

Suffering as Precarious Presence – a Husserlian Proposal

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ABSTRACT · Recent research on chronic pain has recognized the need to define the concept of pain-related suffering (Noe-Steinmüller et al., in review.). Svenaeus (2014) has proposed a definition of suffering as an alienating mood, which avoids important problems of previous definitions (e.g., Wade, 1996). However, it rests on a Sartrean phenomenology of pain experience, which fails to account for some fundamental aspects of pain. A Husserlian alternative to Sartre's phenomenology of pain is introduced and it is argued that suffering is better defined as a precarious relationship to self and world, where the presence of neither can be taken for granted.

KEYWORDS · Pain, suffering, phenomenology, presence, Husserl, Sartre

I. Introduction

I.a. Background: The concept of pain-related suffering and the crisis of pain medicine

Today, we witness a fundamental crisis in pain medicine, the so-called opioid crisis. A very liberal prescription policy of opioids to treat chronic pain has led to an epidemic of overuse and addiction, while failing to reduce the burden of pain itself (Kolodny et al., 2015). Already before this development, it has been argued that a new way of thinking about pain is needed and it has been suggested that the concept of pain-related suffering is of central importance for this aim (Cassell, 1982). All authors using this term seem to share the intuition that especially in the context of chronic pain, people often make an immensely negative experience that is closely related to, but also clearly goes beyond pain, and that may therefore indicate the need for more holistic treatment. However, a consensus on what exactly suffering is, has not yet been reached (see Noe-Steinmüller et al., in review, for a systematic review).¹

In psychology and neuroscience, suffering is typically defined as the emotional or cognitive dimension of pain, which is often described in terms of depression and anxiety (De Ridder et al., 2021; Wade et al., 1996). I argue that, if we followed this definition, pain-related suffering would be nothing more than a synonym for already existing concepts and would contribute little to clinical research and practice. However, a definition of suffering should do exactly that and be faithful to the intuition that there is an experience in the context of pain that has yet to be conceptualized.

Another problem with the psychological definition: If suffering is defined in terms of complex emotion and cognition, organisms who are not (yet) capable of such experiences, such as most animals and some infants, would be incapable of suffering. However, I suggest that the intuitive usage of the term suffering is more inclusive. Why should infants (or animals) not suffer from their pain? Why should suffering only consist in complex emotion and cogni-

1 In the following, I will use the terms 'suffering' and 'pain-related suffering' interchangeably.

tion? Of course, one can bite the bullet and postulate that the above-mentioned beings do not suffer. This route is taken by Cassell (2013). I cannot scrutinize this position in this context, but see Tate (2020) for an insightful critique. For my purposes in this paper, I will assume that intuition favors a more inclusive (and more informative) definition of suffering, and I will use phenomenology to provide such a definition.

Again, what we are looking for is an immensely negative experience that goes beyond pain itself but that is clearly connected to pain at the same time. I will suggest that defining pain-related suffering as a mood satisfies these conditions and avoids the above-mentioned problems of a definition in terms of complex emotion. Concretely, I will offer a description of suffering as a mood, in which the presence of world and self can no longer be taken for granted.

I.b. The manifold senses of presence

The term ‘presence’ plays a central role in phenomenology. The most famous example is probably Heidegger’s (1962) critique of the philosophical tradition as a ‘metaphysics of presence’. But also Husserl’s analyses can be described as an attempt to understand what it means for something to be present to consciousness (Bernet, 1982). As Bernet describes by contrasting, among others, Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida, fundamental philosophical problems arise regarding the relationship between presence and absence on the one hand, but also between different senses of presence (the temporal sense of something being present as opposed to past or future, and the sense of something being present for someone, i.e. given to a consciousness, on the other hand).

In this article, I will exclusively focus on presence in the sense of ‘being there’, of something presenting itself. Furthermore, I will neither analyze existing phenomenological accounts of presence nor make a new proposal about how to use this term. Rather, I will take a closer look at a concrete phenomenon – pain experience and pain-related suffering – and use the term ‘presence’ as a means to test and compare two prominent phenomenologists (Husserl and Sartre) in their capacity to account for this phenomenon. This way, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding not only of pain and suffering, but also of presence itself.

I will argue that Husserl’s phenomenological approach and terminology is well suited to account for pain and suffering. His analysis of how ‘things [present] themselves’ includes an insightful perspective on pain experience and allows an intuitive conceptualization of pain-related suffering, which, as I described above, is still lacking in pain research. With Husserl, I will argue, suffering can be defined as a mood of precarious presence.

II. Svenaeus’ description of suffering as an alienating mood

A phenomenological description of suffering as a mood has already been proposed by Frederick Svenaeus (2014), who defines it as “a potentially alienating mood overcoming the person and engaging her in a struggle to remain at home in the face of loss of meaning and purpose in life” (p. 407). As Svenaeus points out, moods, unlike emotions, are not about any concrete object or event, but rather determine a subject’s general relationship to the world (p. 409). Understanding pain-related suffering as a mood means therefore to describe the negative experience we are looking for as a general stance towards the world and towards one’s life.

Regarding the relationship of this very broad form of experience to the concrete experience of pain, Svenaeus suggests that what binds the two together is the feeling of alienation. According to him, much of the suffering of chronic pain patients consists in their incapability to continue life as they knew it. The patients become alienated from who they were because of the constraints that pain impinges upon their lives. Furthermore, using a classical phenomenological distinction (Husserl, 1952), Svenaeus argues that also pain itself is alienation insofar as it constitutes a change in a subject’s body experience away from the lived body, towards the object body (Svenaeus, 2014, p. 413).

I agree with Svenaeus that indeed in chronic pain such an experience is made. However, I suggest that alienation from one's body is not the essential characteristic of pain. In essence, pain is what Husserl (1952) calls an "Empfindnis", a way of feeling one's own lived-body, and I will argue that, if one takes this idea seriously, one will find that the alienating character of pain-related suffering is not essential for this mood either, but rather a consequence of a more fundamental change in the subject's relation to the world that I describe with the term precarious presence.

III. Svenaeus' Sartrean phenomenology of pain and a Husserlian alternative

Svenaeus' description of pain as an alienation is based on a Sartrean phenomenology of the body (Svenaeus, 2009). Sartre's paradigm case of pain experience is the pain in the eyes that one feels when reading a book for a very long time and with bad lighting (Sartre, 2012). He describes how – before recognizing the pain in the eye – the reading itself changes: The words are deciphered less easily; one must reread more and more sentences before one can go on. In more general terms, the appearance of objects in the world changes, experience loses its taken-for-granted character. And only when the subject is no longer able to engage with the world, pain is experienced in the body through a reflective act. This act is a distortion according to Sartre: The subject forgets what it originally and truly is – a directedness to the world – and objectifies itself as a material object-body, in his terms as an in-itself. Svenaeus uses this line of thinking for his description of chronic pain and takes over what I want to call a dualist phenomenology of the body. For Svenaeus, as for Sartre, the body is either invisible, not present at all, or present as an object, objectified by the subject in a reflective act.

However, I suggest that there are forms and aspects of pain that are completely and utterly missed by this description. Recall the last time you were in strong pain, let us say because you touched a hotplate. The moment your hand touches the hotplate, it starts to burn and to ache. It clearly does not belong to the invisibly functioning lived body as Sartre describes it, because it draws all attention to itself and blocks your relationship to the world. At the same time, it does not fit in with the description of the object body, because an aching hand obviously is "alive". Even the terms, that are typically used to describe such pain, confirm this: Pain is pulsating, throbbing, radiating and so on. Furthermore, the pain you experience when touching a hotplate is *your* pain. There is no alienation taking place – at least not at first. It becomes clear that Sartre's dualist phenomenology of the body is inadequate to describe important aspects of pain. But how can the presence experienced in pain be described? I suggest that Husserl's interpretation of the distinction between lived- and object-body is much better suited for this purpose.

In "Ideas II", after describing the difference between lived- and object-body Husserl introduces another distinction, namely between two different forms of sensations. One of these he calls "Empfindungen" (sensations proper) and the other "Empfindnisse" ("sensings"). Sensings are what we feel when paying attention to the feeling body itself and not to the object causing the sensation. Both sensations and sensings belong to the lived body. The lived body, as Husserl pictures it, is not merely an invisible medium towards the world, that only turns up explicitly as an object when something goes wrong, like Sartre believes. Rather, it can be recognized in its very functioning. Husserl illustrates this with the example of touching the surface of a table:

"Die Hand [...] über den Tisch bewegend erfahre ich von ihm und seinen dinglichen Bestimmungen. Zugleich aber kann ich jederzeit auf die Hand achten und finde auf ihr vor Tastempfindungen, Glätte- und Kälteempfindungen. [...] Und so bietet überhaupt mein Leib [...] spezifische Leibesvorkommnisse dar [...], die wir Empfindnisse nennen" (Hua IV/146).

Not only does the lived body bring the subject in touch with the world and allows the experience of worldly events, but also "bodily events" ("Leibesvorkommnisse") themselves, i.e. sensings (Empfindnisse), are an important part of consciousness

According to Husserl, also pain experiences belong to this aspect of embodied consciousness. He does not address the phenomenon of pain in detail but refers to it at several places. For instance, he stresses that pain sensations (or rather: sensings) contribute to the constitution of the object body (Hua IV/150). He also proposes that sensings, such as pain, “play a role for the constitution of values analogous to the role of primary sensations for the constitution of spatial objects” (Hua IV/152, my translation). I cannot evaluate if this statement is representative of Husserl’s theory of value. What I take from suggestions like this, is that unlike for Sartre, for Husserl it is quite clear that the lived body – in its function of letting the world appear to the subject – is not always invisible. It is an essential aspect of the lived body and its function that it can be experienced in its very constituting activity. In other words, that the process of presenting the world to the bodily subject can itself be experienced.

Importantly, in the example of touching the table, I can decide on which aspect of experience to focus. I can voluntarily shift my attention from the objects of my experience to the experiencing body itself. To my knowledge, Husserl does not discuss the fact that this is usually not the case with pain experience. To the contrary, pain is – I suggest – an *involuntary* “Empfindnis”. The subject loses control over what is presented to it, the presence of the lived body is forced upon the pain sufferer. This involuntary character is of central importance, when it comes to developing an alternative phenomenological account of suffering as a mood, which I will attempt below.

Before that, I want to stress that committing to a Husserlian approach to pain does not mean that one cannot at the same time acknowledge that Sartre’s perspective contains important insights. Take his example of feeling pain in the eyes when reading a book: I agree that indeed, at some point, one will be aware of one’s eyes as objects. Pain experience can give rise to and be closely tied to a self-objectification, and as mentioned above, Husserl himself referred to this aspect of pain (Hua IV/150). However, before I consider my painful eyes as objects, I must feel a sensing in them. A sensing that is not helpful for reading, but that lets the eyes appear as part of the lived sensing body. In other words, pain is multilayered: It contains a changed relationship to the world, and potentially an experience of the object-body.

But what Sartre overlooked is that between the invisible functioning of the lived body and the appearance of the object-body, there is an intermediate step, which is the sensing body. Another way to describe this shortcoming is to say that Sartre did not account for the possibility that the body does not have to be either presenting (lived body) or presented (object body). Rather, there is a peculiar form of presence of the body, where the presenting is itself experienced and even stands in the way of experiencing anything else. I will argue below (5.) that this experience goes not only beyond the dichotomy of subject body and object body, but also beyond the dichotomy of subject and object itself.

IV. Ratcliffe’s concept of existential feeling

What does my Husserlian approach to pain imply for Svenaeus’ analysis of suffering as an alienating mood? After all, his proposal was that pain and suffering are connected by the experience of alienation, and that the bodily alienation one undergoes in pain, is mirrored in the alienating character of the mood of pain-related suffering. As I already said above, I suggest that Svenaeus’ account does capture important aspects of pain and suffering. Although the object-body is not the core of pain experience, pain often implies self-objectification. And I will suggest that pain-related suffering is a mood that implies alienation. However, as in the case of pain itself, alienation is not what is *essential* about pain-related suffering.

To offer an alternative description of suffering as a mood, I will very briefly revisit the concept of mood itself. As Ratcliffe (2008) points out, moods, or in his terms, existential feelings, are a non-intentional form of affect, i.e., they are not directed to a specific object, event or person, but they are a form of general attunement, an openness towards the world, that determines how the world will appear to us. Without mood, the constitution of specific objects or

other subjects would not be possible to begin with. To quote Heidegger's formulation in "Being and Time": „The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something“ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 176/136, as cited in Ratcliffe, 2008).

In other words, I could not be afraid of something, if I was not – at least in some respect – in a fearful mood, i.e., if I was not already attuned to the possibility of objects being threatening. To sum up, moods are *existential feelings*, insofar as they give a certain color to our whole existence and insofar as they are the very condition of possibility for concrete experiences of a specific character.

What Ratcliffe draws special attention to is the fact that together with this existential dimension, moods are also existential *feelings* in the narrower sense of the word. This means, the mood I am in does not only determine my relationship to the world, but it can also be experienced in my body (Ratcliffe, 2012, p. 15f). Importantly, this is no coincidence, but the world-disclosing function of existential feelings rests on their embodiment. Being in a fearful mood, for instance, goes hand in hand with bodily tension, shakiness etc. Ratcliffe discusses a variety of existential feelings – for instance the feeling of being “part of the real world again”, or of being “part of a larger machine” (Ratcliffe, 2005). He also analyses the different kinds of bodily experience that they rely on (Ratcliffe, 2008). In his theory virtually any bodily experience contributes to how we relate to the world, in other words, contributes to our mood. This includes kinesthesia, as well as diffuse bodily dispositions, but also sensations, and, speaking with Husserl, sensings. In other words, moods, understood as existential feelings, not only present the world in a certain mood-congruent way, but can themselves be present in the form of an according bodily feeling.

V. Suffering as precarious presence

Now, the question is of course, how does pain contribute to existential feeling? If pain was – in essence – bodily alienation, Svenaeus' idea of pain-related suffering as an alienating mood would be an accurate description. But what sort of world-relation corresponds to pain as an involuntary sensing?

The non-intentional character of pain

Above, I described – following Husserl – how one can perform a *voluntary* shift of attention towards one's own sensing body. Importantly, in such a shift of attention, the object of my touch, that I was paying attention to before, disappears, I am no longer intentionally directed towards that or any object and I suggest that the same is even more true about pain as an *involuntary* shift of attention towards one's sensing body: When I touch a hotplate, the intentional structure of my experience shortly breaks down, I am no longer directed at any object – e.g., the towel with which I was cleaning the stove – but instead all I feel at this moment is my pain. Pain – if it is sufficiently strong (!) – does not allow for any other (intentional) experience beside it.

I want to stress that of course not every pain experience has this effect. There are pains – and other sensings – that simply come and go and are easily integrated into the rest of our experience. However, some pain experiences are so strong, so all-encompassing, that they really interrupt the flow of experience, distract us from anything else and so-to-speak throw us back onto our lived sensing body.

I suggest that this is also true about serious chronic pain. When I suffer from chronic back pain, the aches, and itches in my back haunt me repeatedly and bring all other experience to a halt – at least for a moment. We are all familiar with the experience of hitting our head somewhere (or other parts of the body) and of only slowly and gradually regaining awareness of our surroundings. I suggest that in serious chronic pain conditions the patient continuously gets pulled out of the engagement with his or her lifeworld and is thrown back on pure pain experience.

Rudolf Bernet (2014) points to an important aspect of this non-intentional character of pain. Since in sensings such as pain, there is no intentional *object*, pain experience cannot be described as *subjective* either. He insists that pain is “non-relational” (ibid. p. 17) and that compared to “normal” experience, pain lacks both the objective and the subjective pole of experience. There is no subject of pain:

“Der Schmerzempfindung fehlt [...] jeder Bezug auf ein ichliches Subjekt. Die Rede davon, dass ich oder ein anderer Schmerzen ‚hat‘, [...] entstammt einer nachträglichen objektivierenden Außenbetrachtung, welche die Schmerzen einem Ich zurechnet, das neben den Schmerzen auch noch andere Zustände hat“ (ibid.).

To put this in terms of presence: In the case of pain, the presenting and the presented are not (yet) distinguishable. Pain constitutes a form of presence that goes beyond or rather undermines dichotomous descriptions in terms of subject and object.

Importantly, the claim is not that every pain experience can be described this way and I believe it would be worth a separate investigation to find out what distinguishes those pain experiences, where the dissolution of subject and object, as Bernet describes it, takes place, from those where it does not. Pain intensity certainly plays a role, but there may be many other factors. However, in this context, it is sufficient that such pain experiences exist and that at least some chronic pain patients continuously/recurrently go through such experiences.

The unstable world-relation of the pain sufferer

To repeat my above question: What does pain contribute to existential feeling? What kind of mood corresponds to the pain experiences I just described? If they involve a dissolution of the subject and its relation to the world, can such pain at all contribute to existential feeling or mood? Or does it rather stand in opposition to the world disclosure that is characteristic for them? In this latter case, does it really make sense to understand suffering as a mood? I suggest the answer to the last three questions should be affirmative. Pain stands in clear opposition to the world disclosing function of (other) existential feelings, but it nevertheless contributes to them and hence it does make sense to describe pain-related suffering as a mood.

I suggest that the repeated threat to the very structure of our experience, the ever-present possibility of the subject’s own disappearance, is key to understanding this mood. Pain-related suffering – the mood of pain – is not primarily characterized by *alienation* from the world, but by an *unstable relation* to it, by the constant threat of losing oneself and one’s world again. *The presence of the pain sufferer’s world is always precarious*. It is not up to the pain sufferer to decide whether she is presented with the world or experiences the pre-intentional presence of her own painful body. One could describe suffering from chronic pain as continuously having to fight one’s way back into “normal” experience.

An objection to this description of suffering could be that it only covers suffering from some kinds of pain, namely pain that really leaves no room for intentional experiences. But I suggest that – although my examples were so far indeed extreme cases – also with more moderate pain experiences, the situation is very similar. Also pain that allows other (intentional) experiences alongside itself, can still dominate the affected person’s lifeworld, and make it fragile and unstable. In this case the pain patient’s experience is still that of a subject in a world, but most of this world becomes unattainable, blocked by an experience that can never be part of it. So again, the presence of the sufferer’s world is precarious and cannot be taken for granted.

VI. Conclusions

VI.a. Pain and suffering

To sum up the results of my analysis of pain and suffering: I followed Svenaeus' insight that suffering is best defined as an embodied mood. Defining suffering as a mood follows the "mainstream" definition in psychology and neuroscience to some extent, insofar as suffering is understood as an affective phenomenon related to pain. At the same time, understanding suffering as a mood is not redundant with existing concepts like depression and anxiety, but conceptualizes it as a new aspect of pain experience that has gained very little attention so far. It is also more inclusive, insofar as also children can certainly be in the mood of pain-related suffering described here: Suffering in the sense of precarious presence, can be experienced by any living being capable of intentional experience and of having a lifeworld.

I want to point out once more that Svenaeus' description of suffering as alienation can be integrated into my analysis. I suggest that my approach rests on a more accurate description of what pain essentially is: An involuntary shift towards the lived body, an involuntary "Empfindnis". But this view on pain and the definition of suffering in terms of precarious presence does not exclude that suffering also includes alienation.

To the contrary, alienation from self and world can be well explained – 'explained' in a phenomenological sense (Fuchs, 2022) – by pain experience understood as an involuntary "Empfindnis". The experience of alienation is implied by the experience of chronic pain that I described as repeated breakdowns of the structure of experience. The pain sufferer feels alienated from self and world, because she lacks control over her experiences and the presence of the painful body is continuously forced upon her. Thus, the world of the chronic pain sufferer can feel both fragile *and* alien, but I suggest that the former aspect of experience is the more fundamental one and more directly related to the experience of pain.

VI.b. Presence

As was said in the introduction, this article does not aim at developing a new concept of presence or at an in-depth analysis of existing concepts. Rather, the term presence was used to develop a more satisfying concept of pain and suffering. By reflecting on Svenaeus' and Sartre's thinking in terms of presence, a shortcoming was detected that hindered a plausible conceptualization of pain. Concretely, this shortcoming consists in the dichotomy between lived and object body, but more generally, the problem lies in the way the very presence of anything at all to consciousness is conceptualized.

Sartre's phenomenology remains fully within the limits of analyzing intentionality. For him, pain is either on the subjective side or on the objective side of an intentional relationship. Think again of his example of pain in the eyes: My pain consists first in my impaired ability to read (subject side), and then through a reflective act, pain experience switches to being an experience of my body as an 'in-itself' (object side). However, as the example of the hotplate showed, there are types of pain where this description is highly implausible. This indicates that a simplistic phenomenology of presence, that only allows for the presence of intentional objects, lacks plausibility as well.

Far from offering a complete phenomenology of presence, it can be concluded that a phenomenological approach to consciousness must account for the experience of a presence that is neither subjective, nor objective. Husserl offers a description of such an experience with his phenomenology of sensations that, as I have tried to show, can be made fruitful for a phenomenology of suffering.

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