

The Need for the Scientific Study of the Transformation of Suffering

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Wong's brief remarks on suffering contrast sharply with most contemporary well-being paradigms. He writes, "suffering, like gravity, is pervasive and inescapable. We need to adopt a more positive attitude towards suffering...suffering is not only a messenger telling us that something is out of balance, but also essential for growth" (Wong, 2023). There are numerous anecdotal accounts of individuals being changed and transformed for the better because of suffering. The notion of post-traumatic growth is grounded in this very possibility (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Religious teachings and traditions often also point towards the possibility of transformation through suffering (Scheler, 1992; John Paul II, 1984; van Zeller, 2015). And yet this clearly is not everyone's experience. For some, the suffering is so overwhelming and all-pervasive that it feels unbearable, and the suffering results in a contraction rather than expansion of being (Cassell, 1982).

While empirical research on suffering has expanded in recent years (e.g., Schulz et al., 2007; Krikorian, 2013; VanderWeele, 2019; Cowden, Seidman et al., 2022; Cowden, Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2022), there is still much we do not understand. For example, on average, in an employee sample in the US, UK, and Canada, those suffering at baseline had subsequently lower well-being two years later, controlling for baseline well-being, and this pertained also to aspects of flourishing such as character and meaning in life for which growth over time through suffering might have been most expected (Cowden, Seidman et al., 2022). A similar analysis in Sri Lanka indicated that those suffering at baseline did not, on average, improve two years later in any aspect of well-being and only increased in pain-related limitations and depressed mood (Cowden, Seidman et al., 2022). Although it is possible that growth through suffering may require different periods of times for different people and may require a longer period of time than two years, on the face of it, the results above suggest that not all who suffer experience positive transformation.

Arguably, these results point towards a couple of conclusions. First, we should continue to try to address the root causes of suffering. As Wong (2023) notes, we will never entirely eliminate suffering, and we should not necessarily flee suffering at all costs; it is inevitable. However, suffering always indicates the loss or privation of some good (John Paul II, 1984; VanderWeele, 2019), and we should seek to address the absence of what is good. However, second, because some suffering is inevitable, we also need to better understand what it is that allows for, or leads to, transformation and growth within suffering. The aforementioned empirical results suggest that this does not take place for the majority of people. So what characteristics, or under what circumstances, or what responses to suffering allow for transformation? To help partially address these questions, we might move towards a stronger scientific study of the transformation of

suffering. Aspects of these questions are empirical: we might, