

Applying Ricœur's Model of Suffering to Negative Non-Primarily Physical Experiences Not Called "Suffering" in Everyday Language

Charlotte Geindre

Sorbonne Université

Abstract

This article explores the application of Paul Ricœur's model of suffering to negative experiences (termed here "para-suffering"), such as a hint of disappointment or a slight envy, which are not named suffering in everyday language, since the term is reserved for worse experiences. The analysis of a para-suffering example shows that a para-suffering experience can unfold within several of Ricœur's figures of suffering. The implications of what should be regarded, at the very least, as significant commonalities between para-suffering and suffering are then examined: caution is necessary in using Ricœur's definition of suffering, suffering benefits from being analyzed in comparison with para-suffering, and para-suffering deserves greater philosophical attention. Although it is neither physical pain nor suffering, it remains a crucial part of human negative experiences.

Keywords: Ricœur; suffering; unpleasantness; distress; emotions

Résumé

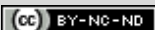
Cet article explore l'application du modèle de la souffrance de Paul Ricœur aux expériences négatives (nommées ici « para-souffrances »), telles qu'un soupçon de déception ou une forme légère d'envie, qui ne sont pas nommées souffrance au quotidien, le mot semblant réservé à de pires expériences. L'analyse d'un exemple montre qu'une expérience de para-souffrance peut se déployer selon plusieurs des figures de la souffrance données par Ricœur. Les implications de ce qui doit être considéré, au minimum, comme d'importants points communs entre la para-souffrance et la souffrance sont ensuite examinées : la prudence est de mise dans l'usage des définitions de Ricœur, la souffrance gagne à être analysée selon une comparaison avec la para-souffrance, et la para-souffrance mérite davantage d'attention philosophique – de n'être ni douleur physique ni souffrance elle n'en est pas moins une part cruciale des expériences négatives de l'humain.

Mots-clés : Ricœur ; souffrance ; déplaisir ; détresse ; émotions

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 15, No 2 (2024), pp. 95-110

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2024.673

<http://ricœur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Applying Ricœur's Model of Suffering to Negative Non-Primarily Physical Experiences Not Called "Suffering" in Everyday Language

Charlotte Geindre
Sorbonne Université

I. Introduction

Paul Ricœur's rich characterization of suffering is remarkably adequate for negative experiences that are neither physical pains—since they are not primarily physical experiences—nor referred to as suffering in everyday language because they appear to lack a certain quality or a certain level of intensity. In everyday language, we are reluctant to name "suffering" a hint of frustration, a brief burst of sadness at the thought of a grandparent who is long gone and has already been grieved, or an annoyance bordering on anger toward one's landlord. The fact that these experiences unfold along Ricœur's axes of suffering suggests commonalities between them and suffering that merit further study, as examining these experiences might lead to a better understanding not only of them but also of those referred to as suffering in everyday language.

References to Ricœur's "Suffering is Not Pain" are common in the French-speaking world of teaching and research, not only in philosophy (see for example the volume directed by Claire Marin and Nathalie Zaccai-Reyners¹) but also in diverse areas related to health and care—it is for example taught in healthcare manuals and guides.² As Eric Cassel's work³ did on a more international scale, Ricœur's lecture provided a much-needed tool to stress the fact that negative experiences are not limited to nociception or physical pain. The popularity of this lecture is understandable: its style and degree of description make it enticing. Still, it is surprising, as Ricœur does not provide a clear-cut conceptual definition of "suffering" that can easily be taught, learned, commented on, and criticized. As Luz Ascarate and Astrid Chevance's English translation⁴ might lead to a more international audience, one aim of this article is to call for caution in using his definition and distinction.

¹ Claire Marin et Nathalie Zaccai-Reyners, *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: PUF, 2013). The French version of the conference, with an introduction by Samuel Lelièvre, is published here: <https://bibnum.explore.psl.eu/s/psl/ark:/18469/3tcm>

² For example: Jean-François Richard, "Douleurs et souffrances : quelle place pour la médecine ?," in *Manuel de soins palliatifs. Clinique, psychologie, éthique*, 4th ed., eds. Denis Jacquemin and Dominique de Broucker (Paris: Dunod, 2014), 84–91; Marie-André Vigil-Ripoche, "Souffrance" in *Les concepts en sciences infirmières*, 2nd ed., eds. Michel Formarier and Lucie Jovic (Paris: Association de recherche en soins infirmiers, 2012), 283–285.

³ Eric J. Cassell, "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine," *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 306, n° 11 (1982), 639–645; Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴ Paul Ricœur, "Suffering is Not Pain. An annotated English Translation," trans. Luz Ascarate and Astrid Chevance, *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 15, n° 2 (2024), 14–27.

