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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why We Should Be Experientialists about Suffering

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Abstract

Increased interest in suffering has given rise to different accounts of what suffering is. This paper focuses the debate between experientialists and non-experientialists about suffering. The former hold that suffering is necessarily experiential—for instance, because it is necessarily unpleasant or painful; the latter deny this—for instance, because one can suffer when and because one's objective properties are damaged, even if one does not experience this. After surveying how the two accounts fare on a range of issues, the paper presents a decisive argument in favor of experientialism. The central claim is that non-experientialist accounts cannot accommodate cases of suffering that are virtuous and that directly *contribute to* some objective good.

Keywords: Experientialism; objective; painfulness; suffering; unpleasantness; virtue

Introduction

There has been considerable debate, in philosophy and psychology, over the nature of negative affective states like pain. Strangely, there has been much less focus on the nature of suffering—which is surprising, given how important suffering is to moral philosophy, medicine, social and political movements, and similar. But interests and focus change, and in recent years, researchers from a range of disciplines—including philosophy, psychology, medicine, and politics—have started to look at suffering in greater depth. This paper will be part of the turn toward suffering, and one that is motivated by recent developments in the area. The central issue concerns a range of theories of suffering, and the main question is whether we have reason to prefer one of three theories of emotion. In what follows, I will outline the three theories, quickly dismiss one of them, and then assess the plausibility of the remaining two with respect to a number of factors. In the final section, I will argue in favor of one particular account, which holds that suffering is necessarily experiential. Ultimately, I think that suffering should thus be understood as an experiential state, and that we should dismiss the idea that there can be suffering that is not experienced.

The three theories

In an interesting and important article from 2022, Brent Kious provides a helpful way to distinguish three theories of suffering. Kious writes: "There are three overall kinds of view about what suffering is: *value-based theories*, including the theory famously expounded by Eric Cassell, which as a group suggest that suffering is something like a state of distress related to threats to things that a person cares about; *feeling-based theories*, which equate suffering with aversive feelings or sensations like pain; and *objective theories*, which suggest that suffering is the absence of objective flourishing."[1] Let us take these in turn.

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Value-based theories

Value-based views "make suffering dependent upon how a person feels, [but] also dependent on something about that person's self-concept."[2] There are a number of options here. (i) For Eric Cassell, suffering is a "state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person."[3] This "occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived; it continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some other manner."[4] Distress is understood as a negative affective state, a state of something experienced as highly unpleasant. Common examples of negative affect or emotion include fear, disgust, grief, and shame. Kious explains the notion of integrity in Cassell's view as "a matter of what people value or care about, or what is important to them. The woman who suffers because of her hair loss can be understood as caring about her hair; it is insofar as she cares about her hair that it is part of who she is."[5]

As Kious notes, there are other researchers who adopt this view of suffering. For instance, Frederik Svenaeus thinks of suffering as "a potentially alienating mood overcoming the person and engaging her in a struggle to remain at home in the face of loss of meaning and purpose in life. It involves painful experiences at different levels that are … primarily about (1) my embodiment, (2) my engagements in the world together with others, and (3) my core life values."[6] Another adherent to this view, as Kious again notes, is Barry Hoffmaster. On his view, "to understand what suffering means for us is to understand the values our suffering exposes. For individuals who are suffering, those values are the personal values that give life purpose and vitality but have been denied or lost, whether temporarily … or irretrievably, as at the end of life with the inevitable breakdown of body and mind."[7] Finally, Kious identifies my own view of suffering as a form of 'value-based theory,' one which links suffering to values, understood as things that people care about, love, like, or have a pro-attitude toward.[8] I propose that suffering "involves two essential elements: (i) An unpleasant feeling or experience of negative affect, which is a central part of our experiences of pain, grief, loneliness, hunger, and the like; and (ii) an occurrent desire that this unpleasant feeling or negative affective experience not be occurring."[9] This counts as a value-based view since minding and negative emotions in general reflect things that we care about and have attitudes toward. Insofar as my view makes suffering depend upon our attitudes, then it counts as a value-based account, on Kious's broad definition.

Feeling theories

Feeling views of pain and unpleasantness are present, if not common, in the philosophical and psychological literature. On these accounts, pain (or unpleasantness) is a distinctive kind of negative experience, that all instances of pain (or unpleasantness) have in common. As I wrote in 2018, on these views, "unpleasantness is a particular kind of feeling or feeling tone, which is part of or internal or intrinsic to every unpleasant experience."[10] There are two main ways that these theories can be cashed out: We can identify *distinctive feeling views* and *hedonic tone views*. Ben Bramble writes: "The best known [internalist] theory is the distinctive feeling theory, according to which for an experience to be … unpleasant … is just for it to involve or contain a distinctive kind of feeling, one we might call … 'the unpleasant feeling'."[11] On the latter view, "the feeling of unpleasantness is akin to an *aspect* of some distinctive feeling, rather than being identical with a distinctive feeling itself."[12]

For our purposes, we can note that there are similar views in the literature on suffering. Jamie Mayerfeld holds one such view, writing: "I shall use the terms 'happiness' and 'suffering' to refer to overall states of feeling at any particular moment. As a first approximation, let us say that happiness refers to a state of feeling good overall, or agreeable overall feeling, while suffering refers to a state of feeling bad overall, or disagreeable overall feeling."[13] Kious comments: On this view, "suffering is the antithesis of happiness; if a disagreeable feeling is worse than unconsciousness, it is suffering. This position—what we might call the 'feeling-based' account of suffering—may also resonate with some ordinary uses of the term."[14] It is unclear, from this account alone, whether Mayerfeld prefers a distinctive feeling view or a hedonic tone view of suffering.

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Objective theories

Both value-based theories and feeling theories might be regarded as kinds of 'experiential' theory. According to Jennifer Corns, experientialist theories "take suffering to be always constituted by something mental,"[15] whereas objectivist theories are non-experiential, insofar as they admit of suffering beyond or outside of experience. Whereas experientialist accounts focus on negative effect, non-experientialist views identify suffering with some objective property, often to do with (disruptions to) functioning. Kious describes objective accounts as maintaining that "The presence of objective suffering is independent of any feeling, distress, or subjective evaluation of one's circumstances, and depends only on whether one's life is going well or poorly in some objective sense—thus, on whether one is (objectively) flourishing."[16]

As with value-based views, objective theories have a range of supporters. Thus, Eleonore Stump proposes an account of suffering in a non-experiential sense. She writes: "Even if a malefactor feels no pain over the moral evil he does, his life suffers because of it."[17] Someone suffers in Stump's sense if some evil befalls them—or in the case of the malefactor, they bring some evil upon themselves—and evils need not be experienced. There are other objectivist accounts. Corns herself holds that suffering is a matter of (severely) disrupted agency. She writes: "Suffering is significant disruption to agency. One suffers when and only when their agency is significantly disrupted."[18] One has many different forms of agency, related to many different 'agential forms'. At the higher and more abstract levels, we can identify biological, psychological, and social forms.[19] At the lower and more particular levels, we can have practical identities or agentive forms of a father, philosopher, supporter of Partick Thistle, academic manager, distance runner, and so on. Insofar as one or more of these agential forms is negatively affected—so that injury puts paid to my distance running, or when colleagues undermine my position as an academic manager—then I suffer, even if I do not experience any negative affect. (Suppose I do not much care, right now, about running, or I do not know about my colleagues agitating behind my back.) Corns writes: "I propose that disruption to any of one's agentive forms is a disruption to one's agency. … If it is so noisy that I cannot exercise my capacity to think, then my psychological agency is thereby disrupted. Pain may consume me, such that my biological, psychological, and social agency are all disrupted. If I cannot access potable water, my biological agency is disrupted. If my environment no longer affords me the opportunity to make and act in accordance with my plans, then my psychological and social agency are disrupted."[20]

There are other objectivist accounts. Kious writes: "The presence of objective suffering is independent of any feeling, distress, or subjective evaluation of one's circumstances, and depends only on whether one's life is going well or poorly in some objective sense—thus, on whether one is (objectively) flourishing. Stan van Hooft has articulated a view of this type. He argues that one can suffer without any subjective awareness, since suffering is merely the opposite of flourishing, which is the realization of ends or goals set by one's nature at several levels of being—the vegetative, appetitive, cognitive, and spiritual. Since it is possible for vegetative ends to be frustrated without one being aware of it, one can suffer without awareness. Tyler Tate and Robert Pearlman endorse a similar view. They suggest that a person can suffer simply by being in bad circumstances, even if she is not aware (or disagrees) that the circumstances are bad—in their view, a 'child in a sexually abusive relationship,' a 'drug addict affording heroin through prostitution,' and a 'billionaire driven on by greed and recognition yet seldom seeing his family' are all probably suffering, even if they do not recognize it, because they are not flourishing."[21]

