

Personal Experience of Suffering. Reflections Inspired by Elements of Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Anthropology

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Abstract. Using elements of K. Wojtyła's philosophical anthropology, I make an attempt to look at the phenomenon of suffering through the experience of the suffering subject, through the uniquely personal experience of 'I am suffering.' The personal experience of suffering involves the inclusion of the phenomena of pain and suffering within the domain of self-consciousness, i.e. within the field of experiencing oneself, the sense of one's own identity, including the striving for fulfilment. In this perspective, the experience of suffering has to do with the person-specific openness to transcendence, which makes it possible to show the positive side to the experience of suffering. Both in the field of self-consciousness and in the personal experience of self-determination, the experience of 'I am suffering' can serve the person in the realisation of personal truth (about the good), involving and stimulating actions towards fulfilment.

Keywords: pain, human experience, fulfilment, personal transcendence, freedom.

Introductory remarks

Given the multiplicity of meanings of the term ‘suffering’, it will be necessary to narrow the field of research to only some aspects of this great subject. Namely, I will speak of suffering by treating it as something exclusively personal. In this sense, one can only suffer if one is able to know one’s own suffering and to relate to it (consequently, animals do not suffer, but only feel pain) (Spaemann 2006, 41–47). I will touch on a few theoretical aspects and also, as a result, a few practical, existential threads. In these latter aspects in particular, I will refer to certain psychological studies.

Wojtyła did not elaborate philosophically on the problem of suffering; he only spoke about it in his theological reflections, including literary ones (his drama ‘Job’). So I am not describing his conception, I only try to apply his philosophical methods as well as his anthropological principles, which are an inspiration when it comes to thinking about certain aspects of suffering¹. In Wojtyła’s anthropology, the basis is elementary lived experience, something that still eludes empirical science. Furthermore, Wojtyła speaks of experience being able to understand, i.e. having the ability to grasp the basic elements, dynamisms, and structures present in it, and he conceives of experience broadly: as both sensory and intellectual as well as external and internal (subjective though objectified) (Wojtyła 2021, 95–99; Savage 2013). At the centre of Wojtyła’s research is his conception of the person, as a subject – ‘I’, revealing itself and at the same time fulfilling itself in its action. This concept therefore implies the essential development of the person, through the realisation of the truth of the good, becoming better in a moral sense, etc. The foundation of Wojtyła’s anthropology is the classical concept of man, meaning here a traditional philosophy of man with Aristotelian-Thomistic roots

¹ A distinction must be made in Wojtyła’s work between strictly philosophical arguments and theological considerations, mainly originating in the papal period. Since Wojtyła respected the principle of the autonomy of philosophy and theology, the Polish philosophical literature usually makes a distinction between his proper names and ‘Karol Wojtyła’ is used in reference to his philosophical views from the time of his academic work, whereas ‘John Paul II’ is used in relation to his theological papal thought.

(that is also independent of theology, but supportive of it) (Buttiglione 1997, 72–82).

Philosophy has considerable trouble with the concept of suffering, primarily because suffering is a completely subjective phenomenon and it seems impossible to objectify it fully (Bain, Brady, and Corns 2019). Therefore, the word ‘suffering’ is usually understood as ‘my suffering’ (we objectify it on the basis of the analogy of experience, just as we objectify the inherently subjective experience of the self) (Wojtyła 1979 (2), 273–277; Wojtyła 2021, 109–112). Given the attempt to capture the subjective aspects of experience, the presence of certain metaphors as well as the first person singular pronoun in the construction of the description seems inevitable.

I would like to present two theses for consideration, which I will develop in the following two sections: 1. Suffering is an essential part of personal experience, i.e. it is integrated into the overall experience of the person so that it can serve the development of the person (it has certain positive aspects); and 2. In the experience of suffering, certain aspects of personal transcendence can be perceived, both on the ground of the person’s self-consciousness and in the field of the person’s self-determination (freedom).

1. The person as subject of suffering

1.1. Man is a suffering being

In ancient Greece, a synonym for human being was mortal being. A derivative term from it could be ‘suffering being’. In principle, this term contains the most important features of human existence: man is a being subject to passions, subject to the inevitability of fate, reliant on the contingency of existence, dependent, and so on. Staying within this broader conceptual scope, we say that a suffering human being is a human being who endures hardships and annoyances that are a necessary part of his or her existence. It can be considered that enduring hardship is inscribed in the nature of man (Frankl 2010, 137).

In this paper, however, I will focus on the narrower meaning of the term ‘suffering’, which I believe is more appropriate to it. Let us begin by comparing suffering with pain. Pain, in the elementary sense, I understand here as a signal of some danger to the organism. It therefore has a meaningful, understandable, positive function in human life, as in the whole of nature (Bakan 1968; Lomranz and Mostofsky 1997). Suffering, on the other hand, can be regarded as a human experience that detaches the experiencing subject from the context of meaning and function performed for the sake of life (organism, survival, functioning, etc.) (Spaemann 2007, 216–221; Cassell 2004). Unlike pain, it seems to be an experience devoid of any known meaning. Therefore, the most reasonable conclusion seems to be the postulate proclaimed by many for the elimination of suffering, freedom from suffering. If, on the other hand, one were to recognise, on the basis of an act of faith or some extra-rational conviction, that the lack of cognition of the meaning of suffering does not imply its actual absence, but only a deficiency of cognition, then one could apply the analogy to the meaningfulness of pain and assume the existence of a meaning of suffering that is, however, inaccessible to us (Frankl 1959; Frankl 2010; Linden 2020).

1.2. Suffering on the level of personal experience and human nature

According to Wojtyła’s concept of integration, suffering enters into the total area of the personal experience of the concrete subject (Wojtyła 2021, 295–375). Personal sensation (as opposed to animal sensation) integrates suffering into the self-conscious experiencing of the self, makes it an aspect of identity and the striving for fulfilment (even if it is considered to be opposed to this striving). Knowing oneself as suffering means that suffering is experienced on the basis of personal experience: ‘suffering is something that is mine, that belongs to me’. Since suffering is therefore part of me, it can become a special object of self-knowledge – it takes the form of a unique existential situation that can reveal something essential about myself (Cassell 2004). Theoretically, this means that even

acute suffering can lead to deeper self-knowledge, i.e. the discovery of some truth about myself (Frankl 1966).

In view of the above, we should pose the question of the relationship of suffering to human nature. Absurd suffering, experienced without any sense, is itself something contrary to reason, and therefore seems to be something existing against human nature, against humanity. We ask, then, whether suffering in any aspect can be human and what that means. That it is inhuman would simply mean that it is evil, as being against man, his nature. Suffering, on the other hand, could be considered human for two reasons: (1) as inherent in the human condition, i.e. accompanying man by necessity, by nature; and (2) as something that can serve the development of the person (his fulfilment), i.e. it can also be something good (Gilbert 2016; Hall, Langer and McMartin 2010). Thus, if the experience of suffering becomes something personal – an aspect of personal life and action – it is certainly human in sense 1 and, at least as a certain possibility, can be considered human in sense 2.

1.3. The specificity of the experience of ‘I am suffering’

The experience of ‘I am suffering’ is certainly a phenomenon different from the fact of suffering simply or of suffering ‘someone else’s’, which I look at and therefore can only imagine. On the other hand, a fully subjective insight into the experience of ‘I am suffering’ is not given to me apart from the real event of my here and now suffering. But again, when I experience suffering in the moment, I perceive it differently – it consumes me, takes away my ability to have a healthy view, etc. I can therefore only consider the experience of suffering unhindered when I am not currently suffering. To enter into the experience of the subject itself, however, requires reference to a concrete personal experience. We are therefore making, following in the footsteps of Wojtyła, a certain objectification of subjective experience here, in order to be able to view the subjective experience, lived in the first person (Wojtyła 1979 (2), 273–277; Wojtyła 2021, 109–112). The objectified experience of ‘I am suffering’ is the proper object of the philosophical reflection.

Going further, let us try to find a place for the experience of suffering in the fundamental distinction of personal activities in Wojtyła's philosophy, i.e. the modernised scholastic distinction between conscious and free acts (actions, *actus humanus*) and what happens in the human being (so-called activations, *actus hominis*) (Wojtyła 2021, 121–124). We would be inclined to consider that experience of suffering belongs to the latter category (as something that happens without, and often against, my will). Let us note, however, that although the subject becomes aware of the inevitability of suffering and of his own helplessness, because he is, as it were, forced to experience it passively, at the same time the suffering experienced (especially intense, acute suffering) embraces the whole person, absorbs and involves him, comes to the fore, not as something that is simply registered in the field of consciousness. The person experiences their pain and suffering in the context of their own self, making it something of their own, personal. Moreover, my suffering becomes something through which I express myself: 'I am suffering' is unique, inimitable to each person. This is what it means that the experience enters the realm of personal experience, i.e. it enters into a relationship with the consciousness and freedom of the particular person. For, in addition to passive experience, there is the activity of the subject, consisting of knowing suffering and taking a free attitude, taking a stance towards experienced suffering. Therefore, suffering (especially acute, intense or long-lasting states) cannot be considered as just some event or sequence of events registered in the subject, as it is a sensation closely linked to the cognitive-volitional involvement of the person.