Ricœur presents the following definitional elements: (1) his object is the “bad infinity of moaning and groaning,”⁵ (2) an ideal-type distinction between suffering and pain is assumed to be posited by psychiatrists and phenomenologists as well, with pain reduced to affects “felt as localized,” whereas suffering affects are said to be “open to reflexivity, to language, to the relationship to oneself, to the relationship to others, to the relationship to meaning, to questioning”⁶ (Ricœur, of course, concedes that this ideal distinction does not echo the complexity of everyday experiences in which pain and suffering are most often mixed), (3) Ricœur’s main contribution is a model of suffering consisting of axes which presents suffering as unfolding within “figures”⁷ along two or three axes, the “self-other” axis, the “acting/being affected” axis, and maybe the axis of meaning which Ricœur does not clearly define as an axis. Although he uses the term “figures” for the first axis only, I will also use the term to refer to forms of suffering on the other axes, (4) as he introduces and comments on the “acting/being affected” axis, he suggests that “we can adopt as our working hypothesis that suffering consists in the diminution of our power of acting.”⁸

The necessary and sufficient conditions for an experience to qualify as suffering are not provided, and the extension of Ricœur’s suffering might be questioned: does Ricœur’s “suffering” denote every experience referred to as “suffering” in everyday language, or does his “suffering” denote any diminution of the power to act, or is the class of “suffering” delineated in another way?

As his definition lacks a precise extension and his model is more descriptive than conceptual, it allows for an examination of negative experiences not referred to as suffering in everyday language following his model. Not all negative experiences that are not physical pains are called suffering in everyday language: if my dear friend leaves my party without saying goodbye, I might have an unpleasant emotion but would I say that I suffered? This experience does not seem to qualify as a physical pain either, even if it is accompanied by some somatization (for example, a lump in the throat), because it is not a primarily physical experience. If, as everyday language seems to translate or signal, there is a difference between those experiences and suffering experiences, they deserve to be considered on their own as they seem themselves relevant in an examination of the human experience. The pain and suffering pair (which denotes physical pain—experiences that are primarily physical—and suffering) fails to cover all negative experiences. I intend to argue that these negative experiences that are not called suffering in everyday language unfold along Ricœur’s axes of suffering and within many of his figures of suffering. His description, presented as corresponding to the aftermath of a child’s loss or of torture, may also apply to negative experiences that we typically deny the qualification of suffering in everyday life.

It should be noted that I am not concerned with whether Ricœur himself would consider these experiences suffering or not: I am considering experiences called suffering in everyday language and experiences not called suffering in everyday language following Ricœur’s characterization of a non-extensively defined suffering.

⁵ Ricœur, “Suffering is Not Pain,” 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ Ricœur does not provide a definition of “figure.” The figures appear to be the different ways or forms of suffering. They could also be described as the various manifestations of a suffering experience, although the term carries a more philosophically nuanced meaning.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

In this article, I will refer to negative experiences as para-suffering.⁹ The different meanings of the prefix para- highlight their proximity, similarity and maybe opposition to suffering experiences. Para-suffering experiences entail negative affects that are not, or not only, felt as localized in the body but that are not usually called suffering.¹⁰ In this work, I will limit the category of para-suffering to experiences not related to physical pain. The relations between para-suffering and physical pain deserve investigation. My justification for excluding physical pain or physical pain-related experiences from the para-suffering ensemble I will consider is that in the context of the examination of Ricœur's lecture, it would entail commenting on Ricœur's distinction between pain and suffering, and its implications for his concept of suffering, which would require a longer discussion than this article can accommodate.

Showing that para-suffering experiences could be examined following Ricœur's model and unfold within many of his figures of suffering is relevant for the following reasons. First, it will shed light on the specificities of Ricœur's characterization that, in my opinion, have to be cautiously considered before making it instrumental in analyses of pain and suffering. Second, the examination of para-suffering experiences could uncover some of their characteristics which might be beneficial for their philosophical understanding. Third, my hope is that this examination will operate as a reminder that a philosophical field dedicated to the understanding of negative human experiences should further investigate on the limitations of the traditional "pain and suffering" pair. Fourth, the examination of the commonalities between those experiences and the ones we refer to in everyday language as suffering experiences might give leads for a better philosophical understanding of suffering.

Following this introduction, in the second section, I will review the aspects of Ricœur's characterization that allow for an examination of para-suffering experiences according to his model of suffering. This will pave the way for the third section, in which my examination of an example of para-suffering should show that a para-suffering experience may unfold along the suffering axes and within many figures Ricœur provides in his model of suffering. Since this commentary will, at the very least, indicate numerous commonalities between para-suffering and suffering experiences, I will examine the implications of these findings in the next sections. In the fourth section, I will discuss the implications for the relations between suffering and para-suffering, in the fifth, the implications for the study of suffering, and in the sixth, the implications for philosophical inquiries into para-suffering.

⁹ "Unpleasantness" and "distress" could have prevented the use of a neologism. However, these two terms have already been used in various and conflicting ways in contemporary analytical literature, so a neutral term seems like a more suitable choice for this examination, especially since this article cannot provide a comprehensive review of the different characterizations of "unpleasantness" and "distress."

¹⁰ Note should be made of my choice to focus on the everyday use of the word "suffering" as it is commonly employed to refer to certain unpleasant experiences. I will not address the everyday use of the verb "to suffer" when it describes a condition that does not need to be immediately experienced or unpleasant (for instance, one can "suffer from" a vitamin deficiency without showing symptoms initially). Jennifer Corns' definition of suffering as "significantly disrupted agency" offers an alternative approach, as she considers this everyday use of "suffering" alongside the everyday use I am focusing on. See Jennifer Corns, "Suffering as Significantly Disrupted Agency," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 105, no 3 (2021), 706–729.

