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Gianni Vattimo

The Metaphysics of Suffering

Summary:

The author critiques the long Western tradition of exalting physical and mental pain as privileged means towards learning the essential truths. This idealization of pain, sorrow, and asceticism in general, is an essential part of Western metaphysics, and as such it has influenced Western medicine and other fields, including psychoanalysis. Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics can also be extended to our modern ideology of renunciation, to which the author opposes the acceptance of one's own radical historicity.

Can it be true that one recognizes one's friends (almost) only in times of suffering? This is nevertheless a widely held opinion, a proverbial expression of popular wisdom. And it does sum up very well a lot of "metaphysical" ideas about *dolore* [pain, sorrow] which, precisely inasmuch as they are metaphysical—in the not just descriptive but also (de)valuated sense that Heidegger attributed to the term—merit re-thinking and, possibly, distorting, *verwunden*, like metaphysics itself. If we think about it, we might even say that suffering (*dolore*) is the essence itself of metaphysics, that there is no metaphysics without suffering.

Learning through suffering?

This expression has many meanings. Why does one recognize true friends in times of pain? Obviously, if there is one truth to this thesis, it is in the supposition that we live in a world where appearance and authentic reality are distinct, and that it is pain which allows us to pass "from here to there", according to the Platonic expression. Tradition prefers the term *askesis*—ascetic elevation—to the term *suffering*, but the substance, it seems to me, is the same. *Askesis*, above all in the sense that the word has acquired with Christianity, is the sufferance of renunciation that one must bear to reach virtue; the Ancients had attributed to this word the meaning of an almost sports-like exercise, but Christianity later colored it with a more intense moral and, if connected to the sacrifice of Christ, expiatory and redemptive, connotation.

In any case, even in our most banal daily conversations, one who has "suffered a lot" obviously seems to merit a greater respect than one who has had too much enjoyment. The motto of classical tragic wisdom—*pathei mathos*, "learn by suffering!"—reveals all this positive appreciation of pain to be not just a Christian affair. So much so that, as much as one might rebel against the metaphysical bigotry that this appreciation certainly implies, it seems difficult to completely free oneself from it. Just as in the case of "metaphysics" in Heideggerian terms. For Heidegger, metaphysics cannot be tossed aside like some cast-off piece of clothing, or like an error finally recognized and dispelled, because metaphysics is the starting condition of our every thinking act, and determines the very structure of language by the use of which we want to free ourselves from that very metaphysics.

The Hegelian dialectic—for which the experience is always “negative” since it forces us to clash with what is not as we would want it or expect it to be—is probably the extreme arrival point of the Western metaphysics of *dolore* [suffering]. A metaphysics which through *pain* and *suffering* reveals itself as essentially a consolatory ransom, a supreme affirmation of the positivity of “reality” even against our way of perceiving it. The fact that we suffer does not indicate that there is something “wrong” in Being, but only that we are wrong in considering Being as such. If one were to then object that even the fact that we are wrong to consider suffering as something wrong is precisely a sign that in Being there is nonetheless a mistake—our own error—one would forever end up encountering the doctrine of original sin, thus once again the idea of a guilt that we can and must correct to re-establish ourselves in the truth of Being.

This mentality of “sufferance” has influenced medicine

Do these abstractions impassion only philosophers and theologians? Yes and no. These abstractions sum up and condition many of the practical—as well as medical—methods for treating pain, both in private and institutional relationships. Anyone who underwent surgery thirty years ago in Italy, for example, knows how reluctant the nuns/nurses were to administer even one drop of analgesic the first night following surgery. There was surely prudence because of the then more limited knowledge on pain therapy; but these limits have been overcome in Italy at a slower pace owing to this “sufferance” mentality, which permeated even the most secularized minds.

Even today, and not in strictly physical therapeutic settings, one still encounters the same attitude. If pharmaceutical therapies have been developed against depression and other psychic or psychosomatic symptoms, then why still resort to psychoanalytic therapies? Because even the thesis of the psychoanalytic partisans, albeit masked, is always conditioned by an ascetic-metaphysical prejudice: only the painful (and long and costly) process which develops in the analytic relationship can really free the subject, discover the deeper causes, and promise a more stable “healing”. Applied to the treatment of drug addiction, in Italy more often entrusted to religiously oriented healers, this attitude leads to the construction of new psychological addictions that only substitute the former drug addiction (never as in these kinds of violent and charismatic religious communities for addicts has the old identification of religion with opium been so true!).

All this, and much more, comes into mind when seeking to philosophize on suffering. But, having established, or at least admitted hypothetically, that there is a metaphysical way for considering pain and suffering and that we are profoundly imbued with it, both in our individual mentalities as well as in our institutions and social customs, what would it mean to free ourselves of it by means of that distortion/sprain (*Verwindung*) which, from what we have learned from Heidegger (but perhaps even from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer), is the only way in which we might hope to act out our revolt ?

Heidegger’s lesson

What “doesn’t work”, in metaphysics viewed from an Heideggerian perspective, is the idea that at the bottom of things there lies a stable order, a necessary eternal (and thus itself rational) structure which we have the task of knowing and assuming as the norm (but even this hardly holds: if it is a necessary fact, then why a norm? This has also been called, inappropriately, “Hume’s Law”: one cannot extract a norm from a fact, it simply has no sense). For the Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1927), to think of true being in this “objectivist” way implies that a) the historicity of human existence “is” not; b) to be, authentically, ought to mean exit from this historicity, to comply with a necessary rational order; c) and thus to tend to plan a rationalized society that prescind from individual circumstances—a society that Adorno at the time called a “total organization”, and that Chaplin depicted in *Modern Times*. These are the existentialist and avant-

guard themes of the early 20th century which inspired even Heidegger and which, in him more than other thinkers, legitimize the polemic against metaphysics.

Historicity, the openness of human existence, its irreducibility to the eternal structure of a true Being (*Sein*) because immutable, means however mortality. In short, then: a non-metaphysical consideration of suffering would demand a non-metaphysical consideration of death. It is this which Heidegger endeavors to accomplish when, in his 1927 work, he puts at the very center of his own doctrine the idea of “being for death” and of the decided anticipation of one’s own death as the key to an authentic existence. Since the world gives itself as world only at the gaze which is the human being, at his “ejected project” (this was already a Kantian acquisition), and since this pro-ject is exactly finite, it is born and it dies, one ought to think that Being (*Sein*) is not an eternal structure given once and for all, placed before (*ob-jectum*) the mind which through *askesis* is able to see it; but instead it is event, happening, historicity.

In such a perspective suffering and death—the two terms can reasonably be considered almost as synonyms: one always suffers of, and for, mortality; even physical illness is the sign, consequence, symptom of mortality—are together insuperable and irredeemable. They can’t be explained or justified, because they do not give access to any truer truth; they are, on the contrary, what frees us from the slavery and the resentment towards any truer truth (the law of Being, God as creator or judge, a wicked destiny, ...). Think of Jesus’ response with regard to the child born blind: it is neither his nor his parents’ fault, but only “so be it”, which should be understood precisely in the sense of absolute eventuality; there is no reason, not even a precise and mysterious divine will, for suffering.

Beyond the metaphysics of suffering

Thus, the foundations are laid for a two-fold non-metaphysical conception and treatment of *suffering*. On the one hand, *suffering* has no dignity, deserves no respect as such, it is simply what occurs, and as such is also always an undesired occurrence (unlike those we await and desire, pleasure, success, etc.), a pure accident, in all senses of the term, the *schlechthin* event, pure and simple. (Sartre wrote some beautiful pages on death understood as a senseless event, believing, probably wrongly, to thus criticize Heidegger.) History is and develops as long as death does not come, and thus also as long as one succeeds in limiting the power of *suffering*. Faced with *suffering* there is nothing else to do, reasonably, than to try to eliminate it.

