality denies man and the singular denies the universal. I suffer from being condemned to a choice which consecrates and intensifies my particularity and destroys all the possibles through which I am in contact with the totality of human experience" (*Ibid.*, 447).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 450.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 450.

⁹ "While effort deploys from the focus of volition in a docile volume, suffering is concentrated, starting with the injured volume, in a narrow focus of pained consciousness. This is only a metaphor, for the focus of volition and the focus of pain are not points; but this metaphor brings up the mystery of the union of suffering and extension. This mystery governs that of existence of the world: if the world exists, it means that all extended bodies function as a horizon of that extended body which I am. It is this body which gradually communicates to them its mark of existence, that dense presence which distinguishes existence from essence; and in communicating to them its undeniable existence apart from any deduction confers on them its own negativity as extension: it is non-self, non-thought, non-willed" (*ibid.*, 451).

anthropological philosophical description.¹⁰ If phenomenological description was circumscribed to the method of bracketing guilt and Transcendence which restricted its the scope, it is within philosophical anthropology that the brackets were lifted to account for the particular constitution of the human being.

It was precisely in his philosophical anthropology that the concept of fragility appeared, linking the phenomenology of emotions and Kantian anthropology. Ricœur's eidetic phenomenology establishes a distinction between phenomenological description and scientific explanation. Ricœur's anthropological approach is divided into three spheres: a theoretical sphere, a practical sphere, and an affective sphere. It is in the third sphere that the theme of fragility appears. We believe that it is in the *Fallible Man*, the first formulation of his anthropology, to which *Oneself as Another* is a follow-up, that Ricœur lays the philosophical foundations of the descriptions he puts into play in his text "Suffering is Not Pain." The description here, in the *Fallible Man*, is not only existential, but involves the reality of human nature as it relates to emotions. Suffering appears here first as the flip side of pleasure¹¹ as in second-degree feelings derived from pleasure. However, it also possesses a first-degree reality that can be understood on its own. Ricœur introduces here Spinoza,¹² which will be important for understanding the concept of suffering in "Suffering is Not Pain." In this first degree, suffering allows the consciousness to isolate itself in order to persevere in its being. It would seem that the cognitive aspect of suffering is accentuated by the risk of making it a solipsistic affect. However, suffering finds its appeasement in the body capable of opening new ways of expression in the world, in this sense, in the outward movement, a semiotics of suffering is triggered, insofar as it is a sign for others:

"It <the body> opens me to others insofar it expresses, that is to say, displays the interior upon the exterior and becomes a sign for others, decipherable and offered to the reciprocity of consciousnesses. In a word, my body opens me to the world by everything it is able to do. It is implicated as a power in the instrumentality of the world, in the practicable aspects of this world that my action furrows through, in the products of work and art."¹³

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

¹¹ "It is possible to submit pleasure to the same critique as we applied to finite perspective when we were showing that perspective is recognized as such only in the truth-intention which transgresses it. The same holds true for pleasure. It is the other affective intention which reveals it as pleasure, as mere pleasure. This can be seen already in the doubling power of feeling: I can suffer from enjoying and rejoice in suffering. These second degree feelings hierarchize affectivity and clearly show the power of feeling to relate itself to pleasure and to behave with regard to it. This affective doubling ushers in and begins a kind of immanent critique of the principle of pleasure, quietly worked upon by the principle of happiness" (*ibid.*, 141).

¹² "spoken negation would not suit these affects if it did not manifest a negative lying deeper than all language and which we may epitomize, following Spinoza, in the excellent word 'sadness.' This lessening of existence affects the very effort through which the soul endeavors to persevere in its being, and so it may well be called a primitive affection. Sufferance in all its forms exalts this negative moment implied in many affects; in suffering, consciousness isolates itself, retires into itself and feels denied" (*ibid.*, 214).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

