

# PHILOSOPHICAL NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING: NIETZSCHE, LEVINAS, WEIL AND THEIR CULTURAL ROOTS

## ABSTRACT

The sort of meanings which suffering is depicted influence both individual experiences of and social responses to it. In contemporary research, these meanings have been explored via mapping out individual narratives on illness and suffering, and by locating common typologies underlying them. Much less emphasis has been placed on philosophical narratives on suffering and the manner in which they both echo and strengthen culturally common Western meanings concerning human travails. The paper takes its impetus from here and examines three distinct philosophical narratives on suffering presented by Emmanuel Levinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Simone Weil. Moreover, it investigates the cultural influences behind them, ranging from Homeric tragedies to Medieval Christianity and Holocaust portrayals. The suggestion is that analysing philosophical narratives facilitates moral comparisons between the varieties of cultural meanings given to suffering. This, again, enables one to locate the societal and political consequences that narratives of suffering have on how we approach, for instance, vulnerability and disability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability is both conceptually and practically entwined with suffering, for what partly makes us vulnerable is our capacity to suffer. Martha Nussbaum, one of the perhaps most notable contemporary philosophers to have tackled the issue of vulnerability, suggests that vulnerability stems from our being thrown into a contingent world, where one's agency is continuously under the impact of external

and internal forces. It forms the lever between flourishing and suffering: vulnerability is a human condition, which can interlace with 'a good life', but which can equally allow suffering to enter us. (Nussbaum 2001.) It is precisely through vulnerability that suffering can exist, as the fact that we are vulnerable creatures suspect to forces beyond our control renders us also prone to pain and anguish. Indeed, arguably the very meaning of 'vulnerability' stems from exposure to suffering: we are vulnerable, because

we are finite and potentially pained creatures. It is on these grounds that the paper at hand approaches vulnerability via focusing on this least pleasant of its companions—suffering. Simply stated, one's take on suffering greatly influences also one's take on the nature, risks and potential value of vulnerability.

Most commonly, suffering is defined as a deeply unpleasant experience, either due to its longevity or its intensity. Unlike pain, suffering touches our whole being: our bodies, emotions, and thoughts become governed by it, and thus it is exceedingly difficult to avert attention away from its hold. Suffering stays with us, we cannot escape it, and it becomes the definer of many of our mental contents and even our very existence. Therefore, it is more than a purely physical state. Indeed, suffering contains a psychological element: it is not constituted by mere physical pain, which has to be accompanied by, for instance, despair, sorrow, humiliation, or fear, as suffering includes feelings toward its source or cause. Partly due to this holistic dimension, suffering also often appears hopeless—it limits our directions for the future, and seems to drag us under its weight. (Mayerfeld 1999; Scarry 1985.)

Next to and entwined with the psychological dimension, suffering can also include cultural and social dimensions. What we deem to be valid causes of suffering, and how suffering is experienced, expressed, and made sense of, can alter significantly depending on our cultural or social background—simply stated, middleclass Westerners may suffer from things that poverty-stricken people from Third world countries may deem as relatively or wholly insignificant. (Wilkinson 2005.) In fact, it has been argued that suffering is always cultural, and experiences of it are affected and even wholly constructed by socially created meanings. On these lines, David B. Morris posits that pain

is a state, which we always bestow with meaning, and which in human beings thereby never takes place neutrally: 'We experience pain only and entirely as we interpret it' (Morris 1991: 29).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Morris underlines that for humans, pain is never just about nerves and neurons, but also a culturally loaded phenomenon. How pain and suffering are perceived depends on the cultural and thereby historical setting and on social categories such as gender, age, religion, and class: 'Pain is always historical—always reshaped by a particular time, place, culture, and individual psyche' (Morris 1991: 6). Ian Wilkinson (2005: 4) echoes this claim: 'The pain sensation takes place as a product of the interaction between neurophysiological processes, social contexts, and cultural meaning'.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more realistically and avoiding strong constructivism, it can be argued that whilst pain as an affect may *exist* also outside of culture, how humans *interpret* it is culturally shaped.

These cultural and social dimensions of suffering are evident, for instance, in how individuals often make sense of their plights via echoing culturally common narratives on illness, hardship, and suffering. Arthur Frank (1995), Rita Charon (2006) and Raymond De Vries (2012) are among those who have analysed the manner in which suffering is frequently, on the individual level, comprehended and rendered meaningful via culturally repeated narratives. We tell stories of suffering, which tend to entwine with, echo, reaffirm, and redirect cultural stories of what it means to suffer. Here, illnesses and suffering are catalysts in life events—they force one toward re-evaluation of one's life projects and values. Frank's typology of such narratives is particularly well known, and his studies on illness suggest that ailment and suffering are often recounted via three, culturally common narrative-types, which are *restitution* (centered on the effort to overcome illness), *chaos* (loss of

hope, followed by fragmentation of one's ability to recount coherently), and *quest* (positioning illness and suffering as transformative factors). (Frank 1995.)<sup>3</sup> The cultural dimensions of suffering are evident also on a metalevel, as one suggestion has been that emphasising human travails, oppression, inequality, and hopelessness, and thereby accentuating 'the suffering subject', has been a trend in anthropological research. (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016.) Hence, not only how one describes suffering, but also how one highlights or depicts its significance in human affairs, can be a culturally loaded matter.

This paper maps out three narratives of suffering found in Western philosophy. Whereas usually the typologies on narratives of suffering concentrate on personal stories, the focus here is on the type of stories circulated in philosophy and their complex relation with wider cultural influences. Arguably, philosophical narratives on suffering have both influenced and echoed culturally common accounts of what it means to suffer, and thereby exploring them will aid also in investigating culturally archetypical ways of making sense of human travails. Thus, the paper investigates 'stories of suffering' familiar from the history of philosophy, which hopefully will add more heterogeneity and nuance to existing typologies. Moreover, it will be argued that next to typologies, which *describe* existing narratives, we need reflection on which narratives are *prescriptively* most fruitful (which narratives provide a foundation, for instance, for moral engagement with and political inclusion of suffering others?). It is particularly for this reason that the exploration of philosophical narratives is valuable. Finally, the paper will address the societal and political consequences that narratives of suffering have on how we approach, for instance, vulnerability and disability.

The paper focuses on three philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Simone Weil, who all offered quite distinctive interpretations of suffering. Their philosophies will be analysed both descriptively and from the viewpoint of normative, political implications, using disability as a case study. Before continuing, it should be emphasised that the philosophical narratives will be explored schematically, thus leaving out many ambiguities and subtleties present in them; however, such a schematic reading is necessary in order to locate the core narratives embedded in otherwise complex philosophical thought.

## SUFFERING AS DESTRUCTION

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas had a strongly negative view on suffering. He argued, as many others from Paul Ricoeur to Hannah Arendt have done (see Arendt 1968; Ricoeur 2004; Wilkinson 2001), that suffering is alien to humanity, and as such beyond the limits of language and reason. Indeed, it stands as the antithesis to our being precisely because we fail to contain or explain it via our mental abilities—it does not destroy only our experiential wellbeing, but also our ability to make sense. In forming such a potent negation or contrast to humanity, and in destroying our flourishing and mental capacity, it also takes away our agency by rendering us wholly passive, until we can only shiver under its weight, give up our efforts, and become a mindless body, as if inhuman (Levinas 1988, see also White 2012; Wilkinson 2005: 16–18). Thus, suffering is a destructive, disabling, de-subjectifying, and de-humanising force, the supreme negation of what we are as living, experiencing, thriving, active agents. It leaves us in 'extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment, and solitude' (Levinas 1988: 158) and by

implication, is something wholly unwelcome, alien, and even monstrous. This destructiveness of suffering is intensified by the manner in which it erodes also our humanity in the moral sense of the term (our capacity to exist for others). On these grounds, Levinas suggests that suffering is nothing short of evil: 'All evil refers to suffering' (Levinas 1988: 157). Thus, Levinas held a deeply negative stance on suffering. Suffering is always surplus to humanity—it is a destructive force, ready to squash us and turn us from agents and subjects into passive objects and things, void of moral 'humanity'.

As a consequence, Levinas held that suffering is always useless: 'Thus the least one can say about suffering is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically it is useless, "for nothing"' (Levinas 1988: 158). We often seek to explain suffering in a utilitarian manner by locating some use or "greater good" that it serves, but this is a deeply dangerous undertaking, for in so doing one risks directing attention from the horrors of suffering onto its explanation and utility. Ultimately, explaining suffering from a utilitarian viewpoint paves the road toward justifying it. This, according to Levinas, ignores the horrors of suffering and thereby does violence toward the individuals undergoing it—indeed, it prevents one from acknowledging the destructiveness of suffering and stands as a profoundly immoral act, which fails to note the significance of others' experiences. Levinas posits that even the search for metaphysical or theological meaning for suffering partakes in utilitarianism, wherein one seeks to justify suffering on account of its 'use'. He accentuates that this is the road, which enabled the Holocaust: suffering cannot serve a benefit, it is always without use, and suggesting otherwise may lead to moral atrocities. (Levinas 1988; see also Arendt 1968; Wilkinson 2005: 88–92.)<sup>4</sup>

In Levinas's philosophical narrative, suffering is thereby the nemesis of the story. It wears away the capacities of its victims, and acts as a catalyst for passivity, helplessness, and loss of agency. Suffering is an evil, which destroys vulnerable human beings and ultimately our moral ability. One is to avoid and eradicate suffering, and never to respond to it with references to usefulness or 'greater good'. In this story, suffering as the evil nemesis must be abolished, and it is only then that we can find a catharsis that re-establishes our humanity and morality. (It ought to be emphasised that, as will be seen in the conclusion, Levinas does argue that suffering can find meaning in its ability to spur us to pay heed to and prevent the suffering of others, or 'taking upon oneself of the fate of the other' (Levinas 2006: 103). Thus, there is some ambivalence in Levinas's philosophical stance on suffering; on the one hand, he suggests that suffering erodes humanity, and on the other, he insists that it renders morality meaningful and can thereby even be a mark of the human condition. One way to make sense of this ambiguity is found from a distinction between responding to and learning from suffering—one is to respond to suffering as an evil, but still learn from its existence, and if one fails in the latter, one also fails in humanity or human morality.)

This is a culturally common depiction of suffering, particularly in Western countries, and the events of the Second World War considerably strengthened it. Indeed, Levinas's philosophy was strongly influenced by his experiences during the war (he spent time in a concentration camp designed for prisoners of war), and it is echoed by many Holocaust survivors. For instance, Primo Levi, famous for his texts navigating his personal experiences of Auschwitz, accentuated how suffering nullifies

one's agency and renders one into 'a thing'. Like Levinas, Levi argues that suffering also places one's moral ability under jeopardy, and that it ought never to be justified (not even via references to religion or metaphysics). Levi depicts the suffering in concentration camps vividly, with obvious parallels (loss of humanity, reduction into a thing, loss of morality, dangers of utility) with Levinas: 'Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses; he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be man whose life and death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgment of utility'. (Levi 1991: 29.)

The cultural prominence of this narrative on suffering is evident also outside of Holocaust influences. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an increase in emphasising the destructiveness of suffering and the need to eliminate it. One obvious example is 'sentimental' philosophy, which gained prominence in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and became entangled with practical politics, such as those advocated by the humanitarian movement. Sentimentalism depicted pain and suffering as evils, which ought to be eradicated, and strengthened the notion of human equality: since we are all creatures capable of suffering, we are equal also in a moral sense. (Turner 1980; Morris 1991: 207–213.) As in Levinas's account, within the sentimental or humanitarian narrative, suffering is an antithesis to humanity, it should not exist and finds no use, and we should act so as to prevent it. The 'suffering as destruction' narrative was found also outside of sentimentalism, and indeed (perhaps paradoxically, considering Levinas's critique of utilitarianism) early utilitarians took

part in it. In *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (2010 [1789]) the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously posited that morality stems from seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering, and thereby defined the latter as an evil to be eradicated.<sup>5</sup> Hence, depicting suffering as a destructive, useless experience, a force outside of the legitimate order of things, and thereby as something that ought to be eradicated, is a reoccurring theme in Western history. Arguably, historical and cultural influences are evident in Levinas's philosophical narrative, and simultaneously his narrative has further reinforced the cultural tendency to portray suffering as the nemesis of humanity, an 'evil' that morality ought to eliminate.