2. The transcendence of the person in the experience of suffering

The above arguments will be developed in this section. The theme of suffering, it seems, can reveal some important aspect of transcendence (transcending oneself) on each of the three main pillars of personal experience that Wojtyła mentions. These are self-consciousness, freedom (self-determination) and participation (interpersonal relationships)

(Wojtyła 2021, 112–117). The first two will be developed in the paragraph 2.1 and 2.2 of this section, while the third topic opens up an entirely new area of reflection on the human being and would therefore require a more extensive elaboration, so it only needs to be mentioned here due to the requirements of a limited text. Participation in humanity has to do with the relationality of the person and the striving for fulfilment in a community of persons. Participation occurs through experiencing the other ‘I’ as a person, thus leading to the personalisation of relationships between people (Wojtyła 2021, 377–414, 514–531). On the level of the experience of suffering, this means empathising with and sharing in the suffering of other persons (the other ‘suffering I’) as well as the possibility of suffering for others (self-sacrifice, sacrificial love) (Bakan 1968, Smith 2005)².

2.1. The question of meaning/sense

A quite distinct feature of human suffering is the question of its meaning, which is an essential aspect of experiencing one’s existence in a personal dimension. The state of suffering, helplessness, passivity, a sense of meaninglessness, etc., do not simply provoke the suffering subject to a mere search for an explanation of their distress. Instead, these states stimulate more intense questions about the meaning of life, its purpose, etc., opening the way to questions about meaning in general. We could consider this property of suffering, by virtue of which it forces the suffering subject to ask existential questions, as the first positive aspect of suffering on the ground of the person’s experience (Hall, Langer and McMartin 2010). From this perspective, it is possible to perceive in the personal experience of suffering certain positive transparencies (peeking through, as it were, from behind the walls of the dark harshness of suffering) which are of significance in the continuity and stability of human existence, in its dimension of the personal experience of the circumstances of individual life. These remarks partly refer to psychological aspects.

² Since participation in the humanity of other persons is always directed towards a particular person/persons, it requires a free act of decision in which the personal subject opens up to the other and makes it possible to establish an inter-personal relationship with all its dynamics. In this sense, this thread is somehow contained within the topic of freedom (see 2.2).

Firstly, it does not seem that the absence of a meaning of suffering necessarily leads to the negation of all meaning, to existential emptiness (although in practice, unfortunately, as a result of extremely powerful experiences of suffering, this can happen). In times of suffering, the act of hope supports the sufferer, as without hope, human existence would struggle to function in principle. The retreat from religious faith that is characteristic of our time, which certainly provides support for the experience of meaningless suffering, can be overcome or balanced to some extent by personal hope. Hope makes it possible to experience human questions from the perspective of unlimited existential openness and a deeply felt longing for fulfilment, so that it becomes an activating factor for that side of personal experience that is responsible for contact with reality, for directing attention to it, for binding oneself to it in various relationships (Waterworth 2004). If, therefore, the experience of suffering finds support in personally experienced hope, the state of acute suffering, together with a weakening sense of the meaning of life, can pull a person out of a merely mental, virtual, 'projective' context in relation to his or her own life, and thus make the suffering person aware of the reality of his or her own existence, and even radically restore a sense of the realism of life. In this way, this experience is capable – by way of a certain provocation – of opening up the search for the meaning of one's own existence in the personal space of life (Frankl 1959; Linley and Joseph 2004; Hall, Langer and McMartin 2010).

