

Suffering as Experiential – A Response to Jennifer Corns

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In *Suffering and Virtue*¹, I examine and defend the idea that suffering plays vital roles in a good life, contrary to the prevailing wisdom that suffering is (always or typically) detrimental to happiness and well-being. In the book, whilst careful to acknowledge the obvious fact that suffering is in many cases deleterious to happiness, I propose that it can, nevertheless, have both intrinsic and instrumental value. I argue that forms of suffering can themselves constitute virtuous motives; that suffering is essential to the cultivation and development of virtues of strength and vulnerability; and that suffering is vital to the flourishing of social groups. Early on in the book I state, without much in the way of reason or argument, that suffering is most naturally used to refer to a negative experiential state. I then develop and defend an account of suffering, according to which suffering is negative affect that we *mind*, where minding is cashed out in terms of an occurrent desire that the negative affect not be occurring. In ‘Suffering as Significantly Disrupted Agency’, Jennifer Corns challenges my assumption that suffering is best understood as experiential, raises a number of objections to my account of suffering as an experiential phenomenon, and proceeds to develop her own non-experiential view. It will come as no surprise that I want to push back against her criticisms of my account, and have objections of my own to her non-experiential view. But in so doing, I hope to make a much stronger case for thinking of suffering as experiential than I did in *Suffering and Virtue*.

1 | CORNS’ OBJECTIONS TO MY ACCOUNT

Corns raises five objections against my account. Since the first is more a statement of theoretical disagreement than an objection, and the last is an acceptance of a desideratum for a theory of suffering that I reject (for reasons which follow), I’ll focus on objections two, three, and four.

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Whilst acknowledging the skill and elan with which these are developed, I find none of them ultimately persuasive.

(i) Corns doubts whether all those who suffer – including young children and non-human animals – can have the third-order attitudes that I apparently take to be constitutive of suffering.² She doubts, to illustrate, that her one-year-old “is able to *desire that she doesn’t desire that she doesn’t hear the lawnmower.*” If my account suggests that we need the capacity for such sophisticated higher-order attitudes in order to suffer, then it is to this extent implausible.

I agree that it seems unlikely that young children can have desires that are directed at things that they acknowledge that they want or don’t want, or have thoughts with the above kind of content explicitly in mind. But note that my account of unpleasantness does not posit an *occurrent* desire directed towards a sensation, one of which the subject is consciously aware, or which figures in her thinking. Indeed, the desire-account of unpleasantness will agree that desires directed at sensations – and which together make something unpleasant – are *not* present to consciousness when one has an unpleasant experience. If they were, presumably all those who theorise about painfulness and other forms of unpleasantness would agree to a desire account of such things! Instead, desire-theorists like me hold that such desires are theoretical posits necessary to explain and capture the motivational and normative features that unpleasantness has. Such desires partly constitute unpleasant experiences, therefore, without this very fact of constitution being present to the subject of those experiences. As a result, all my view of suffering requires is that the subject be capable of having an *occurrent* desire that her unpleasant experience cease – that she be capable of *mind*ing her unpleasant experience – and this doesn’t seem to generate the kind of meta-cognitive worries that Corns supposes. For I take it that even one-year-olds are capable of *mind*ing unpleasant noises.

(ii) Corns claims that my account doesn’t recognise the importance of the sufferer’s ‘extra-mental situation’. This is due to two factors. First, Corns thinks that I am committed to saying that ‘we will typically desire not to be having *any* unpleasant experience’. As a result, I am apparently committed to the view that any unpleasant experience will typically constitute a form of suffering. But then I am apparently unable to explain how the importance (or apparent importance) of something plays a role in generating the desire that an unpleasant experience cease, and hence how importance plays a role in accounting for suffering. As a result, I cannot accommodate the desideratum D5: *An unpleasant experience felt in response to something which is, or is taken by the sufferer to be, important will typically, but not always, result in suffering.*

