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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that, despite resistance by many to its incorporation into public discourse, suffering is a constitutive element of politics today, both a consequence of and a motive for political action. I consider some of the problems attending the incorporation of suffering as a subject of political discussion and I propose a phenomenological approach to address some of these problems. This approach is based on the notion of situation, which allows for a contextual reading of suffering as an intrinsically relational experience encompassing multiple differently situated perspectives. Drawn from Karl Jaspers' writings on psychiatry, this approach focuses on empathic listening to the claims of differently situated selves, and is rooted in awareness of our own situation.

Keywords

Suffering, Arendt, Jaspers, Camus, *The Plague*, private/public.

Introduction

Suffering is not a popular topic in political theory. Indeed, according to many it should not even be something of interest for the discipline: Suffering is a private experience, the claim goes, with which one should deal privately. There are grave dangers in allowing such an emotional condition voice in the public sphere.¹ Indeed, studying suffering as a political phenomenon means challenging a fundamental tenet of modern politics, the distinction between private and public.²

Certainly suffering is an intensely private phenomenon, one that is difficult if not impossible to communicate in its immediacy, complexity, and the devastation it causes. It unmakes people and often renders them unable to speak and act; it unmakes them as public actors. Yet at the same time as it has disciplined suffering into privacy, modernity has also come to assert it as a political issue, insofar as it is amenable to human action and efforts to make the world a better place. Suffering that can be eliminated becomes a political issue, it becomes a call to someone's responsibility and a powerful instrument to mobilize political action on a grand scale, raising important questions about the legitimacy and opportunity of those actions. More and more, with or without the theorists' permission, suffering bursts from the private to the public and political sphere and becomes entitled to the political theorist's attention. Establishing the right of existence of suffering as a topic of study in political theory and as a focus in political practice not only challenges the line between what is private and what is public, but may also entail, as I suggest below, a fundamental alteration in our understanding of the public itself.

In what follows, I examine some paths of suffering from the private to the public, in an attempt to highlight how broken identities and broken communities may find in suffering the occasion to reorient themselves and reconstitute their boundaries along different lines. Suffering is undoubtedly an idiosyncratic experience, yet it is also an experience that defines the human condition in general, and in this tension lie possibilities that are both frightening and exhilarating.

I acknowledge the concerns of some critics of the public standing of suffering and consider the contribution of a phenomenological approach to the mediation of suffering into a public sphere. Drawing on Karl Jaspers' phenomenological approach in psychiatry, I advocate for the contextualization of suffering into specific situations. The phenomenological approach is premised on an empathic form of communication among participants in the situation, rooted in a self-definition of the participants within common situations of suffering, but holding distinctive positions within them. The phenomenological approach provides a way to translate suffering from the private to the public and to bring together into the public the perspective of sufferers, witnesses, and perpetrators.

Why start from the private dimension? Why not, for example, inquire into which forms of suffering attain, or fail to attain, visibility in the public sphere? This is an important question, which has been pursued skillfully by several theorists.³ My own interest here, however, is primarily in the relationship between suffering and agency: how the experience of suffering affects a willingness to act politically, and the interplay between the actions of those who suffer and those who don't, but claim to

¹ There are exceptions, of course. See, for example, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Cynthia Halpern, *Suffering, Politics, Power: A Genealogy in Modern Political Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

² While this will not be the primary focus of the paper, I agree with many feminist theorists that the elision of suffering from the concerns of politics and political theory, and its relegation to the domain of the private is intimately related to its connection to ideas of vulnerability (traditionally associated with the 'feminine'), rather than strength, power, and independence (traditionally associated with the 'masculine'). See for example Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," *Ethics*, 99, No. 2 (Jan. 1989), 250-74. Young writes: "Extolling a public realm of manly virtue and citizenship as independence, generality, and dispassionate reason entailed creating the private sphere of the family as the place to which emotion, sentiment, and bodily needs must be confined." (p. 254)

³ See for example Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) and Elizabeth Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow*.

act on the former's behalf. I find suffering that is private, personal, and immediate, to be the most vulnerable to political manipulation, and I want to inquire into how such suffering may be on one hand articulated, and on the other approached by others in a communicative way so as to bridge the immense solitude of suffering, towards political action. I find this question insufficiently addressed in the existing literature. The decision to take the private dimension of suffering as my starting point justifies the choice to draw especially on philosophical psychiatry and literary works. It also makes a phenomenological approach particularly useful.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I discuss the private, idiosyncratic and hardly communicable aspect of suffering, and how this intensely private experience is and can be articulated politically. Second, I will bring together these two aspects by suggesting that we look at suffering as a situation, encompassing multiple actors and multiple perspectives. I focus on how certain witnesses come to define themselves into a common situation of suffering by drawing on Camus' *The Plague*. Third, I will consider some of the challenges posed by the incorporation of suffering into politics, and suggest how the phenomenological approach may respond to those challenges by attending to many distinct voices in situations of suffering.

1. The Privacy of Suffering

When for the third time the fiery wave broke on him, lifting him a little, the child curled himself up and shrank away to the edge of the bed, as if in terror of the flames advancing on him, licking his limbs. A moment later, after tossing his head wildly to and fro, he flung off the blanket. From between the inflamed eyelids big tears welled up and trickled down the sunken, leaden-hued cheeks. When the spasm had passed, utterly exhausted, tensing his thin legs and arms on which, within forty-eight hours, the flesh had wasted to the bone, the child lay flat, racked on the tumbled bed, in a grotesque parody of crucifixion. (...)

In the small face, rigid as a mask of grayish clay, slowly the lips parted and from them rose a long, incessant scream, hardly varying with his respiration, and filling the ward with a fierce, indignant protest, so little childish that it seemed like a collective voice issuing from all the sufferers there.⁴

Reading this passage is witnessing pain at its most private. This boy is helpless and alone. Nothing seems to be able to bridge the distance that suffering is putting between him and everyone else. Suffering is often an isolating experience, whose intensity and intrinsic nature cannot be conveyed in words. As Elaine Scarry perceptively put it, "to have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt."⁵ The difficulty in articulating suffering is not limited to the realm of words, but extends to that of thoughts. It is challenging to *think* about our own suffering, distend it into a series of thoughts and detach ourselves from it so as to interpose our reflecting mind between it and us. It is even more difficult to imagine the suffering of others.⁶ Suffering drives a wedge in the most solid and strong of relationships. In Camus' *The Plague*, to which I will return frequently for illustration of the themes I discuss, the closing of the walls around the city of Oran, to limit contagion to the outside, provides an insightful metaphor of the kind of isolation in which those suffering are thrown.⁷ The dwellers of the city are forced upon one another with no possibility of escape. An impenetrable

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague, the Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, and Selected Essays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, *Everyman's Library* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 13.

⁶ George Kateb provides an insightful argument about how our ability to imagine the suffering of others has atrophied in the last century. See George Kateb, "The Adequacy of the Canon," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002).

⁷ Given my interest in suffering as a situation, the confines of a novel and of the stories recounted in its pages allow me to touch on various general themes that recur in situations of suffering, while keeping the analysis anchored in the concrete experience of the characters in the book. The advantage of looking at suffering through the prism of a work of literature in particular, is that in many novels one finds a multiplicity of perspectives on the same situation, and an account of how those perspectives are formed and how they interact with other perspectives, which is the necessary element of a phenomenological approach as I understand it and will clarify later in the paper.

boundary is thrown around them. The falling of the walls embodies the entrapment we feel in situations that are beyond our control, an entrapment often compounded by the fact of sharing them with other human beings whom we may find hostile, irritating, or simply foreign to us. The closing of the walls reconfigures relationships without any regard for personal inclinations or sympathies, and forces all the dwellers suddenly into a shared space they have not chosen. The walls constitute an artificial community, oblivious to lines of pre-existing bonds and attachments. Families are broken and lovers parted by the long-delayed yet unexpected decision to isolate Oran.

Those who try to evade the ban on writing letters to communicate with beloved others “outside” have to confront an even thicker wall, the one that often divides those within a situation of suffering and those without. The dwellers in Oran find it impossible “through the dead phrases, to convey some notion of their ordeal” to those outside, and see their attempts at communicating with them as futile monologues “with a blank wall.”⁸ The sympathy that others far away try to send over the radio airwaves also crashes against the wall:

From the ends of the earth, across thousands of miles of land and sea, kindly, well-meaning speakers tried to voice their fellow-feeling, and indeed did so, but at the same time proved the utter incapacity of every man truly to share in suffering which he cannot see.⁹

Nor can a true sense of community be found within the city’s walls, during those first few days of isolation: in extreme solitude “none could count on any help from his neighbour; each had to bear the load of his troubles alone.”¹⁰ Suffering isolates. It severs the most profound of ties by making words inadequate, inappropriate, and ‘dead’ to the task of communicating and bringing together.

2. The Public Dimension of Suffering.

And yet. Let us briefly return to the passage describing the agony of the young suffering child, quoted above. The boy is profoundly alone in the face of terrible pain. Yet he also is not. There are people in the room who are watching him, feeling equally helpless. If we read the whole novel, we learn that the boy’s agony and his death will have a profound effect on them. Moreover, his suffering is being described, and by this very act it attains some measure of publicity. Articulating suffering, seeing suffering are political acts.¹¹ They often help to constitute communities and political spaces that transcend and challenge the existing ones. The fact that suffering is intensely private should not blind us to the fact that its intensity, whether we witness it or live ourselves through it, reverberates publicly and is often a powerful source of motivation to act in ways that affect others in a very public way, whether it is the violent outburst of a sociopath whose rage explodes in indiscriminate shooting, the desire to take revenge for our own or someone else’s suffering against the culprit, or the wish to act in concert with fellow human beings so that what caused us immense suffering will not cause it to others.

Suffering breaks identities and breaks communities, but as those boundaries crumble political possibilities open to constitute public spaces alternative to, or in protest against traditional ones. Our

⁸ Camus, *The Plague*, p. 62.

⁹ Camus, *The Plague*, p. 124. Seeing should not be interpreted literally here. The ability to ‘see’ suffering in the sense intended here does not overlap perfectly with the material fact of being in its presence. One could very well be in the presence of suffering and still not feel part of the situation, as when abstraction blinds one’s seeing of suffering. See, most persuasively, Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. On suffering as a spectacle, and the difficulties entailed in it, see Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Reprinted. ed., *Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics*. (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 1990). I will re-conceptualize this ‘seeing’ as defining oneself within a situation of suffering later in the paper.

¹⁰ Camus, *The Plague*, p. 68.

¹¹ Had one been the boy’s torturer, the one bringing about his suffering, the scene would clearly have been described very differently, perhaps trying to portray the boy as non-human, or as an enemy to be eradicated (a metaphor tellingly suggesting that the boy is not human, but rather a vegetable). See on this Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. See also the leaked Pentagon video of a 2007 operation in Iraq, where US soldiers are heard saying that they are ready to ‘engage’ the ‘birds,’ that is shoot and kill suspected insurgents with 30mm rounds. The video is available at collateralmurder.com, accessed July 22, 2010.

certainties, our habits, the stable ground of our existence dissolve under our feet when we are confronted with suffering. The area along the boundary is a land of disorientation, but also a land of possibility and discovery, of re-orientation.¹² At the same time as it opens us to pain and fright by way of the wound, suffering forces on us an awareness of our limits, of our vulnerability, and of our ability to respond to it. Our response to the boundary often unmakes the identity we knew and had consolidated in the past, and helps to bring about a new one. It breaks through the shells that had protected and solidified who we are. When suffering opens the boundary of our skin and brings us to the boundary of our ability to master and control (the world around us, our autonomy, our feelings, our composure), we are left to face our powerlessness. We are left to acknowledge that suffering, in its ability to unmake us, is a constitutive element of being human.¹³ In this sense, we come to understand how the boy's scream can sound like 'a collective voice' issuing from all sufferers.

Clearly the openness of the boundary, whether it be the open wound on our skin, or the shattering awareness of our limits and our vulnerability, is not a condition we can endure in its depth for any considerable length of time. We need to cauterize and bandage it in order to go about living our life. We need to rationalize, find explanations, vindicate, and endow our suffering with meaning drawn from this world or another. We need to know, or at least believe, that there will be a time when suffering will end, and we want to know how to get there. These are all ways in which we close the boundaries of the wound, but also the other boundaries (of our identity, of our existence) as possibilities that suffering opens.¹⁴

One way in which we close these openings is by putting ourselves at a distance from suffering, abstracting from it. This process of abstraction is a temptation not only for witnesses to suffering, but sometimes even to the sufferers themselves. So terrifying is the contemplation of naked suffering in its ineluctability, that we seek to domesticate it in any way we can. Elaine Scarry has powerfully argued that the displacement of suffering into verbal and ideological constructs is a major condition for its perpetration. We displace suffering not only when we justify it or study it merely as a secondary element of phenomena like torture and war, but also when we immediately bypass it in order to concern ourselves with its elimination. In the hurry to eliminate, escape, or evade - however - we may miss the opportunity to think and reflect, for example, on suffering as an ultimately inescapable dimension of the human condition and on shared vulnerabilities across bitter divides.¹⁵

In what follows I focus on some paths through which suffering in its immediacy comes to be acknowledged as a situation encompassing multiple actors, and is mediated from privacy to political action. My interest is not in prescribing how private suffering should become public grievance. Rather, I want to pose suffering as already a political presence, and suggest ways to cope with this presence by articulating, reading, listening, and interpreting instances of suffering that are already there.

3. Suffering as Situation

I bridge the idiosyncratic and intensely private side of suffering with its public reverberations by understanding suffering as situation, drawing on arguably the most important concept in Karl Jaspers' philosophy.¹⁶ In his major philosophical work, the second volume of his *Philosophy*, he introduces the concept with these words:

¹² See for example Emma Hutchison, "Trauma and the Politics of Emotions: Constituting Identity, Security and Community after the Bali Bombing," *International Relations*, 24, no. 1, (March 2010), 65-86.

¹³ On suffering as a 'boundary situation' and its constitutive role in the human condition see Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie Der Weltanschauungen*, 6. ed. (Berlin, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1971).

¹⁴ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*.

¹⁵ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*.

¹⁶ While familiarity with Jaspers' work may allow a richer understanding of the nuances of my argument, such familiarity is not necessary in order to follow it. I draw primarily on Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie Der Weltanschauungen* (München ; Zürich: Piper, 1994) and Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). In the next sections of the paper, I argue that Jaspers offers two crucial insights for the transition of suffering from privacy to publicity: first, with the notion of suffering as situation, and second with his phenomenological approach.

When I imagine a situation, I see it as the relative location of things, as their topographical arrangement in space. This spatial-perspective conception makes me think of the situation as a *reality for an existing subject who has a stake in it*, a subject either confined or given leeway by the situation in which other subjects, their interests, their sociological power relations, and their combinations or chances of the moment all play their parts.¹⁷

There are three crucial points for my argument in this quotation. First of all, situations are plural.¹⁸ Even at its most private, suffering rarely happens to one person alone. It happens as a situation comprising multiple actors with multiple perspectives. Often, the claim to suffering itself is contested: some, in the presence of suffering, will simply deny it (will “have doubt” in Scarry’s words), either because they do not believe that those who claim to suffer are sincere, or because they do not recognize in them the capacity for suffering (the enemy is ‘eradicated,’ like a plant, or ‘extirpated,’ like a pest). Some may evade the suffering, trying to ignore its presence or questioning their involvement in it. Second, situations are fluid, and they both constrain and enable. As human beings, we cannot choose *not* to be situated, but most of the time we have a say about the situation in which we find ourselves, how we choose to define it. We cannot escape suffering altogether, but often we can define suffering one way or another, and our role, attitude and situation with respect to it. Third, a situation is a reality for an existing subject *who has a stake in it*. It is one of my contentions in this paper that defining oneself within a situation of suffering plays a crucial role in translating it into the political sphere. It is crucial for this translation whether and how one defines himself or herself within it, whether they see the situation as encompassing themselves as a participant, having a stake, a role – past, present, or future - in the situation.

I illustrate next how three specific characters within *The Plague* choose to define themselves within or without the situation of suffering experienced by the city as a whole, with a view to highlighting some of the implications of understanding suffering as a situation.¹⁹

A Tale of One City, and Three Characters

The setting itself of *The Plague* provides an interesting example of the definition of a situation of suffering. The walls of the city, closed because of fears that contagion will spread outside, define just such a situation. *The Plague* also provides insight, within the constraints of this un-chosen situation, into the rather different ways in which various characters define themselves in relation to it. It is not a choice for the dwellers in Oran to be isolated from the rest of the world, and to be bound in destiny to people they may not know nor care about. Yet, within this constraint they have a say about the stake they will take in the situation. I focus on three characters, who carve different paths from the privacy and idiosyncrasy of physical suffering, to rebellion and political action towards the containment of suffering.

¹⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 2, p. 177, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ I consider suffering as a situation, rather than an emotion, because of the intrinsically plural and more communal nature of the former. Emotions are inextricably attached to the person who is experiencing them, whereas situations are shared, and encompass multiple beings. At the outset of *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith observes that “sympathy [...] does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” we need to see ourselves in the situation in order relate to the other. When we witness someone being rude, or someone being delusional we do not necessarily relate to his or her emotion, but mediate it by imagining ourselves in the same situation. Situation indicates both a relation to and a distance from someone else’s emotion. Our senses will never inform us completely of what someone is suffering: “They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case.” See Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I, Section I, Chapter 1, “Of Sympathy.”

¹⁹ While all three characters I consider are trapped within the walls of the suffering city, none of them are sick themselves at the stage of the novel where I direct my analysis. Their ambiguous position with respect to the situation of suffering (they are both within it and without) allows me to highlight the leeway one has as to how they define themselves within the constraints of a specific situation. Later in the paper I draw attention specifically on the suffering ones, and on the crucial role of their voice in the phenomenological approach I sketch.

The backdrop to their journey is the city of Oran, a city Camus characterizes as typically modern and steeped in the private life that modernity staunchly protects. Oran is slow in letting the new events shake its torpor. A grey and mostly inhospitable town, it refuses for a long time to compose the disturbing signals into the shape of a threat to be taken seriously. It ignores, minimizes, and sanitizes the suspicions of its most alert citizens in order to maintain routines it cherishes in their privacy and dullness. The typically modern city simply could not be bothered with a dramatic stop to its pursuit of private interest and its faith that such pursuit would continue undisturbed. Oran is an anonymous town, a town you would hardly be able to distinguish from other business centers around the world. It lacks anything distinctive. Little appears genuine about it. Oran is a banal town, where bored citizens dutifully perform their jobs in order to become wealthy, and mindlessly try to kill idle time until they can return to their moneymaking routines.²⁰ The formation of habits is key to survival in Oran, so it is not surprising that its inhabitants refuse for a long time to make hypotheses about what caused hundreds of dead or agonizing rats to litter its streets.

The fear and suffering that the plague brings appears to break through a thick layer of ordinariness. The frightened townspeople cannot cope with the possibility that everything is not still possible for them, they cannot fathom that they are not after all absolutely free and unconstrained in their private pursuits, at least not free from the possibility that this disease could wipe out their future and make any planning futile. The collapse of their private dreams, however, does not immediately and simply drive them to political action. Two of the characters I discuss start their journey by actually resisting a definition of themselves within the situation of suffering in the city: Raymond Rambert, a journalist in Oran only for a short visit, and Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest.

Rambert

When the authorities finally decide to isolate the city of Oran from the outside world to avoid contagion outside the walls, the most profound sense of isolation, entrapment, and desire to escape is felt by those who do not belong in Oran in the first place. For some of them, the desire to evade and escape the diseased city becomes an obsession. Raymond Rambert, a French journalist visiting Oran on a short assignment, finds himself separated from the life he knew and from his lover. In the face of suffering, like most, he first denies the situation, telling himself the quarantine has to be temporary, and he then desperately and persistently tries to escape it.²¹ He insists to the prefect of the town that “he didn’t have any ties to Oran, he wasn’t going to remain there, he was there by chance and letting him go was the right thing to do.” He protests: “I don’t belong here.”²² Rambert tries to define himself out of the situation, as many tend to do when faced with suffering, their own or (especially) someone else’s. The temptation to deny and evade is irresistible: this is not happening, this does not concern me. In the face of the somber reminder that “it’s an absurd situation, but we’re all involved in it, and we’ve got to accept it as it is,” Rambert stubbornly repeats: “But I don’t belong here.”²³ For a protracted portion of the novel, we see Rambert choosing isolation and becoming the embodiment of the infinite ways in which we can successfully ignore suffering as we focus on our own goals beyond and outside it.

While Rambert becomes increasingly ill at ease with his isolation, he does not give up on his dream of escape until he comes to see himself as belonging to the same situation as the other dwellers. He discovers that Dr. Rieux himself, whom he had accused of being deaf to the plea of his love, was also separated from his loved one by the city’s walls. Rambert then slowly but steadily relinquishes his condition as an outsider and begins to commit to actions against the plague:

²⁰ *The Plague*, p. 6.

²¹ *The Plague*, p. 75.

²² *The Plague*, p. 76.

²³ *The Plague*, p. 77.

Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I have seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business.²⁴

Rambert comes to see himself as encompassed by the same situation as the others and becomes ready to act in concert with them. The spatial proximity of suffering is not what is decisive. What seems to be decisive in Rambert's case is apprehending – within the general situation of suffering to which he was stubbornly oblivious – the particular suffering of Dr. Rieux, a suffering that was closer to him and to which he was more ready to relate. Rambert begins with this very private and yet shared experience his public commitment to the teams engaged in trying to contain the plague and assist the population of the city in coping with it.

Paneloux

The second character I consider is Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest in Oran. Paneloux embodies the quick closing of the boundary that suffering opens by recourse to religious faith. He also initially defines himself outside the situation of suffering. He addresses the full cathedral, early in the novel, lashing out at the population of the city for its mistaken ways and proclaiming the plague a fitting punishment for *them*. Paneloux's attitude towards the suffering of the people is distant: in his sermon he refers to the population and *its* sins, and offers a simple religious explanation for the plague: it is God's punishment for the evildoers. The situation is foreign to him; he sets himself outside it and assigns himself the role of the critical outsider, his voice "vibrant with accusation."²⁵ He contemplates the suffering intellectually, so to speak. Indeed Dr. Rieux calls him "a scholar. He has not seen enough people die and that is why he speaks in the name of eternal truths."²⁶

Paneloux later joins the effort to contain the plague, presumably out of a sense of religious duty. As his involvement in the common effort increases, we begin to see the distance he had put between himself and the suffering diminishing, by virtue of his concrete engagement with suffering people rather than suffering as a general concept. Paneloux begins to define himself within the situation. Crucially, this move occurs by virtue of interaction with others, by Paneloux working with others and seeing himself as part of the struggling community, and culminates with the witnessing of Othon's child's slow and painful death, quoted at the beginning of the paper. Father Paneloux, who had until a few minutes before retained some distance, is brought to his knees and to the invocation to God to save the boy. Further interaction, challenge, and questioning occur during Father Paneloux's exchange with Dr. Rieux, when all the priest's beliefs and protective shells are powerfully attacked ("He was innocent, and you know it," the doctor exclaims in exasperation). These attacks and the profound existential changes they bring about in Paneloux are then translated in the priest's second sermon. In it, his tone is "more mellow and more reflective," the words were at times pronounced with more hesitation and, importantly, he moves from an accusatory *you* towards the people to a compassionate *we*. Some of the beliefs he had articulated in the first sermon are still his, but he now admits that he had pronounced them without any charity. In the second sermon Paneloux allows himself within the situation.

I single out the journey of these two characters as examples of the translation of suffering from the private to the public because they represent the overcoming of two fundamental obstacles for the transition from private suffering to political action in public. In the case of Rambert, we see how suffering can become invisible by virtue of the self-absorption and narcissism of many in contemporary privileged societies. In the case of Paneloux we witness him overcoming the covering

²⁴ *The Plague*, p. 184.

²⁵ *The Plague*, p. 87.

²⁶ *The Plague*, p. 97. It is interesting to note that at the stage of development of the disease when Paneloux gives his first sermon, the population in general is also somehow looking at it 'from the outside,' hoping that it would spare them: "They were scared but not desperate and the time had yet to come when the plague would seem to them like the very shape of their lives" *The Plague*, p. 72.

up of suffering by way of its religious justification.²⁷ For both, the obstacles are overcome by way of work and interaction with others, and by way of drawing suffering from generality to a concrete situation of which they feel a part.

Tarrou

Both Rambert and Paneloux were able to join, when they were ready, an existing public effort against the plague. Let me now briefly turn to the initiator of that public effort. Tarrou is a character presented by the narrator as somewhat extravagant, but genuine. Tarrou is a well-to-do visitor to Oran who, rather than consuming himself with thoughts of escape like Rambert, takes an active role in the new situation. While accepting that his situation defines him, and that escape is impossible, he sets out to define it in turn. First of all, he defines it literally, by narrating it: his notebooks are among the original sources on which the narrator of the story relies to ensure a plurality of points of view for his own account. Second, he defines it by his decision to constitute, and his effort to build, an alternative public response to the plague, one not based on the half-hearted attempt by officials to coerce compliance, but on resistance to the anonymity of the official public initiative and on grassroots ingenuity. When he approaches the doctor with his plan, Tarrou comes to him as an utterly powerless figure, according to traditional definitions and measures of power: He is not qualified to deal with the plague from a professional point of view (in fact, his professional qualifications are unclear), and he is a visitor, not even a citizen of Oran. He is the most unlikely of public figures, planning to create public action in the most difficult of circumstances: on the verge of catastrophe (“In a fortnight or a month at most,” he tells the doctor, “you’ll serve no purpose here. Things will have got out of hand”),²⁸ on the eve of the conscription of the male population, following the failure of a call for voluntary help. His plan is simple and naïve when read against the circumstances:

I’ve drawn up a plan for voluntary groups of helpers. Get me empowered to try out my plan, and then let’s sidetrack officialdom. In any case the authorities have their hands more than full already. I have friends in many walks of life; they’ll form a nucleus to start from. And, of course, I’ll take part in it myself.²⁹

Undaunted by the failure of previous voluntary calls for action, he explains to the doctor that the reason for failure had been that those attempts were

...done through official channels, and half-heartedly. What they’re short of is imagination. Officialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a common cold.³⁰

When asked by the doctor what prompted his initiative in the face of the dangers involved, a crucial exchange begins, one that touches upon God, death, evil, and suffering. The exchange itself can be considered as the first kernel of a public undertaking, an engagement in which the motivations sustaining the public action to come are refined in dialogue. Tarrou apparently evades Dr. Rieux’s fundamental question (“Have you weighed the dangers?”) by repeatedly asking questions around it himself. In fact, he is not evading the question, but laying the foundations to build an answer in concert: “My question’s this - said Tarrou - Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don’t believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to mine.”³¹

²⁷ For a very insightful analysis of the rejection of the religious justification of suffering in the modern era I am indebted to Cynthia Halpern, *Suffering, Politics, Power*.

²⁸ *The Plague*, p. 111.

²⁹ *The Plague*, p. 112.

³⁰ *The Plague*, p. 112.

³¹ *The Plague*, p. 114. An honest, modern Socrates who is not coy about drawing conclusions from the answers to his questions, Tarrou unabashedly declares, after the exchange, that Dr. Rieux “is right.” Rieux asks Tarrou what he knows about it and Tarrou replies that he has “little left to learn” and that yes, he imagines he knows “everything about life.”

The two characters probe each other's attitudes towards the plague and motivations to act against it. While it is true that the plague "opens men's eyes and forces them to take thought," and that "it helps men to rise above themselves," when one sees "the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague."³² Once one has come into contact with death in the way the doctor has, powerlessly attending to people who refuse to die, one tries to relieve human suffering "before trying to point out its excellence." The two are rebels, in the sense defined by Camus elsewhere.³³ While fully accepting the ineluctability of suffering and death, they wager their lives against them, fully aware of being engaged in a hopeless battle, but also aware that in that battle their pride and work as human beings is at stake. Dr. Rieux defends his patients against suffering without giving up the struggle even in the awareness that victories will never be lasting, facing the plague with just enough pride necessary to keep him going in a "never-ending defeat." When asked by Tarrou "Who taught you all of this, doctor?" his prompt answer is "suffering."³⁴ This rebellion, the grounding of Tarrou's public initiative against suffering, is rooted not in the ambition to eradicate suffering once and for all from the human condition (for suffering you want to eradicate completely and definitively can only be a general and elusive entity), but rather precisely in the acceptance of both its ineluctability in general and its unacceptability in the particular.

Tarrou does not deny and does not evade. He recognizes that his efforts may be for naught. Yet he speaks, acts, defines, and rebels against the plague undaunted by the specter of futility. He does not let his belief in the inescapability of suffering as a constitutive element of the human condition hinder his efforts against one of its specific instances, the plague.

Suffering and the Constitution of a Non-Anonymous Public

The newly founded public space of the squads against the plague had the important role of enabling those in it "to come to grips with the disease, and convince them that, now that the plague was amongst us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it."³⁵ It gave dwellers like Rambert and Paneloux the ability and the means to come to see themselves as part of the situation of concrete suffering, and responsible for heeding its call for help.

This new public space comes into existence by way of complex private experiences and histories that become constitutive of it and from which we cannot abstract, lest we miss the fundamental character of the undertaking itself. The public effort is rooted, motivated, and substantiated by those private experiences. Those experiences have at their core suffering that becomes particular and embodied. They portend a different public sphere from the modern, anonymous one. It is a public space, based and grounded not on anonymity and universality, but rather on the confrontation with specific experiences mediated by, among other things, the characters' own life history, their inclinations, and their interactions with others. It matters that I am in the presence of the suffering of this specific person, to whom I choose to relate. It may well be that the acknowledgment of the relevance of suffering and its impact on public life entails a re-thinking of public life itself, away from that interchangeability of subjects which has been its staple over the last four centuries or so. It is implausible to address suffering beginning with the interchangeable subject at the core of modern political thought. Interchangeable subjects do not suffer. If they do, they do in a very general and aseptic way. But suffering is by definition idiosyncratic: it loses its cogency, its meaning and its point when abstracted from its peculiar context and situation, from the specific person suffering that specific experience.³⁶ One of the inaugural acts of modern political thought was to found ideals of

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This could very well mean that what he knows is that everything can be known by way of exchange with others, that truth is necessarily communicative. It is significant that just after pronouncing these words Tarrou slips on a step in the dark stairs outside Rieux's office and he steadies himself "by gripping the doctor's shoulder."

³² *The Plague*, p. 113.

³³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel; an Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

³⁴ *The Plague*, p. 115.

³⁵ *The Plague*, p. 118.

³⁶ I am following here a similar line of criticism as the one undertaken by Iris Marion Young in her "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship."

freedom and equality on stripping individuals of their particular attributes and their specific contexts. This stripping was not the main goal of the early modern political theorists (Hobbes, Locke, and perhaps less obviously Rousseau), but it was how these theorists gave form to the intuition, the assumption underlying the myth of a state of nature that ‘anyone’ would accept the terms of the social contract, by virtue of a shared human rationality. Accompanying the radical ideals of equality in the state of nature, and the idea of ‘anyone,’ came the idea that, at least under certain respects, human beings are interchangeable. Their particular circumstances and their situation in life are not what is essential, or at least what should be emphasized at that stage. Concern for suffering obviously was at the root of those conceptualizations. In fact they could be and have been construed as attempts to alleviate the suffering caused by civil war and deep inequality. But the idiosyncratic and existential dimensions of suffering were eclipsed by this emphasis on the link between equality and interchangeability, and arguably still are.³⁷ Demanding that citizens transcend particular differences and situations to adopt a general point of view means excluding citizens who cannot (or are judged unable to) adopt that point of view.³⁸ Suffering draws (indeed, tears) politics apart from generality into the tragedy of numbing pain and resentment.³⁹ Politics ignores the pull at its own risk, for suffering suppressed is not suffering erased.

Introducing the theme of suffering in our theorizing about the public realm may lead us to rethink our commitment to anonymity and interchangeability. I first turn to the challenges to notions of impartiality and the rule of law that such introduction brings, and later to the phenomenological method as the kernel of this non-anonymous public, incorporating – among others – experiences of suffering.

4. Challenges to Non-Anonymity and the Public Incorporation of Suffering.

Let me address some of the challenges entailed in this loss of anonymity and, in general, in the intermingling of suffering and politics. First of all, what are the risks of attending publicly to pleas stemming from specific, concrete, and mostly non-generalizable situations? At stake may be the impartiality of public policy and a fundamental tenet of the law: should we let idiosyncratic considerations override general rules, and move to a case-by-case series of judgments? Wouldn't we leave the fate of innumerable human beings in the hands of capricious judges unbounded by the rule of law? However important these concerns, they rely on an understanding of the law as either completely insulated from political and moral concerns, or the necessary prey of unscrupulous politicians and moral fundamentalists. In reality, a fact increasingly acknowledged among both law scholars and political theorists, the relationships between law, politics, and morality are complex and nuanced. If we accept suffering as a political problem, and accept the fact that laws originate in politics, then there is a constructive tension to be negotiated between the law's demand for abstraction and impartiality and the plea of particularly situated instances of suffering. Those pleas may productively challenge laws to be more accommodating, more inclusive, more just, or simply more humble.

Perhaps a more politically interesting challenge to bringing suffering within the purview of politics is posed by Hannah Arendt in her highly controversial reading of the French Revolution as the historical event which marked the takeover of ‘the political’ by ‘the social,’ and inaugurated the confusion between concerns attending to the private with concerns attending to the public sphere. Like poverty, suffering has to do with a dimension of humanity that is bound by necessity, rather than freedom.⁴⁰ Those who suffer often have no voice, so they cannot act autonomously in the public realm.

³⁷ Think, for example, of John Rawls's reinterpretation of the tradition of the social contract in both *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005 revised edition).

³⁸ See Young, “Polity and Group Difference,” p. 251.

³⁹ See, for a powerful articulation of this, Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 54. I am in this section equating poverty to suffering. In both instances, human beings become bound to their bodies and incapable of speaking and acting with freedom. For Arendt, even suffering endured for political reasons does not belong in the public sphere. Like the social question of poverty, suffering impairs the free

Those who do not suffer, will seize this suffering and lack of voice and will do with them whatever suits their conscience and pity-inclined soul, as she argues happened during the French Revolution. Arendt considers the ‘passion for compassion’ as the most devastating passion motivating revolutionaries.⁴¹

Her concerns are very timely, in our era of zealous human rights initiatives and calls on interventions across the world, and they deserve heeding. Suffering is a powerful motivator for action, and anyone who advocates for its inclusion in the political realm must take into account the potential destructiveness of the passion for compassion, and the simple equation of actions to relieve suffering with what Arendt calls ‘goodness.’⁴² My focus here is on politicizing, rather than moralizing, suffering: there has to remain an element of persuading and arguing, a focus on plurality, which is essential to politics as both Arendt and I understand it.

Arendt’s views in this chapter of *On Revolution* have been the object of countless studies and critiques. Here I only want to set the stage for how a phenomenological approach to suffering addresses some of her concerns. Let me first establish one fundamental disagreement I have with Arendt. If it is true – as Arendt argues – that the “life process which permeates our bodies,” our need to eat, drink, and be sheltered from the attacks of nature and other men, exerts “the most powerful necessity” on us, and brings us – whenever such attacks threaten our survival – to act urgently, irresistibly, and unreflectively, then the work of politics is not to set barriers to entrance to the public realm for anyone who is undergoing such threats, but rather to find ways to bring those pleas to bear on political interaction in a way that takes Arendt’s legitimate concerns into account. It is untrue that the satisfaction of needs constitutes the domain of ‘the social,’ speaking with one, undifferentiated voice, rather than ‘the political,’ speaking in a plurality of voices, as Arendt suggests. While hunger, pain and thirst do weigh the yoke of necessity upon us, it is not the case that their articulation, and the articulation of responses to them are univocal. They are not, whether the response comes from the victims, or from bystanders. In fact, there are fervent debates about the many ways in which it is possible and appropriate to respond to the plea of those who suffer, at the domestic and the international level. So, even if it is true that suffering and bodily needs in general pertain to the realm of necessity, they enter the public realm as something that is mediated politically, that generates a plurality of voices, including the one of the sufferer. What we need is not impatience for suffering as an inconvenience and a factor of disturbance for a serene political discussion among privileged peers, but rather awareness of the silencing that those who suffer endure, and a framework to articulate suffering and to be responsive to it, and to ensure that those who claim to speak for the suffering make space for the voice of the suffering themselves, or at least have an effective way to both ascertain and doubt their claims.

Underpinning Arendt’s argument is an understanding of politics as the interaction of free individuals in a shared space of appearance. I presently turn to a different perspective on politics that makes space for suffering as a political problem.

5. The Phenomenological Approach.

On Revolution is dedicated to Gertrude and Karl Jaspers “In reverence – in friendship – in love.” The choice to dedicate to her mentor and his wife this particular work is interesting. Although Jaspers and Arendt shared throughout the years friendship, beliefs, and political insight,⁴³ Jaspers had a very different understanding of politics than Arendt’s. He defines it in the only book of his that Arendt quotes in *On Revolution* as the realm of force. It was for him a reality entangled in suffering, struggle, and guilt.⁴⁴ Jaspers had also previously identified suffering as a boundary situation, inescapable for

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actions of political subjects. See also p. 74, where Arendt discusses the compassion “of those who did not suffer with those who were *malheureux*.” See, in general, chapter 2 of *On Revolution*.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 66.

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 83.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt et al., *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

⁴⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* ([Chicago]: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

humanity in general and hence also in political reality. Suffering was for him a situation within which we must define ourselves in order to, at the same time, grasp it as inevitable and fight it as unacceptable. It is something that is central and defining of our lives, and something we would be foolish to aspire to eradicate completely.⁴⁵

There are two ways in which turning to Jaspers gives us insight to respond to Arendt's concerns. First, conceiving suffering as a situation, by definition plural and encompassing multiple differently situated actors with different perspectives, demands that the perspective of those suffering be retained as central. This effectively prevents the 'politics of pity' from misrepresenting the sufferers and manipulating their plea. But Jaspers offers more than just this splintering of claims of suffering into different perspectives. He gives us a way to parse the perspectives and disentangle the points of view within specific situations of suffering, a way to approach a claim that someone is suffering that begins with, and gives centrality to, the claim itself, while at the same time situating it into a broader context. In one of his early articles, "The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology" Jaspers had sketched a procedure psychiatrists could use to listen to their patients' description of their own state of mind, to help them with treatment. The doctor has to rely on the patient's own account of his or her state of mind, and to listen to it in an empathic way. The doctor is obviously in a very different situation from his patient, but he is asked to recreate and imagine their situation for himself, shedding elements of his own situation that may hinder comprehension, and on the other hand drawing on his own emotional resources as needed in order to aid comprehension. Jaspers' understanding of empathy was not sentimental, but epistemological: it is the ability to represent for yourself what someone else is experiencing. Through this process, the individual listening to the other's description must remain aware of his or her own standpoint and situation, so that they know in what way that situation may hinder or aid comprehension. Even though, in keeping with phenomenology, theoretical frameworks (and political preconceptions) must be as much as possible bracketed when approaching an account of suffering, the process of abandoning pre-existing frameworks and preconceptions is a laborious process of awareness of one's own self.⁴⁶ If this process of becoming aware and at the same time distancing ourselves from our own situation is successful, then the account will generate questions arising from the account itself, rather than from the listener's theoretical and political commitments. In this sense, the accounts *become* immediate data to analyze, rather than being immediate in themselves. The accounts are *reduced* to reality only once the process of awareness and distancing is well under way.⁴⁷

I am aware of the problems entailed in translating this approach from psychiatry to politics, but I nonetheless believe the approach can be pluralized and used as a method of communication for actors within and across situations of suffering. I am suggesting that a phenomenological approach along the lines sketched by Jaspers can be useful – together with his insights on situation and in particular suffering as a boundary situation – in understanding the public dimensions of suffering and negotiating its problematic translation into the public sphere. Within this framework each actor, whether involved in the immediate situations, or narrating, reading, and analyzing the situations, strives for an understanding of them as they are defined by the other actors, and does so primarily by becoming aware of his own and everyone else's different position within the common situation. In this sense, an individual engages in a process of intellectual empathy aimed at understanding the situation of another both by drawing on his own past experience, insofar as it is relevant, and by shedding aspects of it which may impair his understanding.

Conclusion: A Phenomenological Approach to Suffering in Politics.

Today, responses to suffering arguably constitute some of the most interesting instances of political action. Like Tarrou in *The Plague*, seemingly powerless agents enter the public realm motivated by,

⁴⁵ Jaspers, *Psychologie Der Weltanschauungen and Philosophy*, vol. 2.

⁴⁶ Karl Jaspers, "The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 114 (1968).

⁴⁷ For a closer reading of Jaspers' approach see Giunia Gatta, "Psychiatry, Philosophy, and a Phenomenological Approach to Politics: Insights from Karl Jaspers," (Florence: European University Institute, 2009). See also Jaspers, "The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology."

and rebelling against, episodes of great suffering, both their own and someone else's. These include human rights grassroots initiatives, movements and organizations, but also anti-war protests, campaigns against poverty, or against various cultural practices, or ways to organize labor that are seen as abusive. These actions, in the name of a generally shared view of suffering as negative, challenge the boundaries of traditional political communities – states, in particular – and are understood often in protest against them. These initiatives are in constant danger of manipulation: the manipulation they themselves may enact on the suffering of those on whose behalf they claim to speak, and the manipulation that they may endure at the hands of powerful agents who may want to use them to justify those acts of cruelty that Arendt warned us against. I suggested that the situated, phenomenological approach to suffering one can glean from Jaspers' work is a useful framework within which to mediate the onset of suffering into the public realm. First of all, its demand that we not abstract from concrete instances and claims of suffering, but rather begin with them, prevents the slippage of suffering and those who suffer from concreteness (and dignity, and a specific identity) into an undifferentiated blob. Suffering is moreover understood as a situation, embracing those who suffer, those who perpetrate, and those who witness. Within these situations the roles are rarely fixed. Different situations within the situation bring different perspectives and judgments on the claim of suffering. The phenomenological approach makes an effort to bring all those perspectives and judgments to the fore, seeking direct accounts for each. In this sense, the phenomenological approach does not “reduce politics to nature,”⁴⁸ but rather politicizes a claim of suffering which, as soon as it becomes public, loses its immediate link to nature.

In this approach, the goal is not the permanent eradication of suffering, for such a goal is unattainable, but rather a translation of private suffering into a public experience, as well as the constitution of a public that is not anonymous and undifferentiated. The approach foregrounds a public that does not demand abstraction from experiences that define each individual as distinct from the other, and allows for the mediation of any suffering that has been endured in a way that is free and unique, and for articulating political demands that vary accordingly.

The exclusion of suffering from the realm of politics blinds us to many crucial aspects of contemporary politics. Whether with the theorists' permission or without it, suffering is an inescapable presence in the political world. I have tried to work within the tension of, on one hand, trying to capture suffering in its immediacy, while on the other knowing that as soon as it bursts out of privacy, suffering is mediated, translated, and possibly manipulated. The phenomenological approach strives to balance both elements by drawing on a multiplicity of perspectives on situations of suffering, and by alerting witnesses and bystanders to the complexities involved in its transition from the private to the public. It allows for the splintering of the claim that one is suffering into multiple facets, and it focuses on suffering as both an idiosyncratic and a shared experience. It makes unavailable strategies of abstraction and elusion of suffering by demanding that an individual define herself within a situation of suffering before she can understand it and engage politically against it.

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⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

