**Suffering as Transformative Experience**

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‘The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability’ (Frank 1995, p. xi)

**Abstract**

In this chapter we suggest that many experiences of suffering can be further illuminated as forms of transformative experience, using the term coined by L.A. Paul. Such suffering experiences arise from the vulnerability, dependence, and affliction intrinsic to the human condition. Such features can create a variety of positively, negatively, and ambivalently valanced forms of epistemically and personally transformative experiences, as we detail here. We argue that the productive element of suffering experiences can be articulated as transformative, although suffering experiences are not the type mostly discussed in the transformative experience literature. We correct for this here by developing a taxonomy of negatively valenced transformative experiences. We suggest three features that make such experiences ones of suffering, following Michael Brady’s definition: *intensity*, *novelty*, and *attentional focus*. Finally, we suggest that one possible explanation for the edifying capacity of suffering comes from it requiring more transformation than positive experiences.

**1. Introduction: transformative experience.**

It is a cliché that suffering is transformative, a source of insight, wisdom, and understanding that can, or perhaps will necessarily, make one into a better person – one with a truer sense of what really matters in life which shows itself in the conduct of one’s life. But such claims, common as they are, are both complex and contested. Some find that experiences of suffering transformed them for the better, thereby endorsing Nietzsche’s claim that heroic coping with physical and psychological adversities ‘makes us *deeper*’ (1974: Preface §3). But others regard such claims as dangerous and deceptive, perhaps as failures to be truthful about the fact that suffering often takes more than it gives, or that it often gives nothing and takes everything, until – as Simone Weil graphically puts it – one is left ‘struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm’, leaving them ‘in no state to help anyone at all, and almost incapable of even wishing to do so’ (2010, p. 39).

Adjudicating such competing claims requires careful sensitivity to the subjective and situational complexity of such experiences, and alertness to the wider cultural contexts within which our conceptions of, and responses to, suffering are made. Barbara Ehrenreich is right to warn of a pervasive ‘ideology of positive thinking’ that encourages a relentlessly and dogmatically optimistic ‘bright-siding’ of human experience of adversity. In the case of illness, this can include the insistence that suffering always yields substantive moral goods, sufficient to nullify any sense of loss or regret arising from one’s suffering (Ehrenreich 2009; Kidd 2019).

Such carefulness, sensitivity, and critical alertness is easier if one has robust conceptual resources on which to draw. In this chapter, we argue that the concept of *transformative experience*, developed by L.A. Paul, is one such resource (Paul 2014).[[1]](#endnote-1) Her guiding claim is that there is a certain type of experience—or, perhaps, a set of experiences—that are distinctive in virtue of their doubly transformative capacity. They are, first, *epistemically transformative*, providing forms or degrees of knowledge that were previously unavailable and, more importantly, previously inaccessible, insofar as they depend on having the relevant experience (one of Paul’s examples is tasting the rare durian fruit). It is impossible to know, prior to tasting the fruit, whether one will love or hate it. Second, such experiences are *personally transformative*, fundamentally changing one’s values, preferences, and desires, and, therefore, transforming one’s identity in substantive ways. It’s not just what one knows and understands that’s substantially changed, but one’s wider structure of values, concerns, interests, and enthusiasms—or even, indeed, one’s entire character or subjectivity.

Paul argues that the concept of a transformative experience challenges certain culturally entrenched conceptions of the nature of human agency. Specifically, ones that tend to presuppose that our choices are typically performed through practices of rational appraisal and decision that proceed against the background characterised by, *inter alia*, agential autonomy, informed understanding, and situational stability. In the case of Paul’s interest in models of rational decision making, for instance, agents are conceived as prospectively identifying the possible outcomes of a decision, assigning values to them, and finally weighing those outcomes against her preferences, given their likelihood. Such a sanguine vision is challenged by the phenomenon of transformative experience. The person contemplating undergoing the experience may be quite different to the person who emerges from the experience. ‘We only learn what we need to know’, remarks Paul, ‘after we’ve done it, and we change ourselves in the process of doing it’ (Paul 2014, p. 4). If so, those conceptions of human agency will be significantly challenged by the phenomenon of transformative experience.