It seems to me that this conclusion only follows if we ignore once more the fact that suffering is a matter of having an *occurrent* desire that some unpleasant experience cease, a fact that I was at pains to emphasise in developing my account. Following Tim Schroeder, *occurrent* desires “are desires that are playing some role in one’s psyche at the moment”. As I put it in the book: *occurrent* desires “are *active* and *operative*: they are involved in motivating action, or in drawing attention to certain options and feelings, or they are acting as ‘premises in our practical deliberation, or in ruling out various courses of action, or inclining us to believe certain things.’” (29) So even if it is true, as Corns suggests, that we typically desire that unpleasant experiences cease, it doesn’t follow that we typically have an *occurrent* desire that such experiences cease. Indeed, it seems to me

² A clarificatory point: since on my account of suffering, “... a subject suffers when and only when she has (i) an unpleasant experience consisting of a sensation S and a desire that S not be occurring, and (ii) an *occurrent* desire that this unpleasant experience not be occurring” (55), the question should really be whether young children and non-human animals are capable of having *second-order* attitudes, since I take it that the desire that some sensation not be occurring is a first-order desire.

plausible that we have very many desires throughout the day, whether directed at our own mental states or not, that are existent but not occurrent, and so which don't play active and operative roles in our psyche. There is as a result considerable scope on my account to recognize the importance of the sufferer's extra-mental situation: suffering can be and is responsive to (perceived) importance when such importance generates an occurrent desire that some unpleasant experience cease, or when a perception of importance elevates and brings into an active and operative role a desire that was previously inactive and inoperative.

(iii) Corns claims that my positing of an occurrent desire that some negative affect cease to explain suffering is in tension with three claims about suffering's value, captured in the following desiderata:

D6: Suffering is sometimes an appropriate response that enables us to respond effectively to its causes.

D7: Suffering is sometimes necessary for something that is, or that is taken by the sufferer to be, valuable.

D8: Suffering is sometimes an essential component of something that is, or that is taken to be, valued by the sufferer.

The reason for this, according to Corns, is that it is the negative affect itself that does the valuable work, and so the negative affect itself that is responsible for certain responses being appropriate and certain things being valuable and valued. The occurrent desire that the unpleasant experience cease – the element which on my account is essential to suffering – isn't (so her argument goes) necessary for this value, and indeed can be harmful to the value in question. For instance, it is the unpleasant affective experience that is partly constitutive of remorse that moves one to make apologies and reparations; any occurrent desire that the feelings of remorse cease would seem to be a motivational fifth wheel here, and so it is not suffering which will play the valuable role(s). More damagingly, an occurrent desire that the pains of remorse cease can run *counter to* appropriate action: instead of making reparations, the sufferer might – because she desires that the unpleasant feelings of remorse cease – take action to reduce her unpleasant feelings, e.g. through hardening her heart. Similar considerations tell against the capacity of my account to capture D7 and D8, on the grounds that the respective values are best explained by the unpleasant negative affective experiences themselves, rather than an occurrent desire not to be having them.

My response here is simply to deny that it is negative affect as such that 'does the useful motivating' and thus has the relevant value. Although I make my case for suffering's value (for instance, as a virtuous motive) by focusing on pain as an instance of physical suffering, and remorse as an instance of emotional suffering, I make it explicit (see, e.g. fn. 8 on p. 61) that the pain and remorse in question need to be suitably intense and/or directed at a suitably important objects and events in order to motivate damage avoidance on the one hand, and reparations and apologies on the other. As previous comments about the importance of occurrent desire indicate, there is good reason to think that it is suffering, rather than negative affect in general, that has motivational and other benefits. Unpleasantness that is not intense, or that does not intrude upon our deliberations or otherwise play an active role in our psyche at any given moment, is unlikely to have the motivational and epistemic value that feelings of pain and remorse clearly do. Without occurrent desire, pain and remorse might not keep our bodily damage or moral wrongdoing in mind, or draw our attention to certain options to mitigate them, or provide the motivational push to override lethargy or selfishness.