In Frank's typology of culturally common narratives of illness and suffering in Western countries, the Levinasian depiction comes close to 'chaos stories'. In chaos stories, suffering has incapacitated its subject to such an extent that she can no longer even construct a coherent account of her ordeals. Thus, the chaos story is disordered and the narrative structure has collapsed, which originates from the sufferer's loss of agency: she can no longer recount her experiences cohesively. Often chaos stories can only be interpreted via focusing on the gaps and silences between words, which further underlines how lingual and reasoned capacities of the sufferer, and thereby her agency, are damaged. The teller of such narratives is broken, exhausted, and mentally fragmented, which suggests that agency is replaced with reduction into 'a thing'. Indeed, chaos stories point toward the unmaking of 'the self' and the destruction of one's ability to govern one's own existence. According to Frank, this eradication of selfhood and agency is a place of deep anguish and sparks nothing less than horror and utter hopelessness. (Frank 1995: 102–109.) The similarities with Levinas's account are obvious,

from loss of agency to the hopeless and futile horror of suffering. Indeed, according to Frank, one notorious example of chaos stories involves the Holocaust: there is no cure to the suffering caused by it, and no way of making sense of what happened. (Frank 1995: 97–100.)<sup>6</sup> Arguably, it is precisely culturally influential accounts such as that offered by Levinas, which render chaos stories one common venue for contemporary individual sufferers seeking to communicate their struggles.

## SUFFERING AS ENNOBLING

Levinas' argument, according to which suffering is useless and ought never to be justified, does appear valid in many moral and political contexts. For instance, one cannot with moral legitimacy justify the suffering of a minority in order to benefit a majority. Yet, there may be contexts, in which suffering is useful and can be justified. These contexts involve suffering, which benefits the sufferer herself.<sup>7</sup>

This leads us to a philosophical narrative quite contrary to that offered by Levinas. One of its most famous advocates is Friedrich Nietzsche, according to whom suffering is a positive and an enabling phenomenon, and something that—instead of annihilating it—cultivates our agency. In fact, he maintains that one can only develop oneself as an agent or a 'self', if one conquers the obstacles posed by suffering. For Nietzsche, suffering is a powerful tyrant, at the face of which one must not surrender and break apart, and which one instead is to overcome, thereby reaffirming and strengthening one's own ability. Nietzsche advises: 'Raise thyself above thy life as above thy suffering (...) Our pride revolts as it never did before, it experiences an incomparable charm in defending life against such a tyrant as suffering' (Nietzsche 1997 [1881]: 71). Hence, whereas Levinas chooses the pessimistic stance,

according to which breaking apart and thus losing one's agency is inevitable, Nietzsche spurs us to stay firm, and to re-instate ability and agency via surviving and defeating the miseries posed upon us. Here, the re-establishment or re-creation of the self takes place precisely via one's willingness to stand up to suffering: suffering without resistance leads to passivity and turns us into 'things', whilst fighting suffering will activate us, and thereby remind us that we are proficient, capable subjects. In short, by not letting anguishes fragment or humiliate us, we manifest our potency. (ibid; Nietzsche 2003 [1886].)

Indeed, surviving suffering leads to a cultivation of mental capacity. The ability to overcome suffering enables improved mental focus, and as a consequence, the mind achieves wholly new horizons and becomes capable of perceiving reality with greater clarity. Quite radically, Nietzsche even suggests that life without suffering diminishes mental ability. It takes the form of a phantasy, wherein we float in comfort and lose contact with ourselves and the world, as if in a pleasant yet deceptive dream, and it is only suffering, which can awake us from this mindless state. Nietzsche clarifies: 'The man who suffers severely looks out with terrible calmness from his state of suffering upon the outside: all those little lying enchantments surrounding the world of a healthy person have vanished for the sufferer (...) If by chance that up to then he has lived in some kind of dangerous fantasy, this extreme disenchantment through pain is the means and possibly the only means of bringing him out of it' (Nietzsche 1997: 70). Therefore, whereas for Levinas, suffering disables one from the use of reason, according to Nietzsche, it enhances reflective ability. Via suffering, one gains a metalevel from which to observe the very root of mindedness, and thus suffering enables greater, not lesser, rationality.

Hence, what according to Levinas is the antithesis to reason, clarity and agency, is depicted by Nietzsche as a catalyst for their very development. At the centre of this account is the human self, strengthened by her aptitude to stand the tests of suffering, and thereby cultivated by her struggles. Ultimately, by living through suffering, we establish our freedom and in so doing even achieve a type of nobility (Nietzsche 2003: part 270). This is because only intense suffering, apparently capable of killing us, can force us to set aside what was mediocre, and to render us more creative—suffering emerges as a method of proudly and artfully manifesting our selfhood (Nietzsche 2001 [1882]: 6–7; see also Michaelis 2001). Nietzsche explains the transformed, delicate selfhood gained via suffering: ‘Once more we look longingly at men and nature and realise with a sorrowful smile that a veil has fallen, we regard many things concerning men in a new and different light (...) We are not unhappy when we see the charms of health resume their play and we contemplate the sight as if transformed, gentle and still weary. In this state we cannot listen to music without weeping’ (Nietzsche 1997: 71).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, suffering acts as a potential enabler and an ennobler, a possible means toward a cultivated mind, and it is here that its usefulness lies. Contra Levinas, suffering can be a highly transformative phenomenon, and serve utility. Whilst Levinas positioned it as ‘an evil’, Nietzsche vehemently resists references to ‘good’ and ‘evil’, claiming that both are just fictions, under which the only paramount issue is one’s capacity to live forcefully and healthily as an individual. (Nietzsche 2003.) In the Nietzschean narrative, suffering is thereby the beatable villain, who via testing us renders us more potent and capable, and who despite the status of a villain or a tyrant, is not to be categorised as ‘an evil’. It acts against us but can be defeated, and thus

indirectly brings about a refining catharsis—moreover, it takes place beyond good and evil. Suffering is a value-neutral catalyst for change and renders those, who overcome it, noble and ultimately even heroic.