On the other hand, all our traditional ideas about *suffering* remain, with an altered sense, starting with that idea which links it to friendship. The only *suffering* worthy of respect is the *suffering* of the other, and thus the death of the other. Herein probably lies the truth of the popular proverb on *suffering* and friends, but also the truth of the ancient *pathei mathos*. In *suffering*, death, and the fear they inspire, one recognizes on the contrary one’s own finiteness; not because we are faced with a transcendent and fundamentally haughty, violent being which stands before us like a wall of mystery, imposing itself like a power which we must accept (reality, for many still, is always only that “against which one clashes”) without claiming to understand it. Rather, finiteness is being with others, the discovery of an otherness from which we cannot prescind.

So even if it is not so explicit in the text, the anticipatory decision of death which opens to an authentic existence, according to the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, is nothing other than the acceptance of one’s own radical historicity: we originate from mortals and will leave room for other mortals; our responsibility-responsiveness is to them; we must respond to the messages and values left to us by our predecessors or by those who are with us in this world, and we must respond to those who will follow. The suggestive, and very cryptic, pages of Heidegger’s *Holzwege* (1950), dedicated to “Anaximander’s fragment”(Heidegger 1975)—“*things must pay the penalty for their injustice, of staying in being instead of allowing others to be, leaving them their place according to the order of time*”—should perhaps be read precisely in this sense, albeit allowing ourselves a certain interpretive liberty, both towards Anaximander and Heidegger himself.

Being is nothing other than a certain taking place and paying the penalty. (Is it too little? But really, to evoke Galileo, would thinking of celestial bodies as immobile rocks lacking life and death, without any future, be any better or more respectful than conceiving them instead as places analogous to our earth, where one is born and dies and for which one IS?)

It is thus also true that in *suffering* one recognizes a friend, that *suffering* “perfects” us, that one learns through suffering, and that who suffers or has suffered deserves respect even and above all for this. The struggle against suffering, or, one and the same thing, the search for happiness, has only one limit: precisely, a solidarity towards others, the assumption of one’s own finiteness which commands one not to cede to *hybris*, to the arrogance of one who “absolutizes” himself and thus exposes himself to all the violent implications of metaphysics. These implications include resentment for not being immortal and the particular intensity with which any suffering strikes him; in fact, suffering can only appear to him as something mysteriously wished against him by some mysterious and evil power.

There is another meaning to Anaximander’s saying that, from a point of view not romantically nostalgic of Greece but aware of the redemptive sense of Christianity, should be recalled here: an opposition to any “mentality of sufferance” and to the (resented) tragicism rampant in today’s culture, disillusioned by the failure of Revolutions. The penalty paid, according to the order of time, by leaving one’s place in the world to those who will follow, is all that is asked of us in order to expiate our (eventual) guilt. Any other exaltation of *dolore* and sanctification of sufferance is only a pretense, often explicitly authoritarian, to appeal to a foundation which, in its absoluteness, can do nothing but perpetuate—as *askesis*, as punishment, as the search for a presumed authenticity—the violence of which suffering is the manifestation, effect and cause.

Translated from the Italian by Claudia Vaughn

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Bio:

Gianni Vattimo, born in 1936, studied philosophy with Luigi Pareyson, Hans Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith. He teaches theoretical philosophy at the University of Turin, Italy, and has taught as visiting professor in many universities in the US. He was a member of the European Parliament for Italy. Among his books published in English: *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991); *The Transparent Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992); with A. Bonito Oliva, eds., James Lee Byars: *The Perfect Thought* (Distributed Art Publishers, 1992); *The Adventures of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993); *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997); *Consequences of Hermeneutics*, Philosophy & Literary Theory Series (Prometheus Books, 1999); *Belief* (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000); *Nietzsche: An introduction* (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002); *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002).

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