Secondly, at the level of concrete, practical decisions, the prolonged experience of acute suffering can often lead to the need to look at the very value of life in a different way and to re-evaluate the value of the many things one possesses or values. This means that the experience of suffering can provoke a person to a re-evaluation of his or her own life, a rediscovery and personal verification of what has value/sense and what does not in a particular life (Peterson 2006; Maksiel 1998). Although the search for the meaning of suffering, in the sense of total cognitive satisfaction, does not usually yield results, in the aspect shown here (especially in relation to hope), it can be considered that the experience of suffering has a certain potential that allows one to perceive in it an aspect

of personal transcendence, i.e. of transcending oneself (Frankl 1966; Garrison 2001). For this experience also involves the possibility of looking at one's own life as such, i.e. going beyond the current here and now, towards the existential meaning of life in general. The natural act of hope that accompanies human life at an elementary level also plays a part here because – despite the distress currently being experienced – life in a holistic perspective shows itself to be good, positive and empowering for survival (Linden 2020). It is on this ground, it seems, that the opening of the person to the religious dimension can also arise, since on the religious level the incomprehensible cause of suffering has to do with Someone in whom I trust (Schnitker et al. 2017).

2.2. Challenge to freedom

Essentially, suffering is something that seems to oppose freedom. The subject of suffering is passive, experiences suffering and has no control over it. Because of the distress, loss, etc. felt, as well as personal helplessness and passive 'compulsion', the subject interprets suffering as an evil, unwanted experience. Therefore, by an act of his freedom, he opposes it. Does this mean that there is no room for suffering in the conception of a person's freedom (i.e. to be free, one cannot suffer)? Is it somehow possible to conceive of suffering as a positive factor in the experience of the free personal subject? What purpose, in the context of the whole experience of the person, would be served by patiently enduring annoyances, pain or sorrow?

As mentioned, the experience of suffering is integrated into the totality of the person's experience. This takes place both in the cognitive field, through acts of self-conscious lived experience, including in particular the search for the meaning of suffering, and in the volitional field, where I take a stance towards suffering. In this sense, suffering enters into a relationship with freedom, which does not necessarily imply its acceptance but only the subject's attitude (also negative). It is worth noting here that the very linguistic form of the expression 'I am suffering', in relation to the expression 'I experience suffering', indicates the active aspect. And it is this active form, after all, that we use most often. This means that,

despite passively experiencing something unpleasant, unwanted, which I cannot dismiss or stop, I have the sense of participating in something that is in itself alien to me, but through the lived experience, the subjectification, it becomes something of mine, as if I could somehow dispose of it (Smith 2005; Hall, Langer and Mcmartin 2010). But what does this mean?

An analysis of acts of self-determination shows that the chief evil of a person is the moral evil through which each person makes himself or herself evil (Wojtyła 2021, 238–242). The act of (self-)misappropriation is never good, since it intrinsically leads to annihilation. No other aspect of a person's experience is therefore intrinsically bad in itself. Therefore, suffering, as fundamentally unwanted, can sometimes be good, i.e. it need not lead to destruction. On the level of becoming morally better (which, in Wojtyła's philosophy, is the chief way of being a person) (Wojtyła 2021, 199–204), the experience of suffering can thus become something good when it gains – in an act of self-determination, i.e. a person's free decision – the rank of a means of acquiring the good (growth, development, fulfilment) of the person or of stopping the greatest evil, i.e. moral evil, which by its very nature denies the truth, including the truth 'about me' (Wojtyła 2020, 130–132, 581–586).

The value of suffering, which in this case takes the form of self-sacrifice, is the good of the end which it serves in a given situation. The experience of suffering becomes a way of fighting personal evil, e.g. when I accept someone's mockery, disapproval, misjudgement or even their causing me pain, as the price of, for example, defending the truth, i.e. when I decide to tell the truth and take all the consequences of this on myself. For every choice of the person, as Wojtyła points out, presupposes a subjective reference to truth, which is understood as transcendent of the subject, i.e. objectively grounded (Wojtyła 1979 (1), 208–210; Wojtyła 2021, 256–259). This is the crucial point. The reference to truth, as a condition of the self-determination (freedom) of the person, has an essential connection with personal fulfilment, consisting in the proper knowledge of the truth (about the good) and adapting to it in the free act of the person. This personal relation to truth is the fundamental expression of transcendence, which in the final analysis, as Wojtyła concludes,

reveals a dimension of absoluteness (of the Absolute/God) (Wojtyła 1979 (1), 206–210).