These, then, are three theoretical options for accounts of suffering. I do not take them to be exhaustive, although given the breadth of theories falling under one or another of them, they seem to cover a great deal of the field. In what follows, I want to focus on the disagreement between my kind of experientialist account, and objectivist accounts of the sort favored by Stump, van Hooft, and Corns. I will summarily dismiss feeling accounts of suffering as implausible—for much the same reasons that similar accounts of pain and unpleasantness are implausible. A pressing and persuasive objection to such views is that, if there *is* a distinctive feeling present in all instances of suffering, then we should, by introspection, be able to discover this feeling. But it seems obvious to many people that there is not any such distinctive feeling, not for pain, nor for unpleasantness, nor for suffering. (This is known as the 'heterogeneity problem' for

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feeling accounts, on the grounds that suffering is simply too heterogeneous in its feelings for us to identify one feeling that is distinctive.) The idea that suffering is a disagreeable overall feeling is not in much better shape, unless we can cash out what it is for its to be disagreeable. If that is a matter of intensity, it cannot accommodate the fact that there are experiences that are unpleasant and low-intensity but still constitute suffering. If Mayerfeld wants to cash out disagreeableness in terms of some attitude, then it is no longer strictly a feeling theory but an attitudinal one like mine. If so, if one wants to be an experientialist, then there is good reason to be a value-based experientialist. In the next two sections, I will focus on whether experientialism or non-experientialist objectivism comes out best with respect to a range of questions or issues that might be thought to favor one side or the other. I conclude that the jury is still out on each of these. I then provide, in the final section, an argument that I think tells decisively in favor of experientialism.

The issue of everyday language use

It is clear that we use the term 'suffering' to refer to negative experiences that are highly unpleasant, such as grief, shame, and disappointment. It is also clear that people often use the terms 'pain' and 'suffering' as synonyms—which might be one reason why feeling accounts have an initial degree of attraction. However, it is also clear that we use the term to refer to non-experiential states as well. As Jennifer Corns puts it, our everyday talk of suffering "countenances both mental and extra-mental occurrences which may constitute suffering. This liberality is reflected in our everyday language. In everyday life, I may as easily say that I suffered a headache yesterday, as that I suffered a huge financial loss yesterday. The former is a suffering that we may presume I experienced, whereas the latter is a suffering that we may presume I did not. My team may suffer a defeat and I may suffer either a job loss or a heartbreak. Because of its impact on her development, my daughter may suffer the mandated closure of nurseries, despite presently having a pleasant time. Examples proliferate."[22] I agree with Corns on this point; indeed, I have written that "there are other familiar but non-experiential uses of 'suffer' and 'suffering'. For instance, we might talk of a person suffering a loss of memory, or a football team suffering a defeat, or a community suffering deprivation as a result of government cuts, and mean by this just that something bad has happened to the person, team, or community. This is a non-experiential sense of suffering, since that which the person, team, or community suffers isn't itself a negative experience … By the same token, something might suffer in the non-experiential sense when it deteriorates or undergoes some negative change: relationships, buildings, air quality, job prospects, good looks, and the like can all suffer in this way."[23]

What conclusions might we draw from our everyday language use? One is that there are, in fact, two distinct meanings or usages associated with suffering. Tyler Tate writes: "One reason an analysis of suffering is so difficult is that 'suffer' is polysemous, with an objective sense as 'to undergo a hardship' and a subjective sense as 'to endure an unpleasant, consciously experienced mental state.'"[24] But suppose we do not (yet) want to take this route. Does the fact that we talk in these two ways give any support to one or the other of our theories? Corns, for one, thinks that it favors a non-experiential account, or at least, it favors an account, which allows that there are other forms of genuine suffering that are non-experiential. She cites paradigmatic cases of suffering—such as torture—where "[w]hat is suffered extends beyond what is experienced, including both immediate and longer-term damage to psychological and bodily functioning. Consider further the suffering of soldiers in battle. This may include the psychological, experienced suffering of fear or guilt, but also the deprivations of the environment and to the body. In both cases, the sufferer may later speak of 'what they suffered' at the hands of the torturer or in wartime, where this is not limited to occurrent, conscious experiences."[25]

Now the experientialist has various moves at this point. One is to agree that the elements Corns cites, such as deprivations of the environment and to the body, are part of what is suffered, insofar as they play a causal/evaluative role in the negative affective experience and/or insofar as they are part of what the victim of torture *minds*. These factors themselves are non-experiential, but they are a part of what is suffered only when they have an influence on the victim's negative experiences. Consider, for instance, a