Moreover, there are good reasons to think that it is really suffering, and not merely negative affect associated with pain and remorse, which constitutes an appropriate response. Suppose I have done something terribly wrong, but feel low-level, relatively mild feelings of guilt and remorse. Clearly this is an inappropriate response, since wrongdoing of this kind normatively requires that I *suffer* the pains of remorse. Something similar applies to the case of grief. When a loved one dies, it is not enough to experience negative or unpleasant feelings of grief, since it is perfectly possible to have mildly unpleasant feelings of grief. Instead, the feelings must – in order to be appropriate – be ones that we *mind* to a considerable degree, that are active and operative in our psyche; on my account, such feelings are appropriate precisely because they are intense enough, or directed at objects/events important enough, to generate an occurrent desire that they cease. The desire not to be undergoing the unpleasant experience is, contrary to what Corns says, precisely at the heart of the value that remorse and other negative feelings have for us.

2 | IS SUFFERING SIGNIFICANTLY DISRUPTED AGENCY?

Having rejected my account, Corns proposes her own: namely, “that suffering is significant disruption to agency. One suffers when and only when their agency is significantly disrupted.” Her account of agency and agentive forms strikes me as subtle, novel, and once again skilfully done. Her accounts of different agentive forms, and the ways in which these can overlap and are dynamically related, promise to be influential, and provide significant insight into the ways in which humans and other animals can flourish, and equally be harmed. However, I don’t think that Corns’s proposal is satisfactory as an account of suffering, and for two reasons. (i) It seems that my account better captures some of the very desiderata for a theory of suffering that Corns elucidates, and (for this and other reasons) is considerably closer to our ‘everyday theory’ of suffering. And (ii) the idea that one suffers when and only when their agency is significantly disrupted strikes me as false both left-to-right and right-to-left, since there can be suffering when agency is not significantly disrupted, and also significant disruptions to agency without suffering. What will hopefully emerge from this discussion is that both our everyday theory, and philosophical argument, supports a view of suffering as experiential.

(i) Corns claims that her account better captures our ‘everyday theory’, which “countenances both mental and extra-mental occurrences” as constituting suffering. But this claim strikes me as false, since it seems that our everyday theory of suffering, insofar as we have one, clearly favours an experiential account of suffering. To see this, consider a list of the many and varied forms of suffering, both physical and mental, that are (unfortunately) all too familiar: the things most people will easily cite as kinds of suffering, if asked. These include: pain, coldness, tiredness, nausea, hunger, thirst, extreme heat, extreme bodily irritation, remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, frustration, depression, loneliness, stress, anxiety, social rejection, lovesickness, boredom, regret ... and so on. Now consider the most basic theoretical question we can ask here: what do all of these have in common, in virtue of which they count as types of suffering, or in virtue of which they fall under the concept? It is difficult – *really* difficult – to avoid the answer that these are all forms of suffering because they are all (extremely) unpleasant experiences, things that feel miserable, things that hurt, feelings that we dislike or hate. One would have to be under the spell of sophisticated philosophical theory – rather than everyday theory – to answer that they all count as kinds of suffering because they involve significant disruptions to our agency (Corns), or that they threaten our intactness as a person (Cassell), or any similar kind of non-experiential account. Of course, it might well be turn out that more sophisticated accounts

than mine are actually true; the right answer isn't necessarily the most intuitive or natural answer, after all. But if another account does turn out to be true, it won't be because it fares better at capturing our everyday theory of suffering. As far as our everyday theory goes, what different types of suffering have in common is something experiential.

But don't we talk perfectly well of people suffering a financial loss, or a team suffering a defeat, or a child suffering from the closure of a nursery, as Corns points out? And doesn't such everyday language suggest that some suffering is experienced and some suffering is not, as D1 states? Well, I am happy to admit to the former claim about language-use, and indeed do so in the book. But this does not license the claim that non-experiential suffering is part of our everyday theory of suffering, or that some genuine suffering is not experienced. Or if it does, then we are also licensed to include in our everyday theory instances of suffering which do not involve significant disruption of agency. After all, we talk perfectly well of the coastline suffering erosion, or the chair suffering strain under my weight, or the band's reputation suffering a critical mauling; and yet coastlines, furniture, and reputations are not agents and do not have agency. If our everyday theory of suffering is determined by our everyday language, then our everyday theory threatens to undermine Corns's proposal too. For this reason, we both have good reason to limit the extent to which our everyday theory of suffering respects how people use the word.³