Many experiences of suffering certainly share the sorts of features of interest to Paul. When one is suffering, for instance due to serious somatic illness, one can be significantly transformed by the illness experience. For example, one’s sense of their own body as naturally compliant and taken for granted can be profoundly changed by illness (Carel 2018). Similarly, the strength and stability of one’s capacities for practical and epistemic agency are often curtailed; one is less capable of autonomous agency and epistemic practice, and one’s bodily and social circumstances become unstable and frightening. This is a transformative experience of illness (Carel, Kidd and Pettigrew 2016).

We suggest that suffering experiences can not only be transformative but can be – and often are – potentially *more* transformative. Before making that claim, though, we note that many persons will suppose that they have a fairly good idea about what this kind of suffering is like, even if they have not, themselves, actually experienced it. One might, for instance, extrapolate from minor bouts of illness, such as the ‘flu, to more serious cases of illness – by extending the timescale, worsening the pain, and so on. Such imaginative exercises are actually far more limited than people suppose (see Carel 2016, chs.3-5), and they anyway ignore something emphasised by Paul: the intrinsic *opacity* of transformative experiences, the fact that we cannot know in advance what they will be like *for us*, or how they will affect our self-understanding, or even know whether whatever sense we do eventually make of them will be congruent with the sorts of understanding one currently enjoys. In Paul’s own words:

The problem is pressing because many of life’s big personal decisions are like this: they involve the choice to undergo a dramatically new experience that will change your life in important ways […] But as it turns out […] many of these big decisions involve choices to have experiences that teach us things we cannot know about from any other source but the experience itself (Paul 2014, p.3).

Paul’s own example, that of choosing to become a parent, has raised much interest because of her claim that this choice cannot be made rationally (e.g. Barnes 2015; Paul 2014, 2015; Harman 2015). This is a paradigmatic example of a transformative experience, although it is one of a largely positive nature. Earlier in her book, though, Paul mentions other types of negative and involuntary transformative experience, including ‘experiencing a horrific physical attack’, ‘having a traumatic accident’, ‘undergoing major surgery’, ‘experiencing the death of a parent’, and ‘experiencing the death of a child’ (Paul 2014, p.16). Here we want to focus on these *unelected* transformative experiences, since we believe that most experiences of suffering tend not to be ones that the person chooses or decides to undergo, and so lie outside the framework developed by Paul, in which the emphasis on choice takes centre stage. Consider, for instance, how rarely one would ever want to *elect* to experience chronic illness, violent accident, trauma, separation, war, political upheaval, becoming a refugee, losing a loved one … the list is depressingly long and too many persons in our world are subjected to them, without ever choosing to undergo such experiences. If David Benatar is right, our unavoidable subjection to such awful experiences is constitutive of ‘the human predicament’ (Benatar 2017).

Whilst Paul focuses on voluntary (i.e. elected) and therefore positive transformative experiences, we suggest that many experiences of suffering come under the two categories we’ll develop, which we label *non-voluntary* and *involuntary* transformative experiences. Such categories can help us to better understand competing claims about the complexly valanced character of certain experiences of suffering. We also want to show that the epistemic and personal transformation that can be brought about by some suffering can be *philosophically* valuable in ways that don’t usually justify suffering but do allow us to see that it has intrinsic meaning stemming from the personal growth resultant from the experience. We elaborate on what we take to be philosophically valuable about suffering experiences in the final section of this chapter.

Two caveats before we begin. The first is that we do not accept that suffering should be endured unnecessarily or be actively sought in order to achieve these edifying effects (Kidd 2012; Carel 2016). Suffering across its forms ought to be actively reduced, mitigated, and ameliorated, not glossed over, romanticised, or ‘bright-sided’. The ontological facts of human mortality mean that being ill is built into our natures, a constitutive feature of our mode of being. This constitutive mortality inevitably imposes significant limitations on the extent to which certain forms of suffering, such as that result from illness, could be substantially reduced (for instance, everyone gets sick, but not everyone has access to high quality healthcare, free at the point of use, that would mitigate their suffering). But there is a huge space between the exultant embrace of suffering urged by Nietzsche and a crass quietism that laments that suffering is inevitable and therefore only to be accepted. We can try to find ways of acknowledging the inevitability of suffering while still trying to find ways to cope with it that steer clear of both darkly pessimistic acquiescence and distorting ‘bright-siding’.

Second, suffering does not always lead to personal growth. People who have suffered trauma often describe a world that has been permanently shattered. Some cases of suffering will cause irreparable damage that will not be a source of growth, but of permanent disablement and distrust. Holocaust survivors are a paradigm example of this, as are other sufferers of posttraumatic stress disorder. Some cases of suffering will be of the kind described by Arthur Frank (2010) as ‘restitution narratives’, where the endpoint of the narrative is one in which the person is somehow better off than she was prior to suffering. But other cases will be too chaotic, painful or traumatic to form a narrative at all, tending to destroy ‘the meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities of the victims of such harm’ – a grim state that José Medina calls ‘hermeneutical death’ (Medina 2017, 47). The violence of suffering, its eruption and destructive force cannot be understated; the ideas set out below about the edification of suffering are in no way meant to belittle this.

**2. The facts of life**

Human life takes many forms; but they share certain features. Often the features on which philosophers focus are positive – reason, autonomy, moral sophistication, virtue. But there are other, less attractive, features of human life. We are subject to a variety of interacting contingencies—bodily, social, and practical factors that can, and often do, fail us in deep and troubling ways. As embodied beings, we are destined to injury, illness, and ageing. As social creatures, ones disposed to form communities and engage in shared practices with others, many of us suffer abuse, exploitation, and oppression. As initiators of projects that aim to give order and meaning to our life, we face the prospect of their failing or going wrong in ways we did not expect and cannot correct.

Gathering these together, we can say that three fundamental features of human life are *contingency*, *vulnerability*, and *subjection*. They are not episodic features of the lives of certain unfortunate human beings, but universal features of human life—they are *existentialia*, in Heidegger’s term, essential features of creatures with our ‘manner of being’ (Heidegger 1996). Alasdair MacIntyre expresses these features of the human condition:

We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing, as we encounter bodily illness and injury, inadequate nutrition, mental defect and disturbance, and human aggression and neglect (MacIntyre 1999, p.1)

MacIntyre is concerned with how we can respond to significant life events, what virtues or qualities are displayed in these responses, and how an active awareness of these facts of life should transform our thinking:

These two related sets of facts, those concerning our vulnerabilities and afflictions and those concerning the extent of our dependence on particular others are so evidently of singular importance that it might seem that no account of the human condition whose authors hoped to achieve credibility could avoid giving them a central place (MacIntyre 1999, p.1)

We suggest that these features of human life indicate a ubiquity of suffering. If our epistemic and practical agency takes place against a complex background of contingency, vulnerability, and subjection, then few of us enjoy anything like freedom from suffering. Thus, it seems that many of the major experiences of the lives of most people are not elected—we do not *select* them but are *subjected* to them. Suffering experiences are no exception to that. In addition, a person might elect to seek out a positive transformative experience, such as having a child, only to find themselves subjected to an unelected type of transformative experience, such as grief about a miscarriage.

We thus suggest that human agency is better conceived of as deeply conditioned by complexly dappled sets of circumstances, such as the constant possibility of our subjection to undesired situations, and the absence of optimal conditions for properly epistemically procedural deliberation. These features are evident in many cases of transformative experience, not all of which need or can be elected by the agent. These features are also present in all cases of suffering we could think of, although there may be others.

The possibility of transformative experiences other than voluntary ones is a consequence of another ‘fact of life’, namely, the contingent, unchosen character of most of the material and social conditions of an individual life. Many of these experiences are not, could not and would not be chosen. Note, too, that a person’s subjection to these sorts of experiences is shaped by social, economic, geographical, and cultural factors which vary within and across societies.