Here, then, we can take a further step in relation to the previous remarks. The experience of suffering becomes a challenge to the freedom of the person, bearing in mind that the proper foundation of freedom is reference to truth. The fact of suffering, which is beyond my control and which appears within my experience as unwanted, can be rejected (in some type of rebellion, negation or even despair, resignation, breakdown) or accepted. Unwanted suffering only implies passivity and the inevitability of experiencing unpleasantness, and rebellion is unable to change this situation. Suffering accepted as an act of freedom, although unintentional, can become something experienced personally, e.g. as part of one's own maturation, a new orientation of one's life, self-discovery, etc., or in the form of gaining some higher good or avoiding a serious evil. Suffering as rejected (bad) is not mine; as accepted, on the other hand, it becomes part of me and can reveal to me some truth about myself (Schnitker et al. 2017). I participate in something that is not mine, but which somehow becomes mine (in the experience of 'I am suffering') and which, moreover, I can in some way dispose of through free acceptance.

Conclusions

The reflections carried out were intended to show suffering from the perspective of its personal experience, especially in the context of lived experiencing, the meaning of life, and freedom. The concluding statements lead us to conclude, in a general and fundamental way, that what is significant in this approach is not so much the sense of suffering itself (still hidden from our cognition) but rather the 'existential' sense of the suffering subject. This sense expresses what we can refer to as the mystery of the person, along with their openness to some higher sense, a deeper dimension of life. Suffering remains a mystery to us, and it is also an essential part of the mystery of the person (Makselon 1998). If the person is a being to be fulfilled, and life is fulfilled insofar as one is able to attribute it to the truth (and in a certain way freely surrender it to the truth),

it seems that the acceptance of suffering could be considered one of the best tests of this free surrender of life to the truth, i.e. to something more in my life. The transcendence means that the mystery of the person is partly revealed, but nevertheless still remains a mystery, housing a relation to a higher dimension/sense of life. Thus, transcending oneself in the experience of suffering – if the subject does not succumb to a rebellion against passivity and the inevitability of unpleasant experiences – becomes a path towards the discovery of some deeper sense of the person, including a deeper truth concerning life and the existence of the concrete personal self, immersed in the constant drama of the quest for fulfilment (happiness) (Frankl 1966; Hall, Langer and McMartin 2010).

Using elements of K. Wojtyła's philosophical anthropology, we have attempted to look at the phenomenon of suffering through the experience of the suffering subject, through the uniquely personal experience of 'I am suffering.' We have shown how suffering is included in the overall personal experience, and we have also indicated the possibility that there is a positive side to the experience of suffering. We have tried to show that the experience of suffering has to do with the person-specific openness to transcendence. Both in the field of self-consciousness and in the personal experience of self-determination, the experience of 'I am suffering' can serve the person in the realisation of personal truth (about the good), involving and stimulating actions towards fulfilment, including voluntary acts of sacrifice (for the higher good).

The conclusions drawn from the above attempt make it possible to formulate some assertions of a general nature concerning the meaning of the fact of suffering in relation to the human condition. Well, the last word of the suffering person is not necessarily the meaninglessness of existence and the abyss of hopelessness, but the transcendence of the person, opening the door to something more, to some higher meaning. On the one hand, the lack of knowledge of the meaning of suffering gives rise to another suffering, which is the sense of the meaninglessness of life and the accompanying temptation to rebel, to deny reality, and ultimately even to reject God (in the classical theory of the virtues, this sense of meaninglessness was to be resisted by the virtue of patience)

(Schnitker et al. 2017). On the other hand, however, the assumption of the positivity of existence, the meaningfulness of being and the rationality of the world, inherent in the depths of human nature and expressed in acts of personal hope, points to the necessity of some kind of reason for the fact of suffering. This theoretical conclusion finds its confirmation in the concreteness of the lived suffering that fills the experience of a person whose acts of self-determination are undertaken on a dramatic path towards fulfilment (in truth). In this way, I believe, the experience of suffering can become a significant impulse to open up to a transcendent (including religious) perspective and can also provide a bridge of sorts to a new dimension of life (Frankl 1966; Makselon 1998).

In other words, although the meaning of our suffering is not entirely known to us, we can still become participants in it as individuals who continue to know ourselves, the meaning of our lives, and experience the desire for fulfilment towards which we move in our free acts, sometimes full of drama and renunciation. Suffering lived in such a perspective, at least in theory, can become an important factor in personal growth (Hall, Langer and Mcmartin 2010). In this way, the philosophical conclusions to some extent confirm what we can hear in the numerous testimonies of people experiencing their suffering in a similar manner, e.g. religious entrustment.

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