Still, I imagine that Corns and others might want more in the way of argument as to why suffering is, properly considered, experiential. Here, then, is one such argument. Suppose we ask why it is so natural and intuitive to invoke unpleasant experiences to explain what all instances of suffering have in common.⁴ One good reason is that this provides a satisfying explanation of the normative claim that suffering is *pro tanto* (or *prima facie*) bad for the sufferer. Indeed, the explanation of the badness of suffering available to those who favour an experiential account seems far superior to an explanation in terms of significantly disrupted agency, or any other non-experiential account. If so, then my account better captures D2. The easiest way to see this is to focus on the badness of pain. Nearly everyone agrees that pain is intrinsically bad. And nearly everyone agrees that pain is intrinsically bad when and because it is *painful*: when and because it involves a highly unpleasant negative affective experience. Such an explanation of pain's disvalue seems both basic and fundamental: we don't need to invoke any other, more basic or more fundamental negative features of pain in order to understand its badness. Indeed, if someone didn't understand that pain is bad *because* it is painful – because it hurts – we would be at a loss to know what to say to them. Contrast the painfulness of pain with other ways in which it has disvalue. Chronic pain can and does cause exceptional demands on the health system, for instance – some estimate that it costs the NHS in the UK £10billion per year. This is clearly a very bad thing. But this kind of extrinsic disvalue cannot be invoked in order to explain the intrinsic badness of pain. Something similar applies, I think, to pain when it causes significant disruption to agency. Such effects of pain can be utterly devastating, and so a very great evil. But they no more explain the intrinsic badness of pain than its financial burdens. If so, then an experiential account of suffering better captures and

³ It is understandable why people use language in this way, even if one accepts an experiential account of suffering. After all, significantly disrupted agency and other non-experiential factors will typically be very closely related to negative affective experiences, as Corns herself notes, but also non-agential harms like coastal erosion and a damaged reputation. It is therefore tempting to use the term 'suffering' to include things which are causes of, correlated with, or consequences of negative affected experience.

⁴ The naturalness and intuitive plausibility of an appeal to experience is something that Corns herself recognises, when she writes: "It should be admitted that we may initially find it strange to think of suffering something which is unconnected to any unpleasant experience or of which we are forever completely unaware."

explains D2 than a non-experiential account, and in so doing better captures our everyday theory of (the badness of) suffering.

(ii) The idea that suffering is essentially connected to negative experience gains further support from counterexamples to Corns's account. For there are cases of significantly disrupted agency that don't seem to count as suffering, and equally cases of genuine suffering which don't seem to involve significantly disrupted agency. Let's take these in turn.

A central problem with identifying suffering with significantly disrupted agency is that many things, both negative *and positive*, can disrupt our agentive forms and hence our agency. If so, it is unlikely that disrupted agency is the defining feature of suffering. Consider, then, how disruptive to our agency the state of falling in love can be. In those blissful first days, when one is head over heels in love, very many of our agential forms and more general sorts of agency are significantly disrupted. Corns states that "if it is so noisy that I cannot exercise my capacity to think, then my psychological agency is thereby disrupted". But those in the throes of love (or passion) are notoriously unable to think, to plan and evaluate, to the detriment of their psychological agency. When consumed by love (or passion) we lose our appetite, cannot sleep, forego exercise, to the detriment of our biological agency. When first in love, we tend to neglect family, friends, work, and other interests that don't involve our beloved, to the detriment of our social agency. Moreover, it's not necessarily the case that another aspect of our agency – viz. the agential form characterised by love – is thereby functioning at peak capacity and making up for these other significant disruptions. Maybe the person I've fallen for is completely unaware of my existence, in which case my agential form as a loving agent seems to be significantly disrupted. Still and all: falling in love feels wonderful, is a paradigmatically blissful and positive state. It is as far away from suffering as it's possible to be. So this is a clear instance of significantly disrupted psychological, physical and social agency, but which is not suffering.