Whether at the level of an individual life or the wider course of societies and cultures, far less of life is the outcome of careful deliberation and decision than is appreciated, not least since reflection on such pervasive contingency can induce a disturbing sense of vulnerability, vividly characterised by various existentialists (see Cooper 1999, ch.8). Karl Jaspers, for instance, speaks of a ‘metaphysical fear’, arising during what he calls ‘boundary situations’ marked by acute personal challenge, which render null our typical values and expectations, forcing one to ‘decide for oneself how to respond’ (Jaspers, 1932). A similarly acute sense of contingency and subjection flows through the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: a person cannot ‘choose [themselves] from nothing at all’, in the sense of being able to ‘transform’ their values, commitments, and projects at will. For our reflections and choices always presuppose a ‘previous acquisition’, like a sense of what matters, something inherited from a surrounding world that we did not choose and over which we have little power (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 447, 452, 191 ff). The Buddhist tradition, too, emphasizes the ‘dependent co-origination’ (*paticca-samutpada*) of things in the world, oneself included. Understanding the deep dependence and contingency that marks human life is an epistemic achievement, and honestly acknowledging it in one’s ways of living is a personal and moral achievement – a double feat that makes reflectively responding to the contingency of human life a ‘Noble Truth’ (see Harvey 2013, p.52f).

With this framework of the ‘facts of life’ in place, we now turn to study a specific type of transformative experiences, namely, those that are *unelected*.

**3. Unelected transformative experiences**

The major life experiences we call attention to here as transformative experiences are primarily ones of suffering. These are transformative experiences that are negative, sprung upon us, and feared, even if we cannot avoid many of them. They are not captured by a voluntaristic and robustly active sense of agency, and this for several reasons. First, no reasonable person would willingly choose to undergo these experiences—for instance, to become a victim of violent crime, or to become seriously ill. These are highly negative experiences that may, of course, accrue some goods as a secondary outcome (Kidd 2012; Carel 2016a, ch.6), but could not be desired by any informed competent person. Second, these sorts of experiences are not of a sort that people are *invited* to consider and choose to have. Trauma victims are victims in part because they have the experience forced upon them: they are *subjected* to the traumatic experience – a main reason trauma is so awful.

This is a deep lesson depicted, argues Martha Nussbaum, by ancient Greek tragedy, which shows how people can be ‘ruined’ by ‘things that just happen to them’. Examples will include agents who experience awful ‘circumstances whose origin does not lie with them’, and the myriad of ‘things that they do not control’ – injustice, unfairness, everyday vices – which flow from the ‘ungoverned contingency [of] social life’ (Nussbaum 2001, pp. 25, 89). Take the case of Oedipus, who, by his efforts to avoid the prophecy about killing his father and sleeping with his mother, ends up fulfilling it. This illustrates a general truth about one possible source of suffering: any decision made in the thick of life could be thwarted, twisted, or otherwise frustrated by a variety of forces, many of them beyond our knowledge and control. As a rule, people tend to exaggerate the number of things that are ‘within our power’, a tendency lamented from the Stoics to contemporary existentialists (compare, for instance, Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* and de Beauvoir’s *Force of Circumstance*). We therefore suggest that the scope of transformative experiences should be expanded to capture cases where the experience (a) results from *subjection* rather than *election* and (b) is not one that a reasonable person could elect to undergo. We suggest that these kinds of transformative experiences are mostly ones of suffering.

To Paul’s detailed analysis of one type of transformative experiences, which we will call *voluntary*, we add *involuntary* and *non-voluntary* transformative experience to create a broader taxonomy, more typical of human life and one that considers the ‘facts of life’ discussed above. All three types, we suggest, can be genuinely transformative, although our contribution is do develop the latter two types, given that the first type has been greatly discussed in the transformative experience literature.