Also this narrative on suffering finds resonance in history. In *Philebus*, Plato (1997) suggested that suffering and happiness require each other, as we make sense of happiness via the absence of suffering and vice versa. Achieving happiness can, therefore, require suffering—a dynamic that positions suffering as a personally useful phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> This suggestion was evident in Greek tragedies, in which undergoing and overcoming suffering can pave the way toward wholly new, cathartic levels of cultivation and contentment. The heroes of ancient tragedies are the supreme icon for how suffering can facilitate self-creation—therein, suffering is an ennobling, enabling matter, defeat over which will add to one’s power and develop one’s mental ability. The Homeric hero pursues his goals regardless of pains and miseries, and this defiance forms his very identity: his excellence is manifested by his willingness to tolerate and triumph over difficulties. In also other forms of Greek art, suffering is often linked to eudaimonic states of harmony and contentment, as it testifies to one’s virtue, strength and capacity for self-renewal. Thus, within the classical view, pain is transformative and ennobling. Even in utter torment and eventual death, the individual gains grandeur and dignity, and suffering emerges as nothing less than beautiful and elevating. (Morris 1991: 199–200; Hammer 2002.) Although Nietzsche himself was critical of them (Nietzsche 2003), Stoics, like Marcus Aurelius, are culturally perhaps the most iconic advocates of such a stance on suffering in the West, and linked it with control over damaging emotions such as fear: one was to control one’s mental

states to a degree that suffering was defeated. True freedom consisted of setting aside misled emotions uninformed by reason, and following one's intellect, which amounted to 'an absolute willed conquest over pain' (Morris 1991: 162). Pain was thus depicted as a type of slavery, from which we are to free ourselves by letting the mind govern the body and its destructive passions, thereby manifesting our virtue and (moral) agency. (Perkins 1995: 196–199.)

Hence, also the Nietzschean 'suffering as ennobling' narrative has long historical roots in Western imagination as it echoes and reaffirms wider, cultural takes on what it means to suffer. Moreover, it is still a common method of making sense of suffering. Arguably, in contemporary Western cultures, the Nietzschean narrative often entwines with masculine identities, as it is precisely men who are under the social pressure to tolerate suffering without flinching and to manifest their ability to be victorious at the face of adversity. Moreover, men are also more frequently under the cultural, social pressure to manifest control and hide their vulnerability, which again can be linked to the requirement to be potent rather than 'weak'. (See Canham 2009; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009.) Thus David B. Morris (1991: 181), in his cultural history of pain, locates Homeric and Stoic influences within the gender politics of pain: 'Pain inside a culture of manliness provides an apparently indispensable test of courage and machismo. If you are a man, you must be tough; if you are tough, you must be able to withstand pain'.

In Frank's taxonomy, Nietzsche's narrative on suffering comes close to 'the quest story'. The quest story positions illness and suffering as a point of positive alteration. The sufferer makes sense of her condition by rendering it into a catalyst for change: it becomes a tool of transformation. Indeed, 'the self', which is built via such stories, is depicted as radically

transformed, as if one was reborn, or had finally 'found' oneself. The transformation can be quite ontological, as the sufferer realizes the 'oneness of himself with the world' (Frank 1995: 119). The suffering, ill individual undergoes a sudden, holistic realization that dramatically alters her take on life, and thereby she becomes even heroic. The quest story can involve automythology, wherein one becomes a Phoenix-like figure rising toward the sky, as if reborn. (ibid.: 122–133.) The parallels with Nietzsche are evident, ranging from transformation to heroism, and indeed Frank himself posits that Nietzsche represents the quest story. However, there are also significant differences. According to Frank, the quest story is inherently moral, and the transformation sparked by it includes a normative, Buddha-like wish to exist for others. (Frank 1995: 127.) As will be seen, such a moral dimension is explicitly lacking in Nietzsche's account. Indeed, the latter comes close to also 'the restitution story', which underlines the need to fix suffering by potent agency (of both medical professionals and the ill person). Here, vulnerability and passivity are marginalized, as the emphasis is on the utopia of one day governing humanity to such an extent that illness and suffering no longer prevail, and also morality may be disposed of. (Frank 1995: 85–95.)

## SUFFERING AS METAPHYSICALLY TRANSFORMING

The third narrative comes from Simone Weil. Speaking from a distinct philosophical perspective influenced by metaphysical and religious thought, Weil offers a compromise between the Levinasian and Nietzschean accounts.

Weil talks of 'affliction' as the most severe form of suffering. In a state of affliction, there



is social, physical, and psychological pain, which engulfs us and leaves us with no escape. She uses the metaphors of slavery and death to depict it: when one is completely immersed in affliction, one is trapped in a state that appears all-encompassing and annihilating. Thus, she argues that '[a]ffliction is the uprooting of life' (Weil 2002: 68). It is a 'mutilating' force (Weil 2002: 69), which appears hopeless and thus even beyond the realms of compassion (for it appears as if nothing can sooth it). In its horrifying grip, one feels despondent and empty, and for a while incapable of locating one's own moral ability. Weil uses *The Book of Job* and its defeated protagonist, robbed off all hope and thrown into misery and worthless emptiness, as an epitome of affliction. (Weil 2002: 72.)

Yet, affliction can offer a route to a positive transformation, and thereby have utility. Like Levinas, Weil posits that suffering as affliction eradicates one's agency and reduces one into a thing: '[a]ffliction (...) deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things (...) They will never believe any more that they are anyone' (Weil 2009: 72). Yet, unlike Levinas, she argues this to be a positive reminder of how agency and selfhood are ultimately illusions, and how we as creatures are bound by the laws of causality. Hence, loss of agency and selfhood is not to be read negatively, but instead comes with a metaphysical realization, which points out that we are not autonomous agents with 'a free will', capable of self-creation and independent subjectivity, but rather beings, who are predetermined by the surrounding world. Indeed, affliction forces one to notice how one's 'self' is an artifice: 'the chief use of suffering (...) is to teach me that I am nothing' (Weil 2002: 111). Behind the illusions of selfhood and agency stands emptiness, and it is precisely this that affliction can teach us to recognize. For Levinas, loss of selfhood signals utter

despair, but for Weil, it is shaded with hope and possibility.

This is because affliction, loss of selfhood and the ensuing emptiness, although painful states, eventually facilitate transcendental realisations by permitting one to become more attentive toward the world. The logic is simple: when we are no longer preoccupied with our self-image, we gain a more realistic understanding of reality. As affliction renders us empty, it also allows the world to access our being, as if filling a void within us: 'Each time that we have some pain to go through, we can say to ourselves quite truly that it is the universe... that is entering our body' (Weil 2002: 78). When recognizing how irrelevant we are, we also become more lucid in our perception—cultivation of mindedness entwines with complete humility. It is here that suffering's transformative potential resides, as we become capable of wholly new 'attention' (ibid.) toward existence (Weil 2005: 87). States of extreme suffering can, thereby, prompt us to perceive reality afresh. Referring to Plato's famous Cave allegory, in which we can either presume that the shadows on the cave's wall are reality, or turn toward the sun at the cave's entrance, thus seeing the 'true' reality, Weil posits that affliction can teach us what is real. (Weil 2002: 112.) As a consequence, suffering ought to be accepted. One should not seek to eradicate it, and instead it should be allowed to facilitate metaphysical realisations, which teach attention and ultimately 'love' in the moral sense of the term.<sup>10</sup>

In Weil's account, suffering emerges as useful, but not heroic. Thus, Weil differs from Levinas and echoes Nietzsche in locating epistemic, transformative utility (indeed, the sort of metaphysical utility rejected by Levinas) in suffering, but her thinking diverges also from the path chosen by Nietzsche in its critique of selfhood and nobility. Unlike Nietzsche, who

linked the ability to tolerate suffering with potency and self-creation, Weil links it with humility and the loss of selfhood. Thereby, the two stand as each other's opposites in their understanding of what suffering is meant to enable: one claims it enables self-renewal, and the other posits that it supports 'un-selfing'.