For a less romanticised example: Corns notes that pain may consume me, such that my biological, psychological, and social agency are all disrupted. This is no doubt true. But pleasure can equally consume a person, and disrupt their agency: the pleasures of orgasm or, more extremely, of taking heroin, are illustrations. Such pleasures involve significantly disrupted agency, especially so in the case of heroin. But it is surely implausible to count the pleasure of heroin, as opposed to its miserably deleterious side-effects and consequences, as itself an instance of suffering. What is true of love, sex, and opiates is also plausibly true of other instances of extremely positive experiences which nevertheless involve significant disruption of agency – such as being in a state of religious ecstasy or euphoria. In states of religious ecstasy, for instance, one might no longer seem distinct from one's environment, or be able exercise capacities so as to modulate it. (How could one modulate and act on a state in which one has achieved Nirvana, or in which the Divine is present?) But it is difficult to think of these as states of suffering.

A final kind of example puts pressure on Corns's view. Corns rightly notes that we can have many agentive forms, and suffer if these are disrupted. So she can suffer "as a human, a biped, a University employee, a mother, a friend, a Celtic fan, and more." But if, as seems plausible, we have many agentive forms, then it is likely that there are some which can be significantly disrupted (and thus count as instances of suffering on Corns's view) but which are not plausible instances of suffering. Note that Corns's list of agentive forms are all positively valued (unless you are a Rangers fan). But we can surely have negative agentive forms: suppose I have the agentive form of an idler, someone who responds to his environment according to norms which stimulate laziness and lack of productivity; or, more negatively still, suppose I have the agentive form of a member of an elite upper-class student drinking society, prone to opulent banquets, ostentatious displays of wealth, and sneering at the poor. Suppose now such agentive forms are significantly restricted

or disrupted, but without my knowing: my parents decide to cut off my allowance unless I get a job; the University bans my drinking society. On Corns's account, such significant disruptions to my agency count as suffering. But this strikes me as implausible: the fact that I can't indulge my lifestyle in such instances hardly suggests that I am thereby suffering, especially if such restrictions don't impinge upon my experience. So here are further instances of significant disruptions to agency that don't constitute suffering.

If this is right, then disruption to agency is not sufficient for suffering. But nor is it necessary. For there are clear examples of suffering which don't seem to involve anything like disruption of one's agential forms or agency. Suppose that I am lovesick after the end of a relationship. Indeed, suppose that I cry myself to sleep each night thinking about my ex, riven with regret, with thoughts about what might have been and what I could have done differently. Each night follows this pattern, and I wake up each morning with a sense of deep sadness, on a tear-stained pillow. But I'm a resilient chap, not one to mope or moan, and so each morning I immediately get up, go about my business, and find no constraints or disruptions on my bodily, psychological, and social agency. I feed and clothe myself, go for a run, then off to work for a productive day, after which I meet friends, socialize, and enjoy life to the full. Indeed, I look forward to new relationships, to falling in love again, albeit keenly aware of the possibility for heartbreak. It seems very plausible to me that each night I suffer, when crying myself to sleep. But it also seems very plausible to me that such suffering doesn't involve much if anything in the way of disruption to my agency. (It is surely pushing things to say that my crying disrupts my agency as a sleeper, especially if I fall into a deep sleep once the crying fit is over.) Indeed, it seems to me that a great deal of the misery involved in regret is of this sort: it happens when we are no longer expressing our agency, when the active business of life takes a back seat. Regret, sadness, loneliness, lovesickness, homesickness, and similar negative emotions are often limited to our quiet moments when activity ceases, sometimes at end of day, and where our agency is no longer threatened by them. (Indeed, I suspect that this is one of the reasons why people susceptible to these miserable feelings often remain active so as to keep them at bay for as long as they can.) If so, then there are instances of suffering which don't involve significantly disrupted agency. Moreover, what makes these instances of suffering is, precisely, the fact that they feel awful. The idea of suffering as experiential thus accommodates these examples, whilst Corns's account does not.

3 | CONCLUSION

If the arguments in the previous sections are correct, then our everyday concept of suffering is of something experiential; the notion of suffering as experiential provides a convincing explanation of its normative status; and attempts to make a non-experiential factor like significantly disrupted agency the core of suffering are subject to counterexamples. No doubt there are other reasons and arguments as to why a non-experiential account is still a live option. Still, I hope that I have done enough here to make up for what was a significant omission in *Suffering and Virtue*, and provide reasons for favouring an experiential account of suffering.