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case of someone suffering unjust imprisonment. Here, we might be tempted to think that the very fact of injustice is an objective, non-experiential element in the suffering. However, the experientialist might hold that this fact is only part of what is suffered when the subject's awareness of the injustice makes their negative experiences even worse. Insofar as the subject does not know about the injustice, it is not a part of what *they* suffer. Something similar might be said about bodily and psychological deprivations: Insofar as we think that these are part of what is suffered, this will be because they are experienced at the time, or subsequently, as deprivations, and hence as things, which enhance the negative affective experience. Of course, the objectivist might reply that this is to simply insist on an experientialist position, rather than to argue for one. But the same charge can be leveled by the experientialist at the objectivist, who takes the above kind of case to constitute a non-question-begging argument in favor of their position. It is not obvious, at this point, which side would win out in this exchange of theoretical intuitions.

A second, and more promising, move is to make the same kind of argument against the objectivist and highlight the fact that everyday language allows talk of suffering where what is suffered goes beyond any functional element (like agency) or any ends or goals set by personal nature: The vegetative, appetitive, cognitive, and spiritual. That is, there are cases where *what is suffered* goes beyond effects on flourishing or agency. One way that this can happen is when the suffering entity is not agentive or functional, is not the kind of thing that can flourish in the sense of human flourishing. Thus, the shoreline can suffer erosion, the air quality can suffer deterioration, the chair can suffer under my weight, and the country's reputation suffers by comparison with another. All good uses of the term; none of the suffering in these cases counts as suffering on the objectivist, non-experientialist view. A second way that this can happen is when what is suffered does not contribute to the agentive or functional elements in question. Thus, someone who is tortured suffers as a victim of a repressive regime, and yet this element of their situation —the political nature of the regime, which might contribute to the additional badness of what is suffered —is not itself an undermining of their agency or flourishing. If everyday usage counts against experientialism for the reasons that Corns and other objectivists point out, then it also counts against objectivism too.

Young children, animals, and patients in persistent vegetative states

We sometimes use the term 'suffering' to refer to the states of very young children and animals. Practices like factory farming and vivisection are held to involve considerable amounts of animal suffering, which is why many people oppose them. Practices like giving anesthetic to very young children undergoing invasive surgery are justified by claims that very young children will suffer otherwise. The purported fact of the suffering of young children and animals is thought to count in favor of objectivist accounts, insofar as the pain thus experienced undermines the flourishing or agency of these subjects, or insofar as it counts as an evil to befall them (in cases where surgery is not warranted, for instance). However, objectivists claim that some experientialist accounts like mine fail to allow for the suffering of very young children and animals, on the grounds that these subjects cannot 'mind' their own subjective states of consciousness. That is: Even if these subjects can form occurrent desires about various things—for food, safety, warmth, and the like—they are not sophisticated enough to form higher-order mental attitudes about their own attitudes. (This kind of argument counts even more against more sophisticated value-based theories like Cassell's, since we can doubt that young children can perceive things as 'threats to their integrity' or experience 'potentially alienating moods'.) As Tyler Tate writes: "The suffering-as-mirage trope is advanced forcefully by Eric Cassell, who believes that infants and children with significant cognitive impairment cannot suffer … Cassell's criteria for suffering are stringent; to suffer one must undergo an injury or threat to personhood, and personhood in turn requires language, agency, a sense of time, a vision of the future, and an ability to attribute meaning to events. For newborns and children with serious cognitive impairments, these are criteria that cannot be met."[26]

A different kind of argument, which puts pressure on value-based theories from the opposite direction, can be made with respect to patients in 'persistent vegetative states.' Jaak Panksepp and colleagues claim that modern neuroimaging indicates that "raw emotional feelings" can exist in PVS

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patients, without their cognitive or reflective awareness.[27] Moreover, this is in line with contemporary thinking about the brain. They write: "Current knowledge of the brain strongly supports the idea that primary-process affective experiences emerged in brain evolution earlier than those high cognitive processes that allow us to think and talk about our internal experiences (i.e., secondary and tertiary forms of consciousness). … These ancient systems seem to be the epicenters for emotional and other basic affective experiences such as the pleasure of taste and the distress of homeostatic imbalances from air-hunger to thirst."[28] As a result, we might think that such affective experiences could constitute suffering, without the presence of occurrent desires.