In the Weilian narrative, suffering is a positive catalyst for transformation, which allows us to become self-effacing rather than heroic and thereby to achieve connection with reality. In fact, in Weil's account, suffering itself is nothing less than the hero. It comes to our illusion-filled, blinded, self-directed lives, and guides us to a fuller, more meaningful comprehension of ourselves, reality and even the transcendent. It is both the protagonist and the catharsis, which cultivates our attention and expands our mental horizons. Considered from the viewpoint of morality, suffering in itself is not an evil, but can be the product of it. For Weil, evil consists of prioritizing 'the self' and following its desires and dreamed-up beliefs, and here the best one can do is to direct one's own evil toward oneself, so that we suffer the egoistical evils we create: 'Where, then, are we to put the evil? We have to transfer it from the impure part to the pure part of ourselves, thus changing it into pure suffering. The crime which is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves' (Weil 2002: 73). As such, suffering can be a form of atonement, which—even if sparked by it—also relieves us from self-obsessed existence, and thereby from 'evil'.

Also Weil's philosophy reflects and reaffirms a culturally common, Western narrative on suffering. The historical roots of it are not difficult to locate, as they spring from perhaps the most obvious framework to have celebrated the notion of suffering's usefulness—religion. It has been argued that: 'Nowhere is the relation between pain and meaning more important

than in the history of religion' (Morris 1991: 44). Particularly Christianity has had a deep impact on Western attitudes toward suffering (Sontag 2004)<sup>11</sup> by centralising the latter in making it the very savour of humanity. Indeed, in Christianity, suffering is described as quintessentially useful: in the rhetoric of 'sacrifice', it becomes a method of salvation, a payment for a better future, which entwines with humility and the idea that reality (God) is to enter us. (Hallman 1991.) The Christian take on suffering has also a darker side<sup>12</sup>, as suffering is depicted as a punishment for 'sinful' failings, whereby the 'wicked' (historically, the poor, the sick, or otherwise marginalised individuals) deserve their torments (Hallman 1991; Morris 1991: 47).<sup>13</sup> Yet here, too, suffering still serves as a form of currency, as its use lies in how it can pay for our sins.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, one can compensate for both wrong-doings and salvation with suffering, and as an end-result, suffering enables nothing less than contact with God in the form of transcendental illuminations, as 'pain [acts] as a medium of visionary experience' (Morris 1991: 129; see also Morris 1991: 48; Mellor 2001).<sup>15</sup> The most iconic image for such a notion of 'suffering as currency' is the crucifixion, which still haunts Western attitudes toward pains and agonies (Sontag 2004).

The connections with Weil's philosophy are evident and, indeed, Weil was a mystic thinker guided by religious influences—for her, suffering allows one to enter the realm of 'grace' and introduces us to both goodness and God. Thus, her narrative on suffering, in which transcendental illuminations and humility are accentuated, echoes and reaffirms Christian tenets. It is noteworthy that Weil lived her narrative on suffering by deliberately undergoing numerous bodily afflictions, and ultimately by starving herself to death at the age of 34, for also through this radical,

somatic exposure to suffering and death, she took part in the Christian tradition (for an analysis of self-torment in Weil's philosophy, see Pirruccello 2002). This becomes apparent when considering the links between extreme suffering and (particularly female) sainthood. Many medieval saints posited that pain and suffering lift one to transcendental insights, and deliberately sought them via various self-punishments. As an example stands Saint Catherine of Siena from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, who claimed that pain and humiliation of one's body enable illumination, joy and grace, and thereby facilitate a direct connection with God. Like Weil, she insisted that, in undergoing suffering, one was to erase one's ego and thereby discover truth and love: 'There is no other way to know the truth. In so knowing me the soul catches fire with unspeakable love, which in turn brings continual pain' (cited in Morris 1991: 135). Here, the central notion is 'the power to transcend the world and the flesh', which emerges as 'a means of knowledge, offering access to an otherwise inaccessible understanding (...) an ecstatic union with God in which suffering is finally indistinguishable from love' (Morris 1991: 135).<sup>16</sup> Selfless affliction, thereby, guides one to truth, love, and God. Manifesting striking similarities with Weil, Saint Catherine of Siena followed her regime of pain and bodily humiliation to the fullest, and died of self-starvation at the age of 33.

Such a narrative of 'suffering as metaphysically transformative' is not restricted to religious spheres. In the Romantic period, suffering was linked to the sublime. The tortured, lone artist was the period's most influential figure, pained by her existential longing, which sparked transcendental epiphanies and connected her with the cosmos. Here, pain is longing, as we ceaselessly aim toward an unnameable goal always beyond our reach: 'This is the pain to be

desired, the pain of desire: the pain of reaching for an infinite perfection that always recedes, leaving us with an aching sense of loss' (Morris 1991: 208). Romantic poets such as John Keats and Percy Shelley rendered this painful loss into art, as the key claim was that pain is necessary in order for one to discover truth and beauty (Hay 2010). Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* stands as the epitome of this theme, and sculpted Western minds into believing in the links between pain, transcendental realisations, and love. (Morris 1991.) Again, connections with Weil are evident, as also she manifested constant longing for truth, love, and God, which (paradoxically) constituted the very pain that allowed her to satisfy her own longing.

Following Frank's typology, Weil's narrative is most similar with the quest story, particularly as it comes to epistemic epiphanies and moral transformation. However, there are also significant differences. Most notably, whilst the quest story accentuates selfhood and control (the sufferer as Phoenix regains her sense of self and active agency), Weil underscores the eradication of both. Indeed, there are hints of chaos story in Weil's approach, especially in regards to passive loss of agency, the fragmentation of one's self-governance, and the feelings of emptiness.

## CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY AND DISABILITY

Morris emphasises that by comprehending the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of pain, we become far more capable of having an effect on it. In short, by governing the meanings we would give to pain and suffering, we can alter the latter. The aim is to resist passivity, whereby we simply follow ready-made meanings, and to actively and reflectively explore which forms of

sense-making we wish to pursue. In this process, pain is rendered into something ‘which we at last recognize [as we] consciously employ our power to create and to reshape its meanings (...) It is a pain we may choose finally (...) to defy rather than to deny’ (Morris 1991: 285). By exploring, on the individual level, what types of cultural depictions of pain impact our own sense-making, we can reshape how we experience pain, and even defy its hold on us. Arguably, focusing on different common narratives on suffering is one way of practicing such reflection and defiance. Indeed, Morris suggests that we should ‘enrich our knowledge of pain by listening to more than one voice’ (Morris 1991: 283). We ought, thereby, to bring forward, pay attention to, and explore various narratives on suffering in order to learn how to respond to our plights and agonies fluently. Such a stance has been repeated by scholars such as Veena Das, who seek to use research as a method of rendering and alleviating the suffering of those (such as women in third world countries) who often remain invisible. The aim, thereby, is to articulate suffering, death and loss, so as to bring forth ‘a world in which one can dwell again’ (Das 1997: 69). Here, it is not only narratives or representations, which impact suffering, but also experiences of suffering, which are afforded space to help reconstruct the sorts of representations we wish to construe. (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997: xiv.)

Mapping out philosophical narratives on suffering, together with their entwinements with cultural influences, is one route to exploring the heterogeneity of the meanings offered to pains and sufferings, and thereby one method of soothing affliction on the personal level. However, investigating them comes with a further benefit. One important impetus for reflecting on which narratives we wish to follow stems from morality and politics.

Narratives on suffering come with moral and political consequences: as highlighted by Das (1997; 2015), how suffering is defined impacts how we respond to it also on the societal level. Hence, meanings given to suffering are never value-neutral, nor without moral and political consequences, and may even facilitate violence grounded on, for instance, gender, race, ethnicity, species, or ability. It is via analysing philosophical narratives that one can most effectively engage with the following question: If narratives on suffering impact how we morally and politically address those, who struggle, which narratives *ought* we favour?

The reminder of the paper will focus on this question. The narratives of suffering offered by Levinas, Nietzsche, and Weil come with radically different moral and political overtones and consequences. In particular, they signal highly distinct takes on vulnerability and how society ought to approach those groups most affected by it. Here, the types of disability that cause increased vulnerability and suffering will be used as an example in order to render the moral and political differences more concrete.

Nietzsche famously claimed that pity is an illness, and this was partly motivated by the idea that preventing suffering in others stunts their personal growth. Thus, he boldly stated that: ‘To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish them suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities—I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not—that one endures’ (Nietzsche 2017: 481). Compassion was to be avoided also due to the manner in which it could render suffering contagious and thereby threaten one’s strength, and Nietzsche went so far as to warn

us against social sensitivity toward suffering, which he deemed as a repulsive dimension of ‘the cult of suffering’ (Nietzsche 2003: 293; see also Frazer 2006). In short, ancient heroes did not lament at the sight of suffering, and neither should we. This stance reveals the kernel of the sort of politics Nietzsche’s view supports: we are to follow the aristocratic, libertarian notion, according to which human beings are independent, capable and potent creatures, who concentrate on mastering suffering in their own lives rather than eliminating it in the lives of others. In the libertarian spirit, each is left to fend for themselves, and social support for those, who suffer, is minimal or wholly non-existent. Following suit, some contemporary Nietzscheans are quite antagonistic toward for instance humanitarian aims, as their suggestion is that politics of compassion offers a weak basis for societies comprised of free individuals (Michaelis 2001; Amato 1990).<sup>17</sup> (Indeed, one can hypothesise as to what extent conservative and right-libertarian cultural influences, centred on hierarchies and autonomy, maintain the ‘suffering as ennobling’—narrative philosophically espoused by Nietzsche.)

From this angle, also concern for the welfare of vulnerable others, such as disabled individuals, appears dubious, as the apparent slogan is that ‘each to their own’. Within the Nietzschean narrative, social hierarchies and/or individual autonomy are depicted as more relevant than shared vulnerability, compassion, moral responsibilities toward others, and the elimination of suffering. The implication is that society holds no obligation to attend to or support disabled individuals, and that, in fact, doing so would constitute slave morality, wherein the ‘weak’ wrongly seek to benefit from the strong. Most worryingly, Nietzsche posits that one ought to abandon those, who are ‘disinherited and condemned by life’, to

destruction—a claim, which has been linked to eugenic beliefs (for discussion, see Frazer 2006). Nietzsche offers us an atomistic, independent individual, capable of self-governance, void of compassion and in little need of others, and this also renders his philosophy hostile toward the type of politics and social policy that would offer care for vulnerable groups. Indeed, disabled individuals would have to hide their very disabilities and aim toward self-sufficiency and potency in order to be accepted by the society. What is lacking in Nietzsche’s account is awareness of shared vulnerability and dependency. Humans are not near-omnipotent or resistant to fragility, but instead highly vulnerable beings; moreover, they are inherently dependent on their surroundings and other creatures. When Homeric heroes are depicted as powerful and self-relied, they appear to lack the sort of human fragility, which makes us real; in simpler terms, Nietzsche’s depiction of humanity appears to refer rather to gods than to people. For this reason, his narrative on suffering is a poor foundation for the politics of vulnerability and social policy capable of attending to groups such as the disabled. (For discussion, see MacIntyre 2013.)

In contrast, Levinas’s philosophy revolved around acceptance of shared vulnerability. Indeed, his stance on suffering needs to be positioned in the context of his ethics. According to him, in the field of morality, reasoned explanations can become ‘totalisations’, which overtake the importance of experience. Here, one no longer recognises the subjective realms of individuals—their affects and emotions—but instead centralises theoretical ponderings, which prioritise abstract categories over the raw, felt content of our mindedness. It is precisely this, which enables one to justify suffering, for when we lose sight of experiences and focus on detached principles, also the terror of suffering

disappears from view. For Levinas, experiences are unique and by default escape theoretical explanations: one quite simply cannot impose theory on them, for whereas the former is rigid and logical, the latter are constantly changing, multifaceted, and often ambiguous.<sup>18</sup> As a result, ethics ought to begin from experiences rather than theory. Here, vulnerability is a central feature, for it is the vulnerability and fragility of the others' being, which sparks a sense of responsibility toward their experiences, and thereby constitutes ethics. One is to note the subjectivity or the 'face' of the other in a mode stripped bare of reasoned, generic presumptions, and thus encounter others via shared vulnerability. The other's vulnerability is a call, to which we answer, and this dynamic forms the core of ethics and social responsibility—in short, ethics originates from face-to-face proximity with vulnerability. Thus, we are to approach ethics via an attitude of 'one-for-the-other', wherein we witness the vulnerability of others, and accept responsibility over it; indeed, it is a demand posed upon us, with the ability to even unravel our selfhood.<sup>19</sup> (Levinas 1969; 2006; 1981; see also Bernasconi 1999; Pandya 2012; Bernasconi in this special issue.) Ultimately, the humanity and vulnerability of others is to take priority over those of our own, and it is the ability to accept this priority, to fully exist for also the suffering and mortality of others, that gives flight to ethics (Levinas 2003).

The ensuing state has been termed 'radical compassion', and it stems from Levinas's way of defining humans, not as atomistic, independent and nearly omnipotent beings, but as creatures limited and fragile in many ways, dependent on each other, and willing to sacrifice for others (Wolcher 2003; White 2012). Instead of Nietzsche's nihilism and hostility to compassion, we therefore arrive at compassion as a locus of social life. Indeed, compassion emerges as the

only alleviation to the absurd destructiveness of suffering, which leads Levinas to an intriguing possibility: if there is any use to suffering, it lies in its capacity to call for compassionate responses in others (Levinas 1988). Therefore, whereas the Nietzschean narrative entails an image of humanity grounded on potency rather than vulnerability, void of compassionate moral concern for others, Levinas centralises vulnerability and compassion. From the viewpoint of social and political attitudes toward vulnerable groups such as the disabled, the implications are evident. Levinas's narrative on suffering would urge disabled individuals to openly manifest also their frailties and need of assistance. It would also invite societal acceptance of difference, and the willingness to 'witness' the stories of those with disabilities. Moreover, on the level of everyday political decision-making and social policy, it would oblige societies to compassionately 'exist for' those with disabilities, providing them with ample social and health care resources. It is perhaps because of these reasons that a Levinasian ethics has been applied in disability studies. In particular, the notion that society ought to 'exist for' disabled individuals has been underlined, with compassion standing as the guide to social policy. (See for instance Jebran 2014.)<sup>20</sup>

As a compromise between the extremes of Levinas and Nietzsche, Weil offers a view that both notes the societal, political importance of vulnerability and responsibility toward others, and the potentially cultivating nature of suffering. Akin to Levinas, Weil posits that affliction calls us to notice what is good, and to respond to others: it is a source of moral obligation, always coloured in normative overtones.<sup>21</sup> Yet, also the Nietzschean epistemic shift can be found in Weil's narrative on suffering, and with the sort of nuance that is capable of combining insight with vulnerability. Suffering

sparks both fresh perspectives onto reality, and moral recognition of the value of vulnerable others. The type of ‘attention’ Weil underlines entwines with moral love: ‘The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love’ (Weil 2005: 92). When we notice others without self-directed motivations and pay attention to their particularities, we come to experience love toward them as a moral imperative, which again impels us to do good. Hence, attention and love lead to responsibilities, which Weil terms ‘a necessity’—as soon as we pay true attention to others, we cannot help but seek to nourish their existence. Such love resembles appreciation of art: one does not wish to force art to fit one’s own needs and interests, but instead visits it with attention, awe, and love. Indeed, Weil argues that we ought to approach those, whom we love, as art. (Weil 2002: 65.)

Weil’s ethics comes with political and social underpinnings, directly relevant to vulnerability. First, it is the vulnerability of others, which guides us toward the ‘necessity’ of ethics: ‘To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself’ (Weil 2002: 119). Therefore, vulnerability forms a commonality between all individuals (‘Vulnerability is a mark of existence’, see Weil 2002: 108), and acknowledgement of its presence is, in itself, enough to spur moral concern and obligations toward others. Second, attentive love toward the vulnerable requires societal eradication of violence—those institutions, which cause harm and spur violence, must be eradicated. (Weil 2002: 85.) Such institutions may include terminology. According to Weil, standard moral terms such as ‘rights’ fail to do justice to what is sacred in human beings, and they also often fail to protect the most defenceless. Instead of them, we are to centralise the willingness to pay accepting attention to others in all their vulnerability, and

evoke love as a social and political principle. (Weil 2005: 80–84.) Here, the primary aim driving social policy and politics is, quite simply, to make sure that no harm is done to others. (Weil 2005: 94.) Therefore, Weil offers a rather communitarian approach to vulnerability. In the context of disability, her narrative on suffering emphasises how we are all in many ways incapable and ‘disabled’, and how notions of potency and ability are always highly limited. Hence, ‘disability’ no longer forms an exclusive category, but rather a vast commonality between all individuals. Moreover, within the Weilian logic, social policies concerning the disabled would be built around the ‘necessity’ to support them and protect them from harm. Here, terms such as ‘rights’ would be replaced with justice, truth and love, as social policy would be rooted in attention toward the specifics of a disabled person’s existence—indeed, the disabled individual would be approached as nothing less than art.

The most evident difference in relation to Levinas is the role of metaphysics. In Weil’s stance on the politics of vulnerability and disability, metaphysical attention is pivotal. Indeed, the aim would not be to eradicate sufferings, but rather to guide us toward their metaphysical acceptance and exploration, which again would demand an unusual marriage between metaphysics and politics. Society would not, thereby, simply care for the disabled, but would also teach each individual to search for transcendental meanings from their own vulnerabilities, pains, and adversities. This demand, with its Neo-Platonic, potentially mystic undercurrents, may fail to find resonance in contemporary, demystified world, which again undermines the Weilian narrative’s potential popularity.

To conclude, the suggestion here is not that we ought to choose one narrative, and

apply it culturally, socially, and politically to all cases, but rather that by examining the moral implications of different narratives, we can draw some distinctions between those that are morally inclusive and those that spark moral hierarchies and exclusions. Arguably, it is in the narratives of Levinas and Weil, and the cultural influences behind them, that one finds more prospects for sound politics of vulnerability, and thereby it is these types of narratives, which deserve more cultural focus and space—even when such focus is reflective and critical enough to locate also problems in the offered narratives (concerning, for instance, the religious depiction of suffering as punishment).

