6

Suffering

Jocelyn Dunphy-Blomfield

> I have given a name to my pain and call it "dog".... It is just as faithful as any other dog – and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants and wives (Nietzsche, quoted in Scarry 1985:11).

> The idea of philosophy as a compassionate art through which confused and suffering people may be brought from their current misery to a greater measure of flourishing – this is a deeply rooted idea in the major traditions of Hellenistic ethical thought, both Greek and Roman (Nussbaum 1990:1).

Identifying the Problem

There is a contradiction or anomaly inherent in feminist writing. It is a discrepancy obvious enough to appear banal, yet since it receives little direct conceptual focus I have chosen it as the theme of this inquiry.

On the one hand feminist thinking represents a *refusal of diminishment* in women's existence – of suspect traditional notions like "woman's lot is to suffer". It develops instead the goal of *eudaimonia* – fulfilment or "flourishing" life – which in Aristotle's time was proper to privileged

males (Nussbaum 1990:1).[1] Women's emergence from exploitation to creativity, whether occurring slowly over centuries or through immediate political action, involves the rejection of damaging elements: pain, poverty, lack of access to knowledge and power, empty desire. I will class negative and disparate experiences like these as "suffering". Strong women want no covert truck with suffering of this kind. Nietzsche exorcised his headaches with a metaphor which groups scolded wives with servants and dogs as instruments for venting (a master's) "bad moods". For "proud" women, acceptance of passive roles in the Punch and Judy show of life is not part of free experience.[2]

On the other side of the dilemma, suffering is not just "woman's lot". It is the lot of humanity. Men suffer pain and injustice just as women do. Among massive demonstrations of human deprivation today two examples stand out: the pain of refugees from war, famine or economic devastation (Pittaway 1991) and that of the worldwide destruction of cultures (George 1992:110). Religions acknowledge the inevitability of pain. Some religions propose freeing ourselves from desire, rather than from its disappointments. Yet do historical disasters represent blows from the gods and/or Fate? Freud challenged psychiatric medicine to look beyond alleviating neurological pain to our human tendency to engage neurotically with what counters fulfilment and the guiding principle of pleasure (Freud 1968a:9-10; 1968b:123). The discontents of civilisation Freud analysed are those of ordinary human social groups. Humans not only suffer pain; they inflict it as well, for disciplinary or military reasons. Pain is part of domination, and the human struggle to come to terms with power both rationalises pain and at the same time multiplies it irrationally.

Set out like this as a dichotomy, the puzzle is simplified: women's resistance to oppression by male-dominated culture needs to be situated within the context of universal human suffering. One could go further and include here the suffering of animals – natural or caused by humans. The pain of all sentient beings can be relieved by the efforts of humans. Such work takes many forms: physical, intellectual, symbolic, religious, emotional, interactive. So the original question about women's suffering then becomes: How does the free woman encounter and come to terms with suffering? Is there a female equivalent for the humility and arrogance of Job in the biblical parable? How describe woman's world, suffering or creative? How do women grasp, interpret and reshape the world?

Though simplified, the puzzle is not solved at this point. To change the question from "How do women free themselves from pain suffered through men's domination?" to "How can women give free and crea-

tive expression to a suffering world?" is to link two questions which are not really commensurate. The problem needs to be looked at again.

Firstly, both questions are serious ones, and the second does not invalidate the first. What is more, they have in common an important but difficult issue: that of including in our idea of the "good", fulfilled, or flourishing life the idea of suffering. If they are to be grouped together, as they must be since they both represent women's experience, I propose seeing them as occupying a conceptual area which has only rough boundaries. What marks out the area is a series of dilemmas, polarities or lived contradictions. I shall note some of these, then take two as thematic guides for my discussion.

Field and Focus: Polarities and Some Guiding Themes

1. Quantity and Quality

Michael Ignatieff has written a book called *A Just Measure of Pain* (1978), which analyses "the philosophy of punishment" in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This title challenges attempts to legislate justly about other people's pain when pain is determined in terms of "how much?". Reviewing the novels of Christina Stead in her posthumous collection *Expletives Deleted* (1992), Angela Carter relates the "fanatical" and "half-crazed" powers of will in some of Stead's personages, not to norms of measure or consistency, but to the *quality* of human experience, of pain and understanding. She writes:

> [Stead offers] extremely important analyses of post-war Britain [and] sexual politics.... [She] restores to us the entire world, in its infinite complexity and inexorable bitterness, and never asks if the reader wishes to be so furiously enlightened and instructed, but takes it for granted that this is the function of fiction. She is a kind of witness and a kind of judge, merciless, cruel and unforgiving. (1992:176)

In praising Stead's judgmental and "merciless" fiction, Carter writes like Ignatieff regarding judging and educating, but in this passage her norms are "fury" and passion, not "measure". Whether of mercy, or of cruelty, assessment by quality imposes different kinds of argument from assessment by quantity.

2. The Limits of the Expressible

In Samuel Beckett's writing the world of inner pain stretches for the limits of language. His novel *The Unnameable* (1958[1952]) flows through a monologue which rides on metaphors of helplessness, impotence and deprivation – loss of the mother, of one's body, one's humanness, of the

world, of the very words being spoken. Its concluding phrase "I'll go on" (1958[1952]:119) is sometimes taken by readers as optimism. But *who* will go on? Quite possibly, in its repetitiveness and absence of hope the phrase presents the continuation and externalising of speech beyond the speaker, or beyond any speaker. Again it is Carter who offers a clear contrast to pain as revealing the limits of a speaker's intentions and transcending them through metaphor. "Suffering beyond metaphor" is what she praises in the work of Eric Rhode (1992:206). What does "beyond metaphor" mean to a writer whose own novels are themselves dynamic metaphors? Is it that metaphor is surpassed by concrete experience? Is there something "beyond" metaphor, a pathway to what is pointed at or unnameable in feeling? The polarity of language's capacities and incapacities to express pain thus marks a second charting of pain as a loosely defined conceptual area.

3. Love of the World

A third polarity appears in the admirable philosophical work of Martha Nussbaum. The theme of her collection *The Poetics of Therapy* – philosophy as "counsel for the unhappy" – as she reports Seneca writing to Lucillus – bears out Seneca's observation of "the frequency with which people who consider themselves philosophers go in for logical and verbal games that have no bearing on important human issues" (1990:1). In *The Fragility of Goodness* she quotes Wittgenstein's diagnosis of certain philosophers as suffering from "a lack of problems" (1986:373). Whether writing on "gentleness in an unsafe world" as she characterises the work of Lucretius (1990:41-90), or of the good life as "vulnerable" (1986:318-372), she respects the logical and practical difficulties of relating careful thought to concrete living in the world. This being so, her structuring of the difficulty of "measuring quality of life ... in women's lives and capabilities" in terms of "utility" and "cultural relativism" holds philosophy in a careful balance between empirical quantification and flyaway relativism (Nussbaum and Sen 1993:5).[3] Nussbaum's bonding of philosophy and world, a polarity which provides orientation on the uncharted field of suffering, provides one of the two guiding themes of my study.

4. Suffering and Action: From *Pathos* to *Praxis* and *Poiesis*

Viewed as background to the questions it poses for women, suffering in non-human sentient beings can inspire strategies of action, evolutionary adaptation, even a kind of stimulus or leverage. In human history, it is the spur to movements of liberation and social reform. How does suffering relate to action?

Today the word "suffering" is generally restricted to the experience of pain. The OED defines it as: "1. To undergo or endure ... to have something painful ... inflicted or imposed upon one ... 2. To go or pass through, be subjected to, undergo, experience (now usually something evil or painful)". A familiar way of thinking about it is to contrast pain with pleasure. This pain-pleasure polarity forms the conceptual mainstay of behaviourist psychology, of Utilitarian philosophy, and of classic Stoic and Epicurean thought. However, the OED's second sense – "to go or pass through ... to experience" brings out that its core notion is passive experience or feeling. "To suffer" (as in "suffer a sea-change") can be used in the sense of simply undergoing or tolerating. As passive experience – for Aristotle the category of *pathos* (the passive condition) – its semantic opposite is not pleasure but action.

Paul Ricoeur, whose concern for linking the "methodological and the ethical" (1955:3) is as strong as Nussbaum's, consistently situates *pathos* within a conceptual gamut stretching from passive experience to effort, then to creative action. In his early work, *Freedom and Nature*, the first volume of *Philosophy of the Will*, he notes that Ravaisson[4] joins "undergoing" to "action" as part of "effort" in discussing the free activity of willing (1966:326, n. 31). In his major synthesis of 1992, *Oneself as Another*, he declares: "For my part, I never forget to speak of humans as acting and suffering" (1992:144-145).

The continuum passivity-activity allows us to conceptualise suffering in a way which is coherent. It gives a wider scope to the immediate view of suffering as imposition or disaster. The semantic range which inserts the enduring of pain within the category of *pathos*, and so extends beyond passivity to action, offers a second thematic guide for considering women and suffering.

One can note here that there are two terms for "action" in Greek philosophy after Plato. These are *poiesis* (goal-directed or technical action, "making") and *praxis* (movement, practical or ethical action). "Poetics", too, has several meanings. Where contemporary theory relates it to literary creation, Aristotle's *Poetics* takes a particular interest in the dynamic relation between tragedies and their audience (1982).

Nussbaum's *The Poetics of Therapy* asks the further question of how the hellenistic philosophers presented arguments "such as to change the heart" in their "reflection about philosophical form and style" (1990:2-3). By including the problem of relating the "emotive aspect" of philosophical discourse to its "rational elements", she gives the term "poetics" a sense close to that of Ricoeur in *Freedom and Nature* when he foreshadows "a 'poetics' of being and of the will in being" – that is, an

analysis of unexamined discursive elements which make up these concepts, and of their interrelation (1966:471).

Suffering as it concerns women will be charted with regard to this polarity of *pathos* and *poiesis*. In turn, *poiesis* will include not only the theme of creative action, but the notion brought out above of a field of speech which requires a theorising "poetics".

Women and Suffering

Women are often viewed as having a special role in alleviating pain and discomfort. It is accepted that they are brave in childbirth, nurse the sick, rear children, tolerate chores that make possible the public achievements of their menfolk, care for those less able than themselves. Until recently nursing, geriatric care and social work were largely female professions. Australian history records the civilising role of women pioneers such as Elizabeth MacArthur (Ellis 1972), and of the women in the Reformist movements in England which led to the "moral Enlightenment", source of new attitudes to convicts and indigenous peoples, to care of the sick and to social justice (Roe 1969). There are outstanding contemporary studies of social problems by women historians like Himmelfarb.[5] We have seen women novelists refine notions of moral action in fiction. The question re-emerges of how women envisage or reshape the world.

Here two outstanding works provide divergent accounts. I shall take the later one first.

Elaine Scarry's remarkable book of 1985, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, is not a study of women's suffering, but of the uses of pain in politics and in writing. Scarry starts with the linguistic difficulty of putting one's pain into words. She notes that in Sophocles' tragedy *Philoctetes* "the fate of an entire civilisation is suspended in order to allow the ambassadors of that civilisation to stop and take account of the nature of the human body, the wound in that body, the pain in that wound" (1985:10). She then moves to the political function of torture. Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, ... [it] mimes ... this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (1985:20). Torturers deny their violence by stopping short of mutilating their victim, and so they also deny the status of hero or witness to a sufferer who "confesses". Words, no longer meaning anything to a victim once pain has reduced them to babble, are presented to the public as a change of heart, so that a double political

victory is achieved (1985:35). War functions in the same way, for through the process of belief war, like torture, creates a social and political reality out of the use of human bodies and their pain. The victim of torture must change heart, or appear to do so, by uttering words which confirm the political reality of the conquerors (1985:331, n. 10). The warrior's wounds and death *maintain* an imagined political reality. In the last part of her book, Scarry presents the works of Marx and the "Judeo-Christian scriptures" as sustaining an imagined world (1985:179-180) formed by work, by artifacts, or shaped by narratives of bodies – forbidden to eat of a tree of life in Eden or threatened with a flaming sword, wandering and building tabernacles, and in the transformed narrative of the gospels cured as suffering flesh (1985:213), healed by the execution of Jesus, maintained in life by participation in his death (1985:214-216). Scarry's synthesis of the experience of pain, its writing on the body, its representation, political exploitation and social significance, hold together what is shown as inexpressible, in a way which allows us to consider human suffering systemically. Body, speech, imagination, social structuring and the subject-object problems of power are entwined. The function of her study of both pain/"unmaking" (torture and as war), and belief/"making" (the Scriptures and the work of Marx as artifacts of creative imagining) is to provide a conceptual structure like that traced above in the work of Ricoeur. She sums up:

> [T]hat the "problem of suffering" takes place and must be understood within the more expansive frame of the "problem of creating" may at the very least be taken as an invitation to attend, with more commitment, to the subject of making, a subject whose philosophic and ethical import we do not yet fully understand (1985:277).

One of the great books of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, presents woman as both sufferer and gaoler (1958:1-2). This ambiguity could be blamed on the book's composition in an earlier and pre-feminist age. However, rather than excusing it, one can explore its puzzling duality as a contribution to the debate which is still with us.

Arendt writes of the first satellite launched in 1957 that "this event, second in importance to no other, not even the splitting of the atom" and attended by "uncomfortable military and political circumstances", was greeted with a joy which was not "triumphal". Rather than "pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men", there was "relief about the first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth'.... 'Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever'" (1958:Prologue, 1). Arendt continues:

> [A]lthough Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul, nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men's bodies or shown such eagerness to go literally from here to the moon. Should the emancipation and secularization of the modern age, which began with a turning-away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the Father of men in heaven, end with an even more fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky? (1958:2)

Arendt's discussion of the artifices of human life moves from the artificial life necessitated by a space environment to that of *in vitro* creation of human beings.

Arendt constantly speaks of humankind as "man", leaving aside disputes about gender in language, while dwelling on the *maternal* metaphor of the Earth that humans are trying to escape from. Her observation fits psychoanalytic studies of children's need to separate from their mothers (cf. McDevitt and Settlage 1971). But her point is a symbolic one. The god she shows humans turning from is specifically a Father. Human taking-over of God's creative power is described in terms of taking over the function of the womb. Thus human subjection is not only subjection to a "human condition" of limited power which can be altered by technology. It is subjection to a Father[6] – and in technological progress it is broken by seizing the father's power over the womb of the mother. What is interesting is that by using the common term "mankind" for both men and women, Arendt implicitly includes women in the human desire to violate divine power as power of the womb symbolised by our Earth. This is an aspect which her book does not pursue. Yet it is there, explosively, waiting for reflection. As she says of her book as a whole:

> [T]he heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty ... seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing (1958:3).

Arendt's identification of "thinking" as solution to the problem of secularised liberation as an escape from Earth itself may reflect the influence of Heidegger. She underlines elsewhere that students of her generation found traditional teaching of philosophy an "ocean of boredom", and were drawn from across Germany by concern "with the 'matter of thought' or as Heidegger would say ... 'thinking's matter'" (1978:295). What she brings out in sketching humans' flight from cosmic Mother and Father is a non-rational drive, close to Freud's depiction in *Civiliza-*

tion and its Discontents of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos and its uncertain outcome. Like Freud, Arendt leaves the problem as a poetic expression, and like Beckett, she suggests that language and concepts may be at their limit in trying to resolve it.

Pain, Meaning and Absence: "The Deserted Village"

If with Arendt we take a view of human suffering as common to men and women, and springing from sources deeper than bodily pain or external cruelty, what constitutes it? Max Weber's essay "The Soteriology of the Underprivileged" (1978) defines suffering in terms of a universal need to grasp the world as meaningful. The essay inquires into salvation beliefs. It starts by identifying "an apparent increase in the variety of religious behaviour" with the social underclasses, but ends with the Buddhist nobility – "the salvation doctrine of an intellectual class which proudly and nobly despises the illusions of this world and the next alike" (1978:190). Weber concludes:

> The need for salvation and ethical forms of religion have another source than the social situation of the underprivileged and the rationalisation of the bourgeoisie as shaped by the practical conditions of the lives they lead. This source is pure intellectualism, just by itself, above all the metaphysical needs of the spirit, which is forced to meditate on the ethical and religious questions not through material necessity, but through the personal inner need to grasp the world as a meaningful cosmos, and to be able to set up a stance towards it (1978:190-191).

Weber presents the individual need for meaning as universal. It applies whether one suffers, or has reached a spiritual point beyond suffering. If his view is correct, then to lack meaning may be the worst pain of all for those who suffer. This approach is that of a study by Isabelle Marin on the care of the dying (1992). Observing death in a secular western society where religious beliefs in an afterlife or the value of suffering are largely eroded, Marin writes concretely of hospital scenes where last meetings with relatives put the emphasis on human relations – love or hate – the desperate search for rationality, for justification of human lives. "The search for reason fails", she writes, "because of the lack of meaning to ground it. When pain and suffering arise ... the search for meaning comes to a brutal end" (1992:96). She finds that the Church speaks less now of the meaning of pain, trying instead to assuage it. She contrasts the effort to relieve pain with Simon Weil's phrase: "Pain is the necessity which makes us take cognizance of our poor humanity" and comments: "Without a doubt, pain is useless, unbearable, senseless; all that is left is to put down the suffering subject" (1992:96), ironically com-

paring her deduction to the hypothesis of putting down victims of injustice in order to suppress social scandal (1992:96, n. 10). But she suggests an alternative: "It's no longer a question of *seeking* meaning, but of *giving* it" (1992:97).

How "give" meaning to the inevitable? John Berger's collection of short stories, *Pig Earth*, ends with an "Historical Afterword", which patiently unravels the meanings that have emerged from these tales of dispossessed peasants (1992:195-213). As world population grows, peasants are disappearing from their ancestral lands. They dwindle, yet they are essentially survivors (1992:196); they are economically conscious as a class. They are conservative, backward. Their religion has never fully corresponded with the religion of rulers and priests. Today, forced to "feed others first" (1992:201), their dream is return to a life where they can first feed themselves and their children. Theirs is not the dream of progress. Peasants assume a just world at the start. Within a culture of progress they look for a culture of survival. Though they are said to be unforgiving, Berger has found that "it is rare for any peasant to die unforgiven" (1992:209). Examining their place in the contemporary world economic system, of which they form a part, he agrees that in the world of agribusiness, where progress now organises both world production and world markets, "no-one can argue for the preservation of the traditional peasant way of life. To do so would be to argue that they should continue to be exploited (1992:211). Yet the forces which in most parts of the world are today eliminating or destroying the peasantry represent the contradiction of the hopes once contained in the principle of historical progress.

Berger contrasts the peasant experience of survival with the "metaphysic" of capital, its self-reproduction, the role "unforeseen by Adam Smith or Marx" to "sever every link with the past" (1992:213). "The 'Deserted Village'", he writes, "has probably almost always been and certainly is again today a feature of the countryside: it represents a site of no survivors" (1992:199).

The pain of the "deserted village" is like that of the dying portrayed earlier – inevitable. For Berger, the peasant world is largely a lost world, strong and doomed. It is not a world to escape from or simply to lament in nostalgia. He sees its "conservativism" – which makes sense of its culture of survival – as "a conservatism not of power but of meaning. It represents a depository (a granary) of meaning preserved from lives and generations threatened by continual and inexorable change" (1992:208). Berger's way of giving meaning to intractable suffering is to find expression for it.

Pain as "pain in its undiluted malignity"

One can go further and consider what modern philosophers after Kant refer to as "radical evil" (Michalson 1990:31). Emmanuel Levinas calls the human choice to do or inflict such pain or evil, "pain in its undiluted malignity" (1988:163-164). To give voice to those who have suffered this pain is to do more than reshape a broken world. It is to protest, and to refuse the destruction of human beings.

Levinas proposes a philosophy which, despite its rigour, is concrete and emotionally charged. He starts from a radical insistence: that one starts and exists *in relation*, not as solitary subject or "I" (1989a:33-54).

He does not propose to alleviate or eliminate suffering. His analyses of pain and death emphasise suffering as a counter-concept to action. Passivity balances practice; evil (as scandal) balances justice and the Good. In the radical evil of the Holocaust, and the other massacres of "millions and millions" (1981:Dedication), it is "suffering for nothing" which is at issue. His article "Useless Suffering" gives expression to the intolerable:

> Is humanity in its indifference going to abandon the world to useless suffering, leaving it to the political fatality – of the drifting – of the blind forces which inflict misfortunes on the weak and conquered and which spare the conquerors, whom the wicked must join? (1981:164)

Certain phrases of Levinas, such as "death, for me, is the other's death" (1989b:83) radicalise the idea of intersubjectivity. The notion of the subject is bound up with that of power. His article "Ethics as First Philosophy", already quoted, presents "modern man" as "distinguished by ... powers of sovereignty" (1989a:44). Power involves not only moral but metaphysical forms of subjection. The human condition is experience of "this relationship of light, whose transcendence death announces" (1989b:78).

Levinas changes thinking about suffering in several ways. To accept the other into the thought-sphere of the subject is to create a doubling which displaces the subject and the *Cogito*, the *"I think"* from the centre of thought. To do so alters perception of the body, the other's pain becoming as central as mine. Relationship to the world is altered, since I now approach it not as my object, but as the place – the "relationship of light" – of relationship-with-the-other, which is the starting-point of thought. Finally there is a change in my relationship to power, for in this "modern age" power is a mistaken sovereignty, only freed for movement and activity by shifting from petrified "thinking of the same". Through the relation with the other which Levinas urges, suffering is transformed and diminished.

Suffering and Philosophy: "Modernity" and the Self

Levinas raises the question of the term "modern".[7] The notion of modernity is frequently traced to the seventeenth century. In *The Passions of the Soul* (1990:37), Descartes writes as a modern thinker setting up a contrast with the "ancients". Where the ancients saw feeling and passion (*passio* or passivity) as initiated in the soul and occurring in the body, Descartes' counter-presentation of them as passions of the "soul", with a corporal location in the pineal gland, provided an objectifying stance for naturalistic philosophy of human experience. Charles Taylor claims that such a stance is problematic. A certain picture of the agent, he says, flattering and deeply attractive to moderns, is one of "disengagement" – of liberation through objectification (1985:4). Taylor's aim in setting the appeal of this naturalism within a wider account – that of "identity and self-interpretation" – is to provide a "critique that can free (the disengaged identity) of its illusory pretension to define the totality of our lives as agents, without attempting the futile and ultimately self-destroying task of rejecting it altogether" (1985:7).

Is it possible to speak to "disengaged" modern philosophers of experience conceived as "engaged", caught up, affected by passion or suffering? Following Ricoeur's work, the Danish philosopher Peter Kemp in his *Theory of Engagement* (1972:11-18) takes up the link between action and suffering or *passio*. Kemp develops a twinned theory of the "pathos" and then of the "poetics" of engagement. Taking the theme further in a 1981 interview with Ricoeur (Kemp 1985) – the same year in which some of the articles of Levinas just mentioned were published in France – he relates the question of suffering to that of identity, which is also central for Taylor. Ricoeur discusses with Kemp the experience of human time and its presentation in the work of nineteenth-century historians, and notes the shift from the "stories of great men" to studies of a history of the oppressed, the "victims"(Kemp 1985:215). Ricoeur discusses this issue again in a symposium with Levinas, where he emphasises evil as evil "suffered" as well as evil "committed" (Ricoeur 1985:15, 17 and *passim*). Taking the theme further in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur presents a study of the tragic in Sophocles' *Antigone*, emphasising the difficult relation between practical wisdom and the intractable or "non-negotiable" character of the tragedy's conflict (1992a:241-249). If one looks at Ricoeur's early work as a whole, from *Philosophy of the Will* (with its study of Kantian ethics in *Fallible Man*, 1986[1960]) to *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), it is possible to claim that the investigation in both books springs from a starting-point which has been overlooked by pre-Levinas critics, i.e., acknowledgement of this intractable presence of suffering. "Suffering", Ricoeur wrote in *Freud and Philosophy*, "accompanies the

task of culture like fate, the fate illustrated by the Oedipus tragedy" (1970:176). It is important to note that Ricoeur's position is not one which leads into that of Levinas, since it chooses an ontological starting-point which he defines explicitly as different from both Levinas and Heidegger (1992b:381).

Vast and general problems of suffering – the exploitation of the Earth, of underprivileged persons or classes, even of whole peoples and nations – belong to "modern" thinking with its technology and disengagement. One cannot solve them by proclaiming the end of modernity – by stating, for example, that a "post"-modern era now obliterates problems which stem from modernity. Just as a dualist imaginative vision which idealises women as angelic saviours – when they are not demons – does little more than short-circuit discussion of the human condition as one of limitation, in the same way any periodisation of cultural and intellectual history must tackle the problems it aims to categorise. Similarly, in the name of enfranchising women, one cannot simply announce that an overthrow of a dualist (male-female) division of reasoning and logic will provide the tools for lessening women's suffering. Modernity, with its social and conceptual divisions, has led to particular forms of suffering. New analyses of what constitutes pain have emerged, and these in turn offer new challenges.

Re-clarifying the Problem

Whether as specific to women, or as part of the ambiguous human condition, suffering is bound up with the loss of meaning. Levinas speaks with many others when he claims that the real suffering is meaningless suffering. By what process is meaning conferred on one's pain?

Hannah Arendt speaks in the second volume of her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, of the world-creating work of the will, a conceptual problem for modern philosophers as for Aristotle, given that "the opposite of deliberate choice or preference is *pathos*, passion or emotion ... in the sense that we are motivated by something we suffer" (1981:60).

Yet for Arendt the move from *pathos* to creative action is not impossible. She refuses the common tendency to set will against intellect, and argues strongly here, in the book whose two halves, *Willing* and *Thinking*, are held together by the notion of "mind" as having a "life", for the power of human willing to *give* meaning in a civilisation which no longer claims power to find it by reasoning.

How does this power express itself? In a different reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (the play chosen by Elaine Scarry to show how the pain of the wounded warrior exiled on his island could suspend "the fate of an entire civilization"), an article by Maria Villela-Petit, "The Is-

sue of the Voices in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*" (1991), emphasises that *Philoctetes* is about the *pathos* – the enduring or suffering – of pain. But, she writes, in this story of the social outcast finally saved by a friend who is also a god, the important word is the term *kleos*, "renown". *Kleos* is "voice", a loud voice. The loud voice of the warrior's doing and his fame had not been spread. From being a hero, he had become unknown, a voiceless person, a person with no glory. His greatest tragedy was not to be exiled – he could have had a noble death, or have disappeared – but to become unknown. The real issue of *Philoctetes* – what Sophocles is at grips with in this tragedy – is *kleos*. The crisis of renown is that of Sophocles at the end of the fifth century. The dissociation of *kleos* from virtue, because of the age's valuing success above noble glory, makes Philoctetes into something less than a tragic hero. This is the point made by Levinas, who brings out that the loss of "voice" or meaning has become the fate of "millions and millions" in our century.

To give conceptual focus to women's suffering has become a clearer task, thanks to the two guiding themes of this discussion: the bond between "thinking" and the "world" which Nussbaum, Ricoeur, Arendt and Levinas make explicit, and that between suffering as *pathos* and as action. This second bond allows for the notions of inherent meaning and the "giving" of meaning to shape each example of pain. Whether it permits major transfiguration of suffering, as in Levinas, or more intricate methodological studies, as with Ricoeur and Nussbaum, the greater expressibility of questions of suffering allows us to situate gender-specific problems in the new focus.

Throughout this study, I have related the conceptual focus of women's suffering or *pathos* to the effort to outline a women's *poetics* as a specific re-shaping of the world. The work of Arendt, Scarry, Carter, Nussbaum and Villela-Petit shows such a creative capacity to re-figure the world. This is a world which includes technology and family dramas, politics, the relevance of philosophy as analyst of history and culture, a sense of compassion which can face "mercilessness", cruelty and loss. It is my husband Bill Blomfield who reminds me that, in the last analysis, pain, and the sight of those we love in pain, shows us that suffering is just "there", to be borne, close to silence.[8] To search for a better focus for suffering through attention to the world and reflection on action, and to relate this search to an understanding of meaning as "voice", also entails respecting that silent *pathos*.

Notes

1 On fulfilment, happiness, *eudaimonia* and "flourishing" human life, see Aristotle (1953). See also Nussbaum's "Non Relative Virtues", in Nussbaum and Sen (1992:243).

2 Several studies have contributed to this linking of free, proud or noble women in Nietzsche. I note in particular the articles by Paul Redding, Penelope Deutscher and Marion Tapper in Patton (1993).

3 Several other studies by women of moral issues involve cultural relativism in terms of gender. Baier (1985) discusses the desire of women writers to identify with a rationality which is nurturing rather than dominating, yet she notes that many male writers share these attitudes, and concludes that a gender-based dichotomy must cross the barriers of empirical gender. If popular language suggests two styles of thinking, a "male" and a "female", some women will prefer to see their work classed with the "masculine" group; the "feminine" approach will include certain male writers.

4 Ricoeur is referring to the work of the French reflective philosopher Felix Ravaisson-Mollien, *De l'habitude* (1838).

5 See Himmelfarb (1985). Herbert J. Gans writes of Jacqueline Jones' *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*, and her earlier *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow* that "until recently, history was written mainly about the elite, and poverty was not a popular topic" (*The Guardian*, 24 May 1992: 20).

6 It is interesting to note that while Arendt in America was writing this study of human existence, in Paris, Jacques Lacan was formulating his notion of the "name of the Father" (cf. Miller 1988:259).

7 The question of whether "modern" means progressive or degenerate was raised in 1809 by Schelling. Speaking of "nowadays", Schelling complained that "Spinoza's realism is ... as abstract as Leibniz's idealism. Idealism is the soul of philosophy, realism its body; only the two together constitute a living whole" (Schelling 1936:21-22). David Krell notes that for Schelling "modern European philosophy as a whole, from its beginning (in Descartes) has this common flaw: for it, nature does not exist, it lacks a living ground" (Krell 1988:13-32).

8 This study owes a great deal to these discussions with Bill Blomfield, to whom it is dedicated. As well, I am grateful to my colleague Ron Gilbert for his introduction to Elaine Scarry's work, to the writers I have quoted, especially to Paul Ricoeur, to Maria Villela-Petit, to Peter Kemp and Charles Taylor, and to Morny Joy for her skilful suggestions as editor.

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