The perspective of expression leads us, on the one hand, to understand the hermeneutic turn that takes place in the final chapter of *The Symbolism of Evil*, titled “The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought.”¹⁴ This phrase would later inspire Ricœur to title one of the sections of “Suffering Is Not Pain”. It is in *The Symbolism of Evil* that Ricœur establishes a link between suffering and guilt. The expressive dimension of this link can be manifested both in art and in religion. Ricœur explores this latter possibility in *Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*.¹⁵ For Ricœur, there exists a symbolic and mythical dimension¹⁶ that makes the expressiveness of suffering possible. On the other hand, this perspective and the place given to the sign obliges Ricœur to carry out a hermeneutics of culture, which takes place, after his hermeneutics of symbols, precisely in a book dedicated to psychoanalysis.¹⁷ Even when the suffering appears here as part of a culture, “Suffering accompanies the task of culture like fate, the fate illustrated by the Oedipus tragedy”¹⁸, Ricœur gives fundamental importance to the very experience of suffering and Freud’s point of view: “While he <Freud> continues to speak of pleasure as a discharge of tension, he very sharply distinguishes between unpleasure—the simple contrary of pleasure—and numerous forms of suffering: the trilogy of fear, fright, and anxiety; the threefold fear due to dangers from the external world, from instincts, and from conscience.”¹⁹ In order to understand culture, symbol hermeneutics must therefore make room for the approaches of other disciplines to what is happening in culture, including suffering. With Freud, Ricœur identifies a richness in the heart of suffering, which exceeds the monotony of joy.²⁰ We cannot fail to recognize an existential interest on the part of Ricœur: it is again the openness and the capacity of expression of suffering that gives it a necessary importance in human existence. Suffering ends up being a source of creativity and productivity from the existential point of view: “The most innovative figures that the artist, writer, or thinker can produce call forth ancient energies originally invested in archaic figures; but in activating these figures, comparable to oneiric and neurotic symptoms, the creator reveals man’s most open and fundamental possibilities and erects them into new symbols of the suffering of self-consciousness.”²¹

In “Suffering is Not Pain,” Ricœur finds himself in the period of his thought in which phenomenology has been transformed into a phenomenological hermeneutics with ontological implications as we see in *Oneself as Another*.²² In this book, Ricœur establishes a dialogue with

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 347–357.

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, trans. John Bowden (London, Continuum, 2007).

¹⁶ See Jean-Luc Amalric, “Finitude, culpabilité et souffrance : la question du mal chez Ricoeur,” in *Le mal et la symbolique : Ricoeur lecteur de Freud*, ed. Azadeh Thiriez-Arjangi et al. (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 63–88.

¹⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 323–324.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

²² Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

disciplines such as linguistics in order to present the dialectical structure of the experience of subjectivity. This dialectical structure runs through "Suffering is Not Pain," in the opposition between the *self* and the *other* on the first axis,²³ as well as between the *acting* and the *being affected by* on the second axis (*agir-pâtir*). Therefore, the reflection of suffering in this text takes up the fundamental motivations that run through his systematic works. Thus, there is constant consideration and respect for methods of inquiring into suffering besides the philosophical, such as the scientific. In the transition from eidetics to anthropology, factual reality becomes important. However, it is in the transition from anthropology to hermeneutics of culture, that the field of the psyche drawing on reflections such as those of psychoanalysis, incorporates an element of suspicion as part of the method's realization. In "Suffering is Not Pain" this is translated as the importance of clinical semiology, psychoanalysis, and treatises on the affects to delve into a mysterious aspect of existence which, according to Ricœur, cannot be exhausted in pain. The first axis, that of the self and the other, presented in "Suffering is Not Pain" responds to the openness that Ricœur has identified in suffering in his systematic work, from his philosophical anthropology. The necessity of the duplicity between action and suffering (the axis *agir-pâtir*) is the effect of an openness, not only to the other, but also to the world. All this is framed in a symbolism (third section of the text) of suffering that places this experience and its enigma as an essential part of human existence.