II. Why Ricœur's Characterization of Suffering Allows for the Scrutiny of Para-Suffering

In everyday language, we commonly make a distinction between what can be qualified as suffering and what cannot, especially when the report on our feelings is pressed or challenged. Going back to the example I gave of my friend leaving my party early, I suppose I could say that I am suffering from the rude and early departure of my friend, but if someone were to challenge me—"really? You are suffering?"—I would probably correct myself, and not only out of modesty (If I refuse to correct my sentence, it is because I truly identify my feeling as suffering, understanding the implied distinction made by the person asking.) A distinction is commonly made between para-suffering and suffering experiences. Note that the situation is different for physical pain. At an extremely low level of intensity, we may doubt whether a feeling is mild pain or discomfort. However, we still identify very mild experiences, such as the sensation of a needle during a blood draw or the feeling when removing a small adhesive bandage from skin covered with vellus hair, as pain, even when pressed or challenged.

My contention here is that para-suffering experiences unfold within many of the figures of suffering provided by Ricœur in his axes model. Although I am not concerned with whether Ricœur would consider what I call para-suffering as suffering, since my focus is on everyday language, it is important to show how his characterization of suffering can be used to examine para-suffering experiences.

Ricœur's method allows for a shift of focus toward para-suffering experiences for the following reasons.

First, he does not indicate the extension of his suffering, and does not provide a conceptual definition establishing all the necessary and sufficient conditions for an experience to be classified as "suffering." Ricœur states that he is approaching suffering through its signs. In a typically phenomenological fashion, his investigation does not start with a locked definition of suffering but consists of a description of suffering phenomena and/or signs of its phenomena in their richness and complexity. This leads him to offer a model which allows for the apprehension of a non-extensively capped "bad infinity of moaning and groaning."¹¹

Second, his axes are arranged into levels: there are levels of the "figures of separation"¹² on the self-other axis and levels in the grid of diminution of efficiency on the "acting/being affected" axis. There is no indication that the experiences should unfold within all the levels, whether these levels depend on the intensity of the experience or merely indicate possible "figures" within which an experience might unfold independently of a quantitative progression. I still intend to show in the next section that para-suffering experiences actually unfold on many levels.

Third, there are reasons to believe that Ricœur is not concerned with a very distinct class of experiences, but rather, as Frédéric Worms puts it, with "the dark and still almost unexplored side of the 'acting and suffering human' theory which has been set out in the great book *Oneself as*

¹¹ Ricœur, "Suffering is Not Pain," 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

Another (1990).¹³ The extension of suffering would thus be dependent on his partition between acting and being affected. This interpretation seems supported by Ricœur's declaration regarding his "working hypothesis" that suffering "consists in the diminution of our power of acting."¹⁴ Of course, there are two possible ways to read such a statement. Ricœur might suggest that his working hypothesis is that any diminution of our power to act is suffering, or that his working hypothesis is that any suffering consists in a diminution of our power to act, although not every diminution of our power to act is suffering. The first interpretation would be supported by his reference to Spinoza for whom this holds true (see *Ethics*, especially Part III).¹⁵ This problem is for a specialist to solve; whether or not it was Ricœur's intent, he does give reasons to consider a wider scope for his "suffering" than the scope of the everyday use of the word "suffering."

At least three objections could be made to my claim that Ricœur's proposition allows for an examination of para-suffering experiences.

The first two objections are easily answered.

First, one of the subtitles is "The time of suffering." However, what follows does not establish a threshold in the duration of an experience in order for it to qualify as suffering and hence does not provide a delineation in the extension of suffering.

Second, Ricœur states, "to suffer is to suffer too much,"¹⁶ which could be read as a delineation of the extension of suffering with an intensity of unpleasantness threshold. Although it could be argued that Ricœur's comment only applies to the context of the paragraph, I propose to take another route. It follows from the fact that suffering is simply bad that any suffering would be too much, just as if you don't like cinnamon, a hint of cinnamon in your coffee is already too much, even if the coffee remains drinkable and you are going to have a second cup anyways because it is the only coffee available to you at the moment. The unpleasant feeling I have when my friend leaves early is already too much because it is an undesirable addition to my life.¹⁷ Hence, Ricœur's statement could be interpreted as qualifying all suffering as excessive since any suffering is undesirable, rather than distinguishing between experiences of suffering as they would be "too much" and other negative experiences that, being less intense, would not be qualified as suffering.

¹³ My translation of "versant sombre et encore presque inexploré de cet 'homme agissant et souffrant' dont le grand livre [...] *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), avait fait la théorie". Frédéric Worms, "Souffrant, agissant et vivant," in *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur*, eds. Claire Marin et Nathalie Zaccā-Reyners (Paris: PUF, 2013), 38.

¹⁴ Ricœur, "Suffering is Not Pain," 19.

¹⁵ Benedict de Spinoza, *The chief works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Harvey Monro Elwes (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884).

¹⁶ Ricœur, "Suffering is Not Pain," 26.

¹⁷ Of course, it could be argued that suffering and para-suffering (like mild envy) might be welcomed, either because they seem justified (a romantic loss "should" cause one to suffer) or because they can add spice to life, heighten awareness of one's desires, and create a sense of feeling alive, for example. The problem of the masochist is addressed in various ways. Following my argument, I would contend that negative experiences are always intrinsically negative (and, as such, always excessive in themselves); however, they can be welcomed for serving other functions.