Once more, the experientialist has ways in which they might respond to this objection. As Kious has argued, we might have some doubts about whether "severely impaired children" really do suffer.[29] We can raise similar doubts about PVS patients. A different response is to maintain that young children and animals can indeed have occurrent desires about their own mental states, at least in the sense I need. If we grant that young children and animals have desires—perhaps understood as functional states that incline or motivate behavior to seek out some goal—directed toward ends such as warmth, then we can grant that young children and animals can have desires toward other mental states, on the assumption that things like warmth are *relative to* a subject's mental states. But if we grant this, it is not obvious why we cannot grant that young children and animals can have desires to states such as unpleasantness. By the same token, Panksepp and colleagues state that "we can be sure that [PVS patients] still exhibit a variety of instinctual behaviors, such as apparent anger attacks."[30] Although PVS patients are not in a position to think and talk about their experiences, the fact that they exhibit behavioral responses might allow that they can have desires directed toward their own internal states as well—again, on the assumption that anger is relative to, because dependent upon, a subject's cares and concerns.[31] If so, then the objector faces the following dilemma: Either children or infants or PVS patients cannot desire things like warmth (or cannot be averse to cold), where these are determined relative to other states of the infant or patient; or they can, as evidenced by behavioral responses, in which case there is no obvious reason why they cannot desire that unpleasantness cease, and so suffer on my account.

In favor of experientialism

As we have seen, objectivist accounts maintain that suffering undermines our agency or integrity or our functioning and constitutes a bad way that an agent can be. Given the identity claim here, we might make this thought a little stronger: Suffering *necessarily* undermines our agency or our functioning. Such disruption to our agency, or such ways in which we fail to flourish, are simply what suffering *is*. As a result, objectivists will not be able to countenance instances of suffering that intrinsically, or in and of themselves, contribute to integrity, agency, and flourishing. (They can admit that suffering can have instrumental benefits.) On this view, if something contributes to or promotes agency or integrity or flourishing, then it cannot be an instance of suffering. In my view, however, there are clear examples of kinds of suffering, which make an intrinsic contribution to our agency, integrity, or flourishing—indeed, to pretty much any objective good that the objectivist can envisage. For there can be instances of genuine suffering that *constitute* good functioning and make for good agency. If so, then objectivist theories are false.

I want to make this case by revisiting things I said in *Suffering and Virtue*, where I argued that some kinds of suffering can be intrinsically valuable because they constitute *virtuous* responses to various objects and events.[32] Moreover, given that forms of suffering can be virtuous responses to an agent's situation, it follows that they will likely contribute to any objective good, at least on plausible theories of what is good for humans and other animals. As a result, the argument promises to undermine all forms of objectivism. In my 2018 book, I gave two examples of suffering, which can be virtuous and intrinsically good, in the right circumstances: Pain, as an instance of physical suffering, and remorse, as an instance of emotional suffering. I will not rehearse all of the arguments for these claims here but will outline the main ideas.

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Pain constitutes what might be called a 'faculty virtue,' following Ernest Sosa. Faculty virtues are constituted by systems, which enable a subject to reliably achieve a certain good and which typically outperform feasible competitors for this task. Take vision as an example. Good eyesight counts as virtuous, insofar as it enables the agent to reliably achieve valuable ends—namely, seeing and recognizing medium-sized objects in one's immediate surroundings, given suitable lighting conditions, etc. — and does so better than other systems that could do this role. Something similar can be said about pain. That is, our nociceptive system enables us to reliably achieve valuable goals or ends—namely, avoidance and repair of damage—and is significantly more effective in this respect than feasible competitors for this task, such as seeing bodily damage or believing that one's body has been damaged. The feeling of bodily damage that is constitutive of pain experiences is much more effective in alerting us to sites of damage, motivating us to avoid further damage, and ensuring our bodies are suitably sensitive so that we do not exacerbate damage and can instead repair ourselves. One reason for this is that pain's affect keeps our attention focused on the bodily damage, in a way that believing or seeing does not, and provides a much more insistent motive to do what we need to protect and repair. The neuroscientist Paul Brand's lack of success in constructing a pain system that alerted subjects to bodily damage, but not via affect, is testimony to this.[33]

What is true of pain at the physical level is equally true of remorse at the emotional level. Remorse counts as a trait virtue, or virtue of character because it involves a particular motive—such as the desire to repent and make reparations after one has behaved badly or wrongly—and is reliably successful in enabling a subject to achieve such ends. At least, feelings of remorse will tend to be more reliable in motivating apologies and reparatory behavior than potential rivals for this job—such as a perception or a belief that one has done something wrong and ought to make amends. One reason for this is that feelings of remorse are not (as) susceptible to rationalization as thoughts or beliefs, nor are they as avoidable, given that affect captures attention in a way that feelings are difficult to ignore. As a result, feelings of remorse will be more effective in motivating apologies and reparations than mere thoughts and judgements—which is one reason why such feelings are adaptive.