Consider the following examples:

*Non-voluntary*: at the age of 24, Primo Levi was arrested in Italy and sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz on the German-Polish border, where he survived for twenty-two months. The experience left an indelible mark on Levi. The experience meets Paul’s dual criteria: it was epistemically transformative, as it taught Levi what starvation, imprisonment, torture, cruelty, total lack of control, severe illness, deprivation and degradation are. It was also personally transformative as he himself says: ‘I do not and cannot know what I would be today if I had not been in the camp [...] this would be, precisely, a case of describing a future that never took place’ (Levi 1979, p.397).

Clearly, Levi’s experience was transformative, and not of a sort anyone would ever choose. Now consider a second example:

*Involuntary*: I see a young child run into the path of an oncoming car. Instinctively, I rush into the road, pick up the child, but the car hits me. The child survives unharmed, but I am severely injured, losing the ability to walk. In this case, I am causally responsible for the outcome, but did not intend it. The experience is also transformative: my new disability changes who I am, my future preferences, and what I know about myself and life. I would not have chosen to become disabled, but the choice to save the child was taken by me. I am transformed, but through an unintended consequence of a choice I make.[[2]](#footnote-1)

We suggest that many, if not most, types of transformative experience are *involuntary*, imposed upon us by the contingencies of life, or *nonvoluntary*, i.e. entirely unchosen. As described above, many of the situations in which people find themselves are ones that no one would choose. And yet, they can be and often are the rule rather than the exception. For example, most of us will die of a serious illness, and yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that a reasonable person, even in an epistemically ideal situation, could *want* to become seriously ill. Such contingencies are not rare and unusual cases but commonplace and a fundamental experiential currency through which we live. It may be helpful to take a life-cycle point of view here, which includes the different stages of life, from infancy and dependence, to adulthood and eventually dependence again to see how common these contingencies are. We suggest that this life cycle perspective can reveal susceptibility to transformative experience as belonging to ordinary lives and as ordinary modes of experience (cf. Carel 2016b).

Given the framework developed so far, we suggest a double expansion of Paul’s notion of choice. First, many common and exemplary types of transformative experiences, such as those arising from serious illness, are not the outcome, and could not conceivably be the outcome, of a rational choice. Second, a coerced choice may be transformative even when devoid of all characteristics of choice. Certain *choices* can also be transformative, as noted by Ruth Chang (2015), such as Gaugin’s choice to abandon his family for the sake of his art. In short, coercive and unchosen situations may be transformative.

Let us continue to develop our taxonomy, based on bivalent notions of epistemic transformation and personal transformation. We suggest that each of these modes of transformation can be either positively or negatively valanced, such that transformative experiences could take one of four general forms. Certain experiences will, of course, be too complex or indeterminate to be so easily classifiable. Moreover, we think there are certain ambivalent transformative experiences, for which it’s to see whether the transformation was positive or negative. We therefore distinguish:

1. Positive epistemic transformation, positive personal transformation
2. Negative epistemic transformation, positive personal transformation
3. Positive epistemic transformation, negative personal transformation
4. Negative epistemic transformation, negative personal transformation

Since we have developed a fuller account of these elsewhere, our focus is on forms three and four, as those most salient to experiences of suffering.

*Positive epistemic transformation, negative personal transformation* – in such cases one learns new things by having a new experience, but the personal transformation is negative. Consider again the earlier quotation from Primo Levi. During his imprisonment and torture, Levi learned everything there is to know about cruelty and degradation. He has certainly acquired deep knowledge of aspects of human existence he would not have known otherwise, so his experiences in the concentration camp were clearly epistemically transformative. Levi himself evaluates his experience, remarkably, at least partially epistemically positively, commenting that ‘in its totality this past has made me richer and surer’ (Levi 1979, p.398). He was also personally transformed by those experiences, but in ways that were deeply negative.

*Negative epistemic transformation, negative personal transformation* – In these cases there is a loss of knowledge accompanied by a negative personal transformation. Take a person suffering from dementia: as her disease progresses, she remembers less and is less aware of her surroundings. She loses language and memory. She is confused and behaves erratically due to her neurodegenerative impairment. This is also a tragically negative personal transformation of a most radical sort. The past person is gradually erased and the new minimal person is reduced to the remains of the once vibrant person.