It has been suggested that there is moral beauty in our ability to learn from suffering and render it meaningful in a way that positions it as a significant part of one's existence (Pullman 2002). In a similar vein, and in the context of disability, Lisa Diedrich has argued that suffering can be offered also a positive, insightful role in one's life: 'Bodily breakdown affords the disabled person another view of the world and the self in the world' (Diedrich 2001: 20). Narratives on suffering help in locating such positivity and meaning, as they offer maps into making sense of suffering. Philosophical narratives entwine with cultural influences, and the two feed each other, thereby ultimately impacting how individuals experience their own travails, and how they societally and politically relate to the travails of others. It is because of this that it is important to scrutinise what types of narratives we favour, both on the individual and social level. Which narratives on suffering, philosophical, and cultural, ease our pains, allow us to make fruitful sense of our lives, enable us to flourish also in our vulnerabilities, and help us to alleviate the miseries of (both human and nonhuman) others?

## NOTES

- 1 Morris uses chronic pain as an example of a condition influenced and even wholly constructed by cultural and psychological factors (Morris 1991.)
- 2 It should be highlighted that these considerations apply to human beings, who are typically cultural creatures. In nonhuman animals pain and suffering may manifest differently.
- 3 According to De Vries' typology, one can also speak of what is here termed the communal narrative, within which suffering renders us more capable of embracing the joint vulnerability in ourselves and others, thus sparking a sense of community. Within the confrontation narrative, on the other hand, suffering cultivates resistance and the moral or political urge to stand up against injustices. (De Vries 2012.)
- 4 Whilst highlighting the Holocaust, it should be kept in mind that there are also other human atrocities and related sufferings, which deserve focus. Thus, the Holocaust should not be positioned as 'an icon' for suffering. (See Sontag 2004.)
- 5 The cultural roots of this narrative on suffering go even further. Already some thinkers from Antiquity were familiar with depicting suffering as the nemesis, which ought to be abolished. Much like Bentham, the Greek philosopher Epicurus (born 341 BC) emphasised the avoidance of suffering, making it the goal of morality—suffering became something defined solely in negative terms (for an analysis of both utilitarian and Epicurean influences, see Mayerfeld 1999).
- 6 Frank argues that Levinas's account moves between chaos and quest stories. The emphasis on the uselessness of suffering resembles chaos story, whilst Levinas's suggestion that suffering can teach ethics to those, who witness it in others, comes close to the sort of moral transformation highlighted by the quest narrative. (Frank 1995: 278.) Yet, it is problematic to portray Levinas's account as a quest story, for doing so undermines the immense pessimism he connects with the experience of suffering—that is, the sufferer herself will not find transformation in her own plight, and will instead succumb to brokenness.
- 7 Even Dostoyevsky, to whom Levinas refers, and who vehemently argued that one cannot subject others to anguishes in order to gain some benefit



- for oneself, maintains throughout his literature that one's own suffering can come with salvation. (On Levinas and Dostoyevsky, see Edelglass 2005.)
- 8 Oliver Sacks, when writing about suffering and injury, shares with Nietzsche the belief in the connections between music, pain and illuminations: 'I felt, in those first heavenly bars of music, as if the animating and creative principle of the whole world was revealed, that life itself was music, or consubstantial with music; that our living moving flesh, itself, was "solid" music—music made fleshy, substantial, corporeal' (Sacks 2012).
  - 9 Echoing Plato, Simone Weil (to whom we shall come shortly) claims that: 'Pleasure and pain are inseparable companions' (Weil 2002: 83) and 'The better we are able to conceive of the fullness of joy, the purer and more intense will be our suffering in affliction and our compassion for others. What does suffering take from him who is without joy?' (Weil 2002: 84). It should be added, as pointed out by one of the reviewers of this paper, that also Levinas argues vulnerability to reside both in happiness and suffering (Levinas 1981)—yet, this appears to be a different claim than that made by Plato and Weil.
  - 10 Weil argues that: 'We should seek neither to escape suffering nor to suffer less, but to remain untainted by suffering' (Weil 2002: 81). 'Untainted' here refers to becoming accepting rather than, for instance, bitter in hands of affliction.
  - 11 Suffering is arguably the most central of all theological questions, and its usefulness is usually found from the mysteriousness of the divine will (Lewis 1940).
  - 12 According to Weil, too, suffering can be deserved as a punishment for wrong-doings. (Weil 2002: 74.)
  - 13 Indeed, etymologically, 'pain' means punishment (deriving from 'poena' in Latin).
  - 14 Hence, pain and suffering can be traded with, and this notion is familiar in many cultures, where pain has been used a form of sacrifice meant to appease evil spirits or please gods. (Morris 1991: 47.)
  - 15 *The Book of Job* (which, as seen, also Weil refers to) stands as the most famous and studied example of biblical suffering. There, too, suffering is ultimately a source of illumination, as in the end the much-suffered and tormented Job states that he can see God.
  - 16 Also in rites of passage, pain is used as a method of transforming our mental landscapes. These continue in Western cultures, where for instance sports can act as a road from childhood play into adulthood capable of tolerating pain. (Morris 1991: 181.)
  - 17 For instance Lorelea Michaelis has critiqued the way in which suffering is, in contemporary Western societies, deemed as a necessarily negative experience which ought to be eliminated. He maintains that instead of this, we ought to view it as something transformative, liberating, and useful, for it spurs us to recreate what it means to be an active agent. (Michaelis 2001.) Similarly Joseph Amato has argued that Western societies unduly position suffering as the epitome of evil. In a Nietzschean vein, also he posits that we could rather view suffering as a catalyst for character cultivation. (Amato 1990.) Levinas (1988), on the other hand, parodies this connection between potency and suffering, suggesting that it is precisely the mal-use of power, which often leads to suffering.
  - 18 A careful reader will note that there is a contradiction in Levinas' thinking here: if also other experiences than suffering defy language and reason, why is only suffering pinpointed as something destructive?
  - 19 Importantly, vulnerability does not dwell only in suffering or pain, but instead takes place in all of our affects; yet, suffering forms the weightiest form of actualised vulnerability, and thereby the most acute call upon others for help.
  - 20 Levinas himself was suspicious of rule-based political governance, for he feared that the vulnerability of individuals became easily hidden and overridden by general laws and rules. He thus argued for governance that prioritized the particularity of vulnerable others rather than generic normativity. (Levinas 1988).
  - 21 It should be noted that the notion of 'suffering as punishment' may conflate and confuse the moral viewpoint.

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