Because of this, we have good reason to think that pain and remorse are (in the right circumstances and given the right conditions) faculty virtues: They constitute appropriate responses in important human situations and facilitate the achievement of significant goods. As a result, these forms of suffering constitute intrinsically valuable states and traits, precisely *because* they constitute appropriate responses to the relevant objects and events. Thus, pain is an appropriate response—indeed, the appropriate response par excellence—to bodily damage. Likewise, remorse is an appropriate response—again, par excellence—to moral wrongdoing. If we think (following philosophers like Robert Adams and Thomas Hurka) that virtues are forms of loving or 'being for' the good and of hating or 'being against' what is bad, then pain and remorse really do count as virtuous and as intrinsically good. Moreover, on any plausible account of flourishing, agency, functioning, and objective goods, virtues contribute to such goods. In the case of functioning, virtues simply are cases where the subject functions ideally well. Insofar as objectivism rules out the possibility of suffering, which is virtuous and valuable in this way, we thus have good reason to reject it. We can put the argument formally, as follows.

1. For any objective account of suffering, there will be some objective feature F such that X counts as suffering to the extent that it undermines or disrupts F.
2. If some X *promotes* F, then X cannot be suffering on that objectivist account.
3. For all F, virtuous pain and remorse will promote F. (F = agency, flourishing, etc.)
4. Virtuous pain and remorse are genuine instances of suffering.
5. Objective accounts of suffering are false.

Objectivist responses

Since P1 just states the objectivist theory, then the objectivist will have to deny one of P2, P3, or P4. How might they do so?

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Rejecting P2

Corns might argue that suffering can promote some F and still be suffering on her account. Corns thinks that suffering is *pro tanto* bad, but it can be all-things-considered good. Thus, something like hunger can disrupt her biological agency and so constitute suffering but can promote biological agency all-things-considered. As a result, X can count as suffering to the extent that it disrupts one form of biological agency but can promote biological agency nevertheless. She writes: "If, for instance, I am dangerously obese, then it may be good for me qua biological agent to suffer hunger and, all things considered, I should not act to eliminate that hunger—at least, some degree of hunger and for some time. In this case, other biological norms and considerations of my integrity as a biological agent are sufficient to explain why my suffering hunger is good all things considered and not to be eliminated."[34] If so, then genuine suffering can promote the relevant feature.

But this response only provides short-lived relief. For one thing, it is not suffering hunger that is good, all things considered; instead, what is all-things-considered good is her not eating. If the hunger could be eliminated by taking a pill, then it ought to be eliminated. It is not hunger that promotes biological agency in this instance, in other words. For another, this strategy looks like it is making P2 come out false by simply changing the referent of F. Corns maintains that in these instances, hunger can promote some F (biological agency all-things-considered) even though it counts as suffering because it disrupts one form of biological agency. But this is to change the value of F, from one that refers to a particular agential form in P1 to a different feature or agential form (biological agency all-things-considered) in P2. Given her argument, hunger is still intrinsically bad, but all-things-considered good.

My argument maintains that certain forms of suffering are intrinsically good because they are appropriate responses to bad things, and that when they do so, they promote agency. Thus, pain is intrinsically good because it is an appropriate response to bodily damage, and because it enhances my agency in dealing with bodily damage. In other instances, Corns seems to recognize that suffering can be an appropriate response that seems to promote agency. She writes: "Consider again under this heading the examples of unpleasant pain and remorse. These will typically constitute instances of suffering on the current proposal because they will typically constitute significant disruptions to agency. Moreover, the present account further illuminates *why* suffering is sometimes an appropriate response. Consider remorse. It will sometimes be appropriate that my agency be significantly disrupted when I have done wrong; it will sometimes be inappropriate for me to carry on as an undisturbed psychological or social agent when I have done a wrong. Until I redress the wrong, my agency is and ought to be disturbed. Similarly, consider pain. It will sometimes be appropriate that my agency be disrupted when my body is damaged; it will sometimes be inappropriate for me to carry on as an undisturbed biological agent when I have undergone damage. Until I address the damage, my agency is and ought to be addressed."[35] Here too, Corns seems to be arguing that remorse, as a disruption of psychological or social agency, can be appropriate and valuable because my overall social and psychological functioning and agency depend upon this. Likewise, my all-things-considered biological agency can be promoted if my agency is disrupted by my pain.