We thus see that transformative experiences can be both negatively and positively valanced and can be both voluntary and non- or involuntary. We suggest that such an expansion of the notion of transformative experiences can be useful for capturing suffering experiences, to which we now turn.

**4. Transformative experiences and suffering**

Our claim in this section is that experiences of suffering are very often cases of unchosen transformative experiences of either an involuntary or nonvoluntary character. They can also include cases of a voluntary transformative experience that goes awry, such that it turns into a nonvoluntary transformative experience: think of the case of deciding to have a child but losing the pregnancy.

Our starting point is Michael Brady’s definition of suffering, taken from his recent book, *Suffering and Virtue*:

‘[A] subject suffers when and only when she has (i) an unpleasant experience, consisting of a sensation S and a desire that S not be occurring, and (ii) an occurrent desire that this unpleasant experience not be occurring’ (Brady 2018, p.55).

On this account, suffering is comprised of a sensation of some kind—which need not be pain—coupled to a desire that this sensation not be occurring. An experience of suffering is therefore a sensation plus a desire, such that ‘the unpleasantness of some experience is a relational property’ (2018, p. 55). I am suffering if there is a spreading ache in my lower back that’s sufficiently painful and distracting that I start to desire that the sensation ceases – so I might get up and stretch, or take a painkiller, or determine to tarry on but think about seeking physiotherapy.

Transformative suffering naturally involves a range of unpleasant experiences, such as sensations of anxiety, dislocation, displeasure, uncertainty, vulnerability, and of course pain, plus the occurrent desire that these experiences not be occurring. In cases of unelected experiences of suffering, one might be painfully aware that one can do little, or nothing, to make the experience cease. Indeed, one reason many people would not elect to undergo an experience of suffering will be the knowledge that, once started, the experience either cannot be stopped (the case of torture, say) or that the experience would cause forms of harm that will persist even after the experience ceases (suffering physical mutilation).

The question here is what do such unpleasant experiences contain in them that is transformative? The first clue can be found in Brady’s definition. Suffering is not simply an unpleasant *sensation*, but an unpleasant *experience*, such that the experience is coupled with a desire for it to cease. This points to the first feature of suffering that makes it transformative, namely, that it is an experience. As an experience, suffering gives us new information about what having certain sensations (e.g. pain, sadness, grief, despair, extreme fatigue, etc.) is like, whilst they stand in a particular relation to the desire that they stop. Merely having some sensation without the desire for it to cease will not constitute suffering. This stands to reason, as a sensation that may be unpleasant but that one is not moved to try to eliminate is not suffering, as Brady would claim. This is a further point in support of our view that unelected experiences can be and are transformative.

We further suggest that the accompanying desire for its cessation points to the *intensity*, *novelty* and *attentional focus* which characterise suffering, each of which concern deep aspects of what it means to suffer. One feels disappointment when dropping one’s ice cream onto the ground – although that feeling is unpleasant, it lacks the intensity typical of suffering (such disappointment won’t creep deep into our hearts, as the dull existential ache that will crumple every future moment of joy). One’s attention will also soon move away to something else – the sun sparkling on the sea, or a joke. Moreover, unless one is a small child, such disappointment is also unlikely to be *novel* – one will have dropped one’s food or spilled one’s drinks before, whereas everyday experiences of bodily health do not prepare one for the feeling of bodily doubt characteristic of chronic somatic illness (Carel 2016a, ch. 4). Experiences of suffering, then, are characterised by an intensity, novelty, and attentional focus that marks them out from other types of negatively valenced experiences.