The third objection is more serious. As Ricœur is somewhat allusive, different interpretations of his figures of suffering can be offered. It could be argued that the figures are only suitable for para-suffering if weak interpretations of them are adopted. If stronger interpretations of the figures were adopted, Ricœur's model of suffering would no longer adequately capture para-suffering experiences. Consider the following example. In the third section, as I attempt to show that para-suffering unfolds within the figures of suffering, I will argue that a slight envy might unfold within the second figure of separation, that is "the vivid experience of the incommunicable; the other can neither understand nor help me; the barrier between them and me is insurmountable; the solitude of the sufferer."¹⁸ Of course, at first glance, Ricœur's description seems to refer to more dire experiences than, for example, a fleeting sense of envy that comes from crossing paths with the concert violinist who lives in your building, given that, as a child, you briefly dreamed of becoming a concert violinist yourself. Now, for a feeling to be easily communicable, it is preferable that its "lore" is simple, and that the person experiencing it has had time to process it. The lore of this envy is complex. At the very least, it involves your childhood memories, your choices and desires about your life, and your opinion of your current situation. Furthermore, when you are in the midst of experiencing envy, it can be difficult to talk about it. In fact, your attention is focused on the feeling, not on communication, and communication demands a distance you might not be able to take as it is happening. Additionally, as you just felt that mild envy, the help of others is likely to fall short—notably because for them to appease you it might take a few minutes of communication. At last, your envy is yours, and yours only, and it is rooted in your personal history: you may feel alone in experiencing it. Now, someone could object that when Ricœur refers to damage to communication, he is not concerned with delays or incidents regarding this function but with serious damage only. Reference to the "incommunicable" would only be made if the experience is to stay (nearly) impossible to communicate, not if it is not communicable at first. With this strong interpretation, it no longer seems possible to claim that the para-suffering experience of slight envy unfolds within that figure: it will become communicable later, notably through the many shared narratives of similar events.

If stronger interpretations of the figure of suffering are adopted, it may seem that my examination of para-suffering under weaker interpretations fails to prove commonalities between para-suffering and suffering experiences.

One way out of the problem posed by stronger interpretations of the figures of suffering which do not align with the interpretation I will provide in my comment on para-suffering in the next section would be to argue that Ricœur's lecture is ambiguous, and as such, allows for different readings. It might be thought that, when talking to psychiatrists, his intent was to suggest and provoke thought, and to leave his proposition open to interpretations.

Another route is to defend that there are still commonalities between para-suffering experiences and suffering experiences because there are commonalities between weaker and stronger interpretations of the figures of suffering. Weaker and stronger interpretations of Ricœur's figures of suffering must share some commonalities. For example, "incommunicable while the experience is lived" and "incommunicable per se" share the commonality of pointing to difficulties in communication. Thus, even if Ricœur's model does not adequately describe para-suffering

¹⁸ Ricœur, "Suffering is Not Pain," 20.

experiences under the strongest interpretations of the figures, its application through weaker interpretations still reveals shared commonalities between para-suffering and suffering.

To sum up, my answer to the third objection is that stronger interpretations of Ricœur's figures of suffering than those I will use hereafter do not render my proposition irrelevant. They might merely render it necessary to consider fewer commonalities between para-suffering and suffering experiences (incommunicable per se and incommunicable as it happens are in both cases incommunicable). Furthermore, as will be exposed in Section V, the examination of weaker interpretations of the figures may be beneficial to the understanding of suffering.

III. Para-Suffering and Ricœur's Characterization

To show that para-suffering experiences may unfold within many of the figures of suffering presented by Ricœur, I will examine a single example of para-suffering following the order of exposition of his model. This strategy is both argumentative—it should show that the application of the model of suffering to para-suffering experiences may work and that para-suffering experiences deserve philosophical consideration as they are bad, pervasive, to be avoided, like suffering and physical pain experiences are—and investigative—it should uncover ways to analyze the figures of suffering. I will not have room to consider other examples, as I have chosen to comment extensively on this one, but it seems to me that other experiences of para-suffering, such as those previously given as examples, could unfold in a very similar manner. My hope, in commenting on this one example at length instead of examining the figures one by one and considering how different cases of para-suffering might unfold within each, is to show that a single para-suffering experience can unfold through multiple figures, thus telling a story" very similar to the story of a suffering experience. Para-suffering experiences should appear to be potentially pervasive, as they can unfold across Ricœur's axes and figures, that is, in many dimensions.

A concert violinist moved into your building a year ago. Sometimes you hear her play, sometimes you cross paths with her as she is rushing out in beautiful clothes. You like, or even love, your career, but you played the violin as a child for a few years and for a moment you dreamed of that precise life your new neighbor has—you sometimes feel a mild form of envy. Envy is known as a passion, and a "mild passion" might seem oxymoronic; whether it should still be called a passion or not might be open to discussion. Regardless, it seems to me that my example is easy to relate to: if you generally like your life, the envy you feel could be mild. I am assuming that the mild envy felt in this example would not be described as suffering: it is uncomfortable and undesirable, but it is rarely the worst feeling you will experience in a week. It may seem that the criterion of unpleasantness, whose intensity threshold is not met, prevents the experience from being considered suffering—but other options should also be considered. This experience does not seem like a suffering experience to you; nevertheless, what is happening to you/what you are doing to yourself still unfolds within many of Ricœur's figures of suffering.