This genealogy of the concept of suffering we traced back to Ricœur's systematic work, ends up finding a unique meaning and an interdisciplinary importance in "Suffering is Not Pain." There have been changes in method, motivation, and interest that have preceded and made possible the reflections in "Suffering is Not Pain." Also, once this conceptual genealogy has been traced, it becomes possible to integrate the reflections of "Suffering is Not Pain" into Ricœur's philosophical trajectory which begins with a phenomenological existential eidetics and ends with a hermeneutic phenomenology of ontological implications, thus opening an interdisciplinary dialogue. What is clear here is that, in this text, the question of the distinction between pain and suffering is supplanted by the question of the relationship between suffering and human existence, which runs transversally through Ricœur's systematic work. However, this text, taken from the conference "Suffering is Not Pain" does not belong to Ricœur's systematic work. To understand its importance, it is necessary, first of all, to make a detailed reading taking into account the intertextual references and the meanings implied by the expressions used by Ricœur. This is what we, the editors of this issue, have sought to do with the annotated translation of "Suffering is Not Pain," which has an explanatory introduction. This first translation of this text into English appears as the first contribution of this thematic issue.

One cannot understand Ricœur's approach in this text without reconsidering its historical place within his peripheral works on pain and suffering in medicine. This is what Astrid Chevance presents in her contribution titled "Ricœur's Practical Philosophy of Suffering in Medicine: a Contextualization of 'Suffering is Not Pain' with Other Peripheral Works." Chevance emphasizes the importance of Ricœur's thought in laying the foundations for an applied ethics that can help

²³ The institutional dimension of suffering is not addressed in "Suffering is Not Pain," but it could have been integrated into this first axis. On this subject, see Paul Ricœur, "Autonomy and Vulnerability," in *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 72–90.

reconsider clinical practices surrounding suffering. Suffering holds a key position in questioning medical practice, as it is first and foremost a relationship with the patient. It is also on the implications of this text for the clinical perspective that Martin Dumont's contribution is based. This article, dedicated to a dialogue with Paul Ricœur's "Suffering is Not Pain," challenges the clear distinction Ricœur draws between the phenomenological and the clinical approaches. It provides a reflection aimed at highlighting the mapping of spaces dedicated to clinical practice within Ricœur's thought on suffering. This opens the door to the possibility of a genuine clinical philosophy. This sharp distinction between the phenomenological perspective and the clinical perspective is fundamentally based on the distinction, established by Ricœur in "Suffering is Not Pain," between the concepts of pain and suffering. This distinction is deepened in the contribution of Elodie Boissard, putting in perspective Ricœur's reflection from the contemporary philosophy of mind. It is in the concept of evil, implicit in this distinction, that Boissard finds clues to reflect on the practical, epistemic, and evaluative function of Ricœur's approach. Similarly, Jennifer Corns establishes a dialogue between the Ricoeurian distinction between pain and suffering in "Suffering is Not Pain," and the contemporary analytical philosophy of suffering, identifying methodological and conceptual points of agreement and disagreement between these approaches. The article invites us to conceptualize Ricœur's notion of suffering through the analysis of its effects on agency. However, while pain and suffering can be treated with their difference, one can also find their commonalities. This is precisely what interests Charlotte Geindre, who, in her contribution, seeks to find the commonalities between the two concepts. According to Geindre, both concepts express negative and unpleasant experiences. This reflection opens the possibility to make, from a Ricoeurian perspective, a finer distinction that includes experiences that are halfway between pain and suffering. What is at stake here is what we *express* when we point to experiences of pain and suffering. István Fazakas interrogates this narrative aspect of the experiences of pain and suffering implied in the hermeneutic perspective developed by Ricœur in "Suffering is Not Pain." To this end, he brings Ricœur's perspective into dialogue with psychopathological phenomenology. He therefore aims to conceptualize an ante-predicative dimension of this type of experience based on Ricoeur's thought. The question of the ante-predicative dimension of these concepts leads us to certain paradoxes in the case of suffering. This is what Serge Margel's contribution questions. From his perspective, being able to suffer implies being capable of tolerating suffering, while at the same time, suffering touches the very depths of the intolerable. Margel identifies in Ricœur's thought, looking for links between "Suffering is Not Pain" and other reflections of his phenomenological and ethical works, a philosophy of the paradoxes of suffering.

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