It is easy to see how the experience of a serious accident will be personally transformative. The intensity and novelty provide an experience unlike my previous ones, and indeed one that is likely to change my values and goals in a profound way. The structure of one’s experience – of time, social spaces, one’s body – all are transformed in fundamental and irreversible ways: one now suffers chronic back pain; one’s mobility is restricted; one’s sole focus is getting rid of the pain—and so on. The attentional focus demands that one give cognitive and emotional as well as practical attention to the accident and its consequences, thinking about it during one’s time in hospital, then again during rehab, then coping with an emerging realisation the pain will become a permanent feature of one’s life and world. It is also easy to see how the experience is epistemically transformative. One learns new things about one’s body, how it behaves when damaged, and the variety of forms that experiences of pain can take. One learns things about hospitals, medical treatments, and the culture of modern healthcare and comes to understand the rhythms and rules of the health service. One also gains insights into the psychological reality of profound fear, grasps the complexity of what it means to understand one’s own mortality, and so on. Such epistemic goods could not be accessed before the experience, since they are premised upon changes to one’s lived experiences – of, for instance, what it means to understand *one’s own* damaged body.

We claim that it is in virtue of the three features – *intensity*, *novelty*, and *attentional focus* – that the accident is a transformative experience. Note these features are neutral – intensity can be good, too, as can novelty and attentional focus – and, moreover, that they help explain what makes an experience transformative. Where they are negatively valanced, they will also be cases of suffering.

**5. What can suffering tell us about transformative experience?**

We want to conclude by returning to a feature of Paul’s original account, namely, her focus on elected transformative experiences. Although these are clearly genuine and important, our claim is that the complex dependencies and vulnerabilities characteristic of our natures as embodied social beings mean that subjection to unelected and involuntary forms of transformative experiences is far more characteristic of human life. Nowhere is this clearer than in experiences of suffering, which are, after all, prevalent to the point of ubiquity across the range of forms of human life – hence Benatar’s emphasis on the ‘awfulness’ built into ‘the human predicament’.

An important feature of negative experiences is that they are perhaps much *more* transformative than positive experiences, given that one also must make narrative sense of both the nature of the experience and its nonvoluntary or involuntary nature. Such experiences might transform us in deeper ways than voluntary transformative experiences because we have to deal with the epistemic, personal and practical changes, as well as with their involuntary or forced nature. For example, when nine-year old Anna is forced to leave Germany to travel to Switzerland in 1933 because she and her family are Jewish and fear for their lives, she imagines this trip as a holiday, an adventure – in other words, as an elected experience (Kerr 2017). She not only needs to adjust to life abroad, leaving her home and friends and so on, but also needs to make sense of her family’s escape due to imminent threat to their lives, which requires further cognitive and emotional labour from her, such as the acquisition and mastery of such complex concepts as injustice and antisemitism. It may be that positive narratives are less disruptive in this sense, since they entail less onerous and depressing moral, cognitive, and emotional labour (think, for example, of the ‘burnout’ that afflicts social justice activists, due to the physically and psychologically corrosive effects of a sustained engagement with feelings of anger, injustice, and other negative affects).

A second reason for thinking that negative experiences are significant transformative experiences is that suffering transforms views about the structural context of the experience in ways that voluntary choices might not. A voluntary experience presupposes a social and practical context hospitable to exercises of self-directed agency, a structure of options and effective means for their realisation. But most experiences of suffering tend to be nonvoluntary and involuntary, meaning that they are imposed upon the agent without their choosing them and invariably against their preferences. When an experience is *forced* upon us, that is itself part of its negativity – a sense that “I didn’t want this”, “it just erupted into my life”, and so on. When a person has consistently enjoyed good health, for instance, the sudden experiences of acute bodily transformation occasioned by a diagnosis of chronic illness comes as a shock – puncturing a comfortable sense of obliviousness and complacency in ways that are negatively personally and epistemically transformative. This suggests that by focusing on the voluntary the current literature on transformative experience neglects perhaps the greatest source of transformation, namely negative experiences.

A final thought is that negative experiences – and especially suffering – can often have an edifying effect that also makes them particularly good vehicles of transformation. At its broadest, experiences of suffering are edifying when they afford opportunities for the cultivation and exercise of various positive attainments, such as ethical virtues, wisdom, and a sense of existential perspective. Such edification can easily take trite forms, of course, like the Nietzschean sentiment (actually originating with Goethe) that ‘whatever doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger’, to the facile ‘bright-siding’ insistence that suffering always ends in triumph rather than despair, that battles are won but never lost, and so on. It is a deep truth that suffering often does not make us stronger or ‘deeper’, that one’s losses are not always followed by compensating gains, and that there are sometimes no ‘bright sides’, that what Jonathan Haidt (2006) calls posttraumatic growth is a possibility and not an inevitability, and so on (see Kirkengen 2010, Marmot 2016).