The "self-other" Axis

Let's see how this para-suffering unfolds within Ricœur's figures of the "self-other" axis. Ricœur starts by describing a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, one is completely

focused on oneself and, on the other hand, there is “a special kind of intensification of the relationship with others.”¹⁹

First, you might be considerably more focused on yourself as you experience mild envy, which could cut you off from others and the world. If you are in the middle of a conversation with a friend coming home with you in your stairwell when you cross paths with the violinist, her gala dress and violin, the mild envy will make you more aware of yourself than you were before. You were focused on the chat, now your feeling is making you focus on you. You appear to yourself in a certain kind of “immediacy” as you feel that feeling. Ricœur writes, “when I think about something I suffer absolutely.”²⁰ You might not “para-suffer” absolutely, but the para-suffering does undermine your intentionality: you try to engage in what your friend is saying but your affects are not congruent with the conversation—what you feel is envy. Is it accurate to say that “the world no longer appears as habitable but as depopulated”?²¹ If we interpret Ricœur's allusive sentence in a classical phenomenological sense, a world that is not habitable would be one in which you don't recognize a place that can be yours, and in which you cannot deploy your actions.²² A depopulated world would be one in which others no longer seem to connect with you or seem to be out of your reach. As you feel that envy, the world you were in before crossing paths with the concert violinist seems to have been erased,²³ at least a little. In a movie, a director could show what you are feeling by slightly blurring the image of the staircase and the voice of your friend. For such a blurring to occur, the feeling does not have to be a suffering feeling. You are no longer addressing with fluidity what your world addresses to you—stairs to be climbed without even thinking of it as you go to your flat with your friend, statements she makes to which you answer—because you are distracted by the attention-grabbing feeling you are experiencing. For seconds, you barely listen to what your friend says. Maybe you would not say that “the world no longer appears as habitable but as depopulated”, but the world is less habitable and more depopulated than it was before you felt that envy. Note that other para-suffering experiences, whether clearly emotional (a burst of sadness as you remember a grandparent you lost and grieved decades ago) or maybe not (frustration), could similarly draw you back into yourself and away from the world.

Second, there might be a “special kind of intensification of the relationship with others”²⁴ in para-suffering, and it may unfold within the four figures of “separation” provided by Ricœur.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² Ricœur uses “habitable” to qualify world in *Time and Narrative*: “And whereas metaphorical redescription reigns in the field of sensory, emotional, aesthetic, and axiological values, which makes the world a habitable world, the mimetic function of plots takes place by preference in the field of action and of its temporal values” (Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984], xi). A more precise interpretation of his sentence in “Suffering is Not Pain” could be made if we assume a strong continuity between this monograph and the lecture. A sufferer, drawn solely back to herself, would not have access to the shifts and substitutions at the core of the metaphorical function that make it possible to translate, share, or connect her affects to something else. It could be argued that the para-sufferer experiences the same difficulties, but to a lesser extent, and only while her para-suffering is ongoing.

²³ Ricœur, “Suffering is Not Pain,” 20.

²⁴ *Id.*

A slight envy can unfold within the “vivid experience of the irreplaceable.”²⁵ You are aware of the fact that your friend cannot feel what you are feeling, because one cannot pass a feeling onto another and because your envy has its lore as discussed. This is obviously true of any subjective experience, but, as Ricœur underlines later in the lecture, a suffering (and, in my opinion, a para-suffering) “summons others.”²⁶ Because your para-suffering summons others, you are aware of the fact that you are the one suffering and that they are not—“the sufferer is unique.”²⁷ I have already commented on the “incommunicable:” your envy has its lore, as you undergo it you might be too involved in the feeling to adequately describe it; furthermore, you might need time to process it in order to convey it. Moving on to the third figure of separation—“the other person announces themselves as my enemy”²⁸—you could very much blame the violinist in that moment, and, with the kind of bad faith that sometimes accompanies unpleasant feelings, judge her for showing off her talent and glamorous life. You could also end up using any excuse to blame your friend—she does not realize what is happening to you, she never valued your artistic side... Your para-suffering could at last unfold within the fourth figure of separation, the “fantasized feeling of being chosen” to (para-)suffer, and you might ask yourself why a concert violinist would move into your building—“why me?”²⁹ Some might consider that this is an overreaction unlikely to occur with para-suffering. In my opinion, even if a para-suffering is not too much to bear, it is too much because it is bad, and it seems to me that the leap from a negative experience to a demand for justification is very easily taken. Note that, again, other para-sufferings, such as a burst of sadness or a moment of frustration, might unfold within these figures.

The “acting/being affected” Axis.

Ricœur provides four “levels” on a “grid” on the “acting/being affected” axis³⁰—I have been referring to them as “figures” following his wording for the self-other axis.

You might experience some “powerlessness to say anything.”³¹ Notice how we sometimes take ten seconds and several breaths before we divulge information about what is negative to us? As you are caught up in envy, the words to describe it can appear stuck for a few seconds.