But this is to change the argument. Corns seems to be thinking that disruptions of agency can be appropriate responses to bad things, whereas the point I am making is that in these instances, it is expressions of agency that are appropriate responses. Remorse does not significantly disrupt my agency in the relevant sense but facilitates and promotes it. The same can be said about pain. As a result, even if it is true that sometimes disruptions to agency are called for—we should freeze when in danger, perhaps, or become numbed after trauma—the appropriateness or otherwise of these disruptions is beside the point. My argument depends upon pain and remorse being instances or examples of proper functioning and non-disrupted agency in these instances.

Might there be other versions of F that the objectivist can appeal to in order to show P2 is false? Recall that P2 states: If some X *promotes* F, then X cannot be suffering on that objectivist account. What the objectivist would need to show is that X counts as suffering because it undermines or disrupts some F and yet also promotes that very same F. Suppose that F is identified with flourishing. Is it possible for us to maintain both that something—such as pain—counts as suffering because it undermines flourishing and

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that very same thing can promote flourishing? It is not easy to see how this could be done, at least without equivocation. As a result, I conclude that P2 remains intact.

Rejecting P3

This premise, recall, states: For all F, virtuous pain and remorse will promote F. This might seem, on the face of it, an overly strong claim. Might there be versions of F for which this premise is false? Pain and remorse might seem to be in some tension with some specifications of F—for instance, we might specify F has 'happiness' and argue that pain and remorse are inconsistent with this. However, this would only be plausible for some versions of what happiness is, and—interestingly enough—most plausible if happiness is understood in hedonic terms. Virtuous pain and remorse do indeed seem in tension with enjoyment, pleasure, and feelings of satisfaction. However, the closer our specification of F comes to hedonic and affective notions, the less plausible it is as an objectivist account of suffering. By the same token, the more objectivist we make our account of suffering, the less likely it is that virtuous pain and remorse will not promote F. On any plausible objectivist account of well-being, virtuous pain and remorse will be necessary for physical, psychological, and moral health, for instance. This is especially so because the forms of suffering are, precisely, *virtuous*. It is thus difficult to see how virtuous traits and states can fail to promote the kind of feature that the objectivist will appeal to. If so, the objectivist remains in a bind.

Rejecting P4

Is it true that virtuous pain and suffering—as opposed to chronic pain, recalcitrant grief, and similar—are *genuine* forms of suffering? Some objectivists deny this. Thus, Tyler Tate writes: "Pain, even undesirable pain, is not considered suffering when it is judged to be requisite and critical for a newborn to grow into an infant, an infant into a toddler, a toddler into a child, a child into an adolescent, and an adolescent into a functioning and well-adjusted adult. For example, the physical and emotional pain associated with discipline (e.g., swatting a child's hand away from an electrical outlet or forcing an adolescent to admit to and apologize for stealing) is often deeply 'minded' by children and adolescents but not considered suffering. It seems therefore to be the case that a full account of the suffering of children cannot be given without an objective teleology—that is, without understanding a child's life in reference to a species-specific end, goal, or purpose. These ends, goals, and purposes are accountable to standards of flourishing that are independent of the individual child's subjective experience. Again, to understand suffering one must first understand what a thing is; to understand suffering is to understand a life."[36]

Tate therefore seems to insist that pains and so forth that are necessary for flourishing, for a 'species-specific end, goal, or purpose,' cannot in fact be suffering. As a result, he is likely to think that virtuous pain and remorse, which contribute to flourishing, cannot be instances of suffering either. What might we think of such a view? I think it's understandable why someone might think that disciplining a child or forcing them to apologize for wrongdoing are not cases of inflicting suffering. However, there are other cases where negative experiences seem necessary for a species-specific end, goal, or purpose and yet which seem paradigmatic instances of suffering. Consider grief, for instance—the kind of grief that one experiences when a loved one dies. Grief is usually entirely appropriate in such cases; indeed, grief can seem to be 'called for' or 'required' even as a normative response to such great loss. Moreover, grief seems to serve species-specific ends, insofar as we are social creatures who need to recognize, mark, and recover from great losses. No doubt that grief, in serving these ends, disrupts other things that are part of flourishing—for instance, enjoyment, career, and other purposive ends. In spite of this, virtuous grief would seem to be part of a flourishing life; we would think considerably less of someone who did not grieve in these circumstances or who prioritized their other legitimate ends and forms over grieving. Do we want to insist, with Tate, that such grief is not genuine suffering after all? Is there any reason to deny what seems patently obvious—that it is a paradigmatic instance of suffering—other than commitment to

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an objectivist account of suffering? I think that the answers to both questions are clearly 'no.' If so, then we must admit that there are genuine instances of suffering that facilitate flourishing or the right kind of agency in these circumstances and so do not count as suffering on objectivist lines.[37]

If this is the case, then the objectivist cannot respond to the argument by rejecting P4 either. I therefore conclude that the argument is sound and that we have good reason to prefer experientialist accounts of suffering over their objectivist rivals.[38]

Notes

1. Kious B. Three kinds of suffering and their relative moral significant. *Bioethics* 2022;**36**(6):621–7.
2. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 622.
3. Cassell E. The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine. *New England Journal of Medicine* 1982;**301**(11):639–5.
4. See note 3, Cassell 1982, at 640.
5. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 622.
6. Svenaeus F. 2014, p. 413.
   Svenaeus F. The phenomenology of suffering in medicine and bioethics. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 2014;**35**(6):407–20.
7. Hoffmaster B. Understanding suffering. In: R. M. Green RM, Palpant NJ, eds. *Suffering and Bioethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 31–53.
8. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 623.
9. Brady MS. *Suffering and Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2018.
10. See note 9, Brady 2018, at 32.
11. Bramble B. The distinctive feeling theory of pleasure. *Philosophical Studies* 2013;**162**(2):201–17.
12. See note 9, Brady 2018, at 32.
13. Mayerfeld J. *Suffering and Moral Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1999.
14. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 624.
15. Corns J. Suffering as seriously disrupted agency. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2022;**105**(3):706–29
16. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 624.
17. Stump E. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010.
18. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 714.
19. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 715.
20. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 716.
21. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 624. A further distinction needs to be made, which is that there seem to be 'hybrid' views of suffering, according to which suffering can be viewed as involving both negative experience and the frustration of aims or functioning that are implicit in our capacities – for instance, the capacity to feel pain. This is the kind of view endorsed by Antti Kauppinen. See Kauppinen A. Meaningfulness and time. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2012;**84**(2):345–77; and more recently his Telic Perfectionism and the Badness of Pain. In Rossi M, Tappolet C, eds. *Perspectives on Ill-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; forthcoming. Insofar as this kind of view makes experience necessary for suffering, I classify it as experiential rather than objectivist. My target, then, is only the kind of theory which holds that suffering can be non-experiential. Thanks to a reviewer for pushing me to be clearer on this point.
22. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 708.
23. See note 9, Brady 2018, at 11.
24. Tate T. What we talk about when we talk about pediatric suffering. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 2020;**41**:143–63.
25. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 707.
26. See note 24, Tate 2020, at 9.

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27. Panksepp J, Fuchs T, Garcia VA, Lesiak A. Does any aspect of mind survive brain damage that typically leads to a persistent vegetative state? Ethical considerations. *Philosophy, Ethics and Humanities in Medicine* 2007;**2**(32):1–11.
28. See note 27, Panksepp et al. 2007, at 7.
29. See note 1, Kious 2022, at 256.
30. See note 27, Panksepp et al. 2007, at 8.
31. Thanks to a reviewer for this journal for raising the possibility of suffering in PVS patients.
32. See note 9, Brady 2018, Chapter 3.
33. See note 9, Brady 2018, at 73, fn. 9.
34. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 723.
35. See note 15, Corns 2022, at 725.
36. See note 24, Tate 2020, at 17.
37. Might it be the case that this example *also* undermines my own account of suffering – on the grounds that grief in this instance, which is entirely appropriate and called-for, is ultimately something that an enlightened subject *will not* mind, precisely because it is entirely appropriate and called-for? That is: might virtuous kinds of suffering not count as suffering after all, because the more reason one has to endorse feelings of grief et al., the less reason one has to mind such things? This is an important objection; Corns has raised a similar point against my account of suffering. (See note 15, Corns 2022, at 714.) However, it is not ultimately convincing. On my picture, it is not simply grief that is called for when a loved one dies – since that is compatible with very low levels of feeling being fitting or appropriate, and low levels of feeling are *not* fitting or appropriate when a loved one dies. Grief in such circumstances must therefore be suitably intense – in which case it is something that an enlightened subject *will* mind, and so will be constitute a subject's suffering in the aftermath of loss. So it can be true that a virtuous subject will mind their suitably intense feelings of grief, whilst at the same time not minding that they are suffering; the virtuous sufferer will not have a further higher-level attitude of minding their suffering, in other words. Thanks are again due to a reviewer for raising this objection.
38. I would like to thank Brent Kious, and an anonymous reviewer of this paper, for their very helpful comments.

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