Such truthfulness about the many ‘dark sides’ of experiences of suffering are still consistent, however, with a confidence that in certain cases and in the right context there can be philosophically valuable lessons that can be found in suffering. A properly balanced edificationist conception of suffering has the complex conditional form that *certain* experiences of suffering *can* afford certain goods and attainments for *certain* persons and under *certain* material and socialconditions. The complexly conditional character of edification reflects what we earlier called ‘the facts of life’—for instance, our dependence on other agents means that our access to the practical, moral, and emotional support cannot always be guaranteed. Many chronically ill persons report that, after their diagnosis, some friends stop calling, for instance, causing sadness and bitterness as well as removing a source of the comfort and support that a good friend ought to provide, an example of what Martha Nussbaum refers to as ‘the fragility of goodness’.

The contingently available goods of edifying experiences of suffering can include a capacity to accept failure and disappointment, the ability to live in the present, to revise one’s life goals in the face of unwarranted calamity, and to co-exist with limitation, illness, disability, bereavement and loss (Carel 2018, 2016; Kidd 2012). Many of these concern the complex ability to develop authentic ways of appreciating and coping with one’s embodied vulnerability and subjection to materially and socially conditioned suffering and to bad luck. Since vulnerabilities and conditions are intrinsic to human life, and a main generator of the nonvoluntary and involuntary transformative experiences described above.

Although these abilities could be gained through other sorts of experiences, such as engagement with certain forms of literature, there are special reasons why they can be especially gained through first-person experiences of suffering. First, we may be unable to imagine the reality of a particular type of suffering without the requisite sorts of lived experience. Second, we may lack the empirical knowledge about the nature or character of an experience, especially if testimonial reports about it are hard to come by. Third, even if we suffered similarly in the past, we are notoriously bad at remembering negative events, and famously very good at reconstructing our memories of events in distorting ways (Gilbert 2006). Here is an example: We may think we can reliably anticipate the misery of solitary confinement, by imagining how lonely we might feel and how bored we would become. Perhaps if we watch Marc Rocco’s *Murder in the First* we think we understand what it is like. In fact, the effects of solitary confinement include disruption of bodily sensory-motor functions, of a sort that a lay person would find hard to imagine and impossible to anticipate (Gallagher 2014). One cannot know in advance what sorts of transformations will or might follow from that sort of experience, however hard one might try.

Many questions remain for further work on the relationship between suffering and transformative experience. Are there other features of suffering that further explain the link between suffering and edification? Why might pleasant experiences be less conducive to such edification? Are unelected and negative transformative experiences more central to human life than those that Paul talks about? We think so, since the conditions for voluntary transformative experience – such as socially facilitated agency – are less common and more fragile than one would like. If so, should we shift focus towards the negative and involuntary rather than the voluntary and positively life-changing experiences? Since we are dependent, afflicted, vulnerable creatures inhabiting a deeply imperfect social world, what might be really primary is our susceptibility to negative involuntary and nonvoluntary experiences that transform us personally and epistemically in disturbing ways. Suffering could therefore be a form of transformation imposed upon us by our fragile bodies, unjust societies, and the gritty contingencies of the world. Finding ways of appreciating and coping with that fact is a primary existential task for human beings.

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**Notes**

1. The wider literature on the concept includes symposia in *Res Philosophica* 92:2 and symposium: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91:3 and several other writings: Pettigrew 2016; Pettigrew unpublished; Talbot 2016; Shupe 2016; Cappelen and Dever 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For an extreme account of such transformation by disability, see Jean-Dominic Bauby’s account of his stroke and the resulting ‘locked-in syndrome’ he suffered, described in his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, originally published in 1997 (English translation 1998, Vintage Books). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)