You might as well experience some “powerlessness to act.”³² the envy does not have to be very intense for it to confuse you enough so you will take extra seconds to find your keys in your bag when you arrive in front of your apartment door, and so you never know how to interact with the violinist when you see her. Furthermore, it might be that envy that paradoxically prevents you from taking violin lessons again.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

Placing those figures “back on the self-other axis,” Ricœur notes that suffering makes one the “patient,” at the other’s “mercy.”³³ Because you feel diminished in your power of action, the violinist could appear to you as the one with the power to act—clearly, if she were to move out of your building you would feel better. As you have not yet figured out a way to stop inflicting that envy on yourself, you could find yourself feeling like the patient at her mercy. Additionally, your feeling of envy is a distractor, and one that makes you feel a little defeated, which can easily leave you at everyone’s mercy: if another one of your neighbor opens his door to complain to you about some neighboring issue you might lack the focus and will to fight back as they are being unkind to you.

The third level of the diminution of the power to act is the diminution of the narrative function accompanied by the damage to the “internarrative fabric.”³⁴ I acknowledge that damage to this function following a mild envy is not aligned with stronger interpretations of this figure. Nevertheless, your narrative function is certainly not operating at its peak. You are indeed stuck in the “instant”: it is “an interruption”³⁵ of the time you were living in before. That feeling might not fit with your current narrative—you thought violin was in your past—, and integrating it might take some time and demand for you to fight your resistance. As to the “internarrative fabric,” it might not be “torn”³⁶ but you and your friend are now in two different places and for example if you do not share your experience with her you two will keep very different memories of that conversation you are having as you are getting to your flat.

The fourth level of the diminution of the power to act is the diminution in the ability to esteem oneself, closely related to Ricœur’s understanding of the diminution of the power of self-imputation. For Ricœur, self-esteem depends on the ability one has to esteem things. As you are overreacting to the presence of a woman living her life and sometimes wishing she would move out, you might consider that your evaluations are off, and your self-esteem might take a hit. Regarding self-imputation, you might be troubled about who is responsible for your para-suffering: you or her? Again, other para-sufferings, such as a burst of sadness remembering your grandparent or a moment of frustration, might unfold within these figures.

“What suffering gives us to think about.”

On the last “axis,” Ricœur presents two other “figures” of suffering: suffering “raises questions or asks or interrogates”³⁷ and suffering “summons others.”³⁸ This might be true of the para-suffering of a slight envy. You might ask yourself “How long? Why me?” Is it your destiny trying to tell you that you made a terrible choice giving up on violin? You are not really inquiring. This is a way of manifesting your demand for “justification”³⁹ in response to the assumed unfairness of what is happening to you. This para-suffering might be summoning others: you

³³ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

might bring the topic of your career in the conversation with your friend, hoping she will tell you how successful you are, you might ask her to stay a bit longer than expected because her presence could distract you. Other para-sufferings might unfold within these figures: a frustration might lead to a demand for justification, a sadness might summon others...

IV. Relations Between Para-Suffering and Suffering

It follows from my examination that either the distinction between para-suffering and what is usually referred to as suffering is without difference or there is indeed a difference although Ricœur does not provide it or does not provide it clearly enough. The examination conducted is not enough to draw conclusions presented as definitive on the relations between para-suffering and suffering beyond “they share commonalities.” However, coupled with other considerations and arguments, it leads me to a proposition and some remarks.

It seems necessary to me to maintain the distinction between para-suffering and suffering. My main argument is simple: there is an everyday distinction between suffering and para-suffering, which signals a distinction in experience, which is what is of concern here. I am assuming that everyday language reflects implicit commonsense definitions or characterizations or discriminations of what is called *x* from what is called *y*, if “no it’s not *x* it’s *y*” is understandable and defensible. As previously stated, we commonly distinguish between suffering and para-suffering, sometimes quite firmly: “No, it was not suffering, let’s not exaggerate,” or “I am not bothered, I am suffering right now.” If the concern is with suffering and para-suffering as personal experiences, the distinction should be kept.⁴⁰

Regarding the difference that underlies the distinction, both qualitative and quantitative approaches can be considered.

At first glance, the difference between para-suffering and suffering seems to be quantitative—if that were the case, para-suffering and suffering would lie on a *continuum*. An experience of para-suffering would be an experience that fails to meet certain thresholds: to be considered suffering, an experience has to be unpleasant enough, or long enough, or have enough consequences... If a slight envy does not qualify as suffering, isn’t it because it is “slight”, and then not unpleasant enough?⁴¹ If we refrain from calling the experience following the early departure of one’s friend from one’s party, a suffering experience, might it be because the unpleasant feeling was gone half an hour later? A quantitative approach to the distinction between para-suffering and suffering would assume that there is a quality (or a combination of qualities), whose threshold(s), whether met or unmet, is (are) paramount in choosing to qualify an experience as “suffering.” The difficulty in pinpointing the criterion/criteria whose threshold has (have) to be met is that in many cases, a quality does not vary all things being equal. For example, a longer experience may, due to its duration, become more unpleasant, more pervasive, or more concerning.

⁴⁰ The difference might be culturally constructed, but everyday language might also reflect these cultural shapings of experiences.

⁴¹ For argumentation against unpleasantness as the criterion whose intensity threshold must be met for an experience to be suffering, see Michael Brady, *Suffering and virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The qualitative approach to the distinction between suffering and para-suffering entails that in order for an experience to be suffering it should include a specific quality or characteristic that is not part of para-suffering experiences. Michael Brady, for example, provides an account of suffering that includes a characteristic he deems absent from mere unpleasant experiences: the fact that one minds about both the unpleasant sensation and one's desire to not have such a sensation. He defines suffering as such: "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."⁴² The second-order desire (ii) could be the quality of suffering experiences that is lacking in para-suffering experiences.

Differentiating between the quantitative and qualitative approaches might prove difficult. Indicating a threshold that a quality has to meet does not necessarily mean that the approach is a quantitative one, as the threshold can be met because the experience includes a specific quality of character. Conversely, if an experience entails a quality or a characteristic that makes it a suffering experience, it can be the result of the fact that the threshold of another quality of the experience (intensity, duration...) has been met.

Pinpointing the difference that makes the distinction is beyond the scope of this comment on the application of Ricœur's model of suffering to para-suffering experiences. That said, my examination of para-suffering experiences could prompt useful reflections. Notably, as the analysis of para-suffering experiences in the narrative figures required weak interpretations of these, damage to the narrative functions emerge as a strong candidate for consideration of what makes the difference, with the presence, absence, or intensity of damage being the key factor (depending on the choice of a qualitative or a quantitative approach).

V. Implications for Philosophical Analyses of Suffering

The not-so-surprising fact that there are significant and numerous commonalities between para-suffering and suffering is important to consider: suffering might be approached differently if we focus on what it shares with para-suffering.

In the last decade, philosophical work on suffering—especially in or related to "The Value of Suffering Project"⁴³—has provided detailed, fruitful and mindful characterization and definitions of suffering. Such an effort was needed, as suffering had thus far been more commented on and referenced than analyzed or conceptualized. This is particularly striking in the philosophy of medicine or in philosophical content that became instrumental for healthcare researchers and practitioners. In Cassel's work for example, suffering is initially this negative experience beyond pain. However its exact nature remains unclear. In a supported critique, Charlotte Duffee shows that his definition of suffering as severe distress at the threat of one's integrity may be

⁴² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴³ For a presentation of the project directed by David Bain, Michael Brady and Jennifer Corns, see <https://www.davidbain.org/grants-projects/pain> It led to a volume: Michael S. Brady, David Bain and Jennifer Corns eds., *Philosophy of Suffering: Metaphysics, Value, and Normativity* (London: Routledge, 2019).

uninformative as “he never details what sort of experience suffering is”⁴⁴ and as the word “distress” might not provide more details on the experience than the word “suffering” does. Furthermore, the massiveness and monstrosity of some experiences of suffering sometimes inhibit attempts to analyze them into components, aspects or dimensions, and sometimes elicit attempts to analyze them into aspects that themselves have to be massive and monstrous. This leads to rather uninformative characterizations which lack sufficient detail.

The consideration of how para-suffering experiences unfold can help strengthen our philosophical understanding of suffering in at least two ways.

First, comparisons between the different ways para-suffering and suffering experiences unfold along Ricœur’s axes can be fruitful, as they allow for a different perspective on suffering. Let’s consider an example. When commenting on the unfolding of my para-suffering example within the figures presented by Ricœur, I have repeatedly stressed that the slight envy could unfold within this or that figure at least at the beginning, or for a few minutes. It seems that a suffering experience would unfold within those figures for a longer period. This comparison provides leads for a better characterization of suffering. It might, for example, suggest that for an experience to be considered suffering, it requires a certain duration (the duration criterion in a quantitative approach), or that a suffering experience is, in some ways, still ongoing long after it is assumed to have passed. An experience of suffering would stay incommunicable and others would keep on appearing as unable to help regarding that matter years after because in a way it is still ongoing. Other differences in the ways para-suffering and suffering experiences unfold could and should be examined as this inquiry can provide other ways to understand suffering.

Second, it might be fruitful to introduce some of the more mundane elements, aspects and dimensions I referred to in my consideration of para-suffering when considering suffering. For example, I have attributed many of the unfolding of my example of para-suffering within the figures of suffering to attentional capture. It seems to me that attentional capture is also playing an important role in suffering. I have explained, totally or partially, the diminution of powers to act, damage to the intentionality, challenges in communication, by the fact that in a para-suffering experience the attention is drawn to the negative experience and to the self. Isn’t it true for a suffering experience too? A phenomenology of suffering could benefit from a phenomenology of attentional capture, and from a phenomenology of motivation, and from a phenomenology of the emotions... Suffering experiences, in their atrocity, might be such that it is not easy to discern the elements, aspects and dimensions that constitute them and whose phenomenology should be considered in order for suffering to be better understood. My contention here is that the consideration of para-suffering experiences might help uncover these phenomenologies.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Duffee, “What Really is the Nature of Suffering? Three Problems with Eric Cassell’s Concept of Distress,” *Bioethics*, vol. 34, n° 7 (2020), 695.

VI. Implications Regarding the Philosophical Consideration of Para-Suffering

Another important implication of the fact that some para-suffering experiences can be examined through Ricœur's model of suffering is the highlighted need for further philosophical exploration of para-suffering.

I hope to have shown that these experiences are bad and pervasive. They can unfold within many figures along Ricœur's axes, and, at least momentarily, alter one's relationship to oneself, to others, and to the world in various ways. Unfortunately, they are also mundane and frequent. While suffering is hard to avoid, para-suffering is even harder: the causes of para-suffering are numerous. For most of us, a week without some para-suffering is a remarkably happy week. Furthermore, some of those experiences summon others; shouldn't we listen?

One might respond that there are numerous philosophical investigations into emotions or even negative mental states and events like boredom (or frustration). However, my call is for a collective consideration of para-suffering experiences, comparing them both to physical pain and to suffering. To this end, para-suffering should be examined within the philosophical field of pain and suffering. This would be beneficial, as the pain and suffering field has developed notions and theories that could be instrumental in understanding these experiences. Moreover, this approach could encourage the inclusion of para-suffering in healthcare research and clinical practice, which already draw on philosophical inquiry from the pain and suffering field, rather than from other philosophical domains. At present, the focus remains predominantly on the pain-suffering pair, as if it exhausts "the bad infinity of moaning and groaning."

In the philosophical field of pain and suffering, suffering is almost always addressed within the "pain and suffering" framework. The relationships between pain and suffering, or the delineation between them, have been subject to many conflicting interpretations and philosophical theories (for a critical discussion, see Olivier Massin's "Suffering Pains"⁴⁵). Now, if we use "pain" to refer to physical pain, and "suffering" in line with its everyday meaning, para-suffering experiences are left unaccounted for. If we strain the meaning of suffering to encompass para-suffering, we lose an important distinction.

There are promising investigations into the study of para-suffering experiences within the pain and suffering field, including reflections on unpleasantness and mental pain (the extension of the pain category to non-physical or non-primarily physical pains, notably following the introduction of the concept of social pains in neuroscience and psychology by Naomi Eisenberger and Jaak Panksepp⁴⁶). However, they seem to be the neglected stepchild of the field, and further investigation on the relations between unpleasantness and/or mental pain and pain and suffering is needed.

⁴⁵ Olivier Massin, "Suffering Pains," in *Philosophy of Suffering: Metaphysics, Value, and Normativity*, 76–100.

⁴⁶ Naomi Eisenberger, "Broken Hearts and Broken Bones: A Neural Perspective on the Similarities Between Social and Physical Pain," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 21, n° 1 (2012), 42–47; Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

To conclude, examining the commonalities between para-suffering and suffering could help reshape the philosophical understanding of negative experiences. It could refine our understanding of suffering, while also exposing a broader range of experiences that warrant attention. Ricœur's way of characterizing suffering allowed me to highlight other negative experiences, and more generally may prompt reflection on how negative experiences unfold. His model may be more about exploring the dynamics of suffering and other negative experiences, rather than offering a strict or precise definition of them, as it lacks a clear extension. With Luz Ascarate and Astrid Chevance's translation making Ricœur's work accessible to non-Francophone readers, it is important to approach this text as a resource for understanding the unfolding of negative experiences, rather than as a definitive guide to defining or delineating suffering and pain.

Bibliography

- Michael Brady, *Suffering and virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- , "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine," *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 306, no 11 (1982), 639–645. <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejm198203183061104>
- Jennifer Corns, "Suffering as Significantly Disrupted Agency," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 105, no 3 (2021), 706–729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12841>
- Charlotte Duffee, "What really is the nature of suffering? Three problems with Eric Cassell's concept of distress," *Bioethics*, vol. 34, no 7 (2020), 695–702. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12748>
- Naomi Eisenberger, "Broken Hearts and Broken Bones: A Neural Perspective on the Similarities Between Social and Physical Pain," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 21, no 1 (2012), 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721411429455>
- Claire Marin et Nathalie Zaccà-Reyners, *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur* (Paris : PUF, 2013).
- Massin Olivier, "Suffering Pains," in *Philosophy of Suffering: Metaphysics, Value, and Normativity*, eds. Michael S. Brady, David Bain and Jennifer Corns (London: Routledge, 2019), 76–100.
- Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Jean-François Richard, "Douleurs et souffrances : quelle place pour la médecine ?," in *Manuel de soins palliatifs. Clinique, psychologie, éthique*, 4th ed., eds. Denis Jacquemin and Dominique de Broucker (Paris: Dunod, 2014), 84–91. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dunod.jacqu.2014.01.0084>
- Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- , "Suffering is Not Pain. An annotated English Translation," trans. Luz Ascarate and Astrid Chevance, *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 15, no 2, 14–27.
- Benedict de Spinoza, *The chief works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. II, trans. Robert Harvey Monro Elwes, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884).

Marie-André Vigil-Ripoche, "Souffrance," in *Les concepts en sciences infirmières*, 2nd ed., eds. Michel Formarier and Lucie Jovic (Paris: Association de recherche en soins infirmiers, 2012), 283–285.

Frédéric Worms, "Souffrant, agissant et vivant," in *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur*, eds. Claire Marin and Nathalie Zaccā-Reyners (Paris: PUF, 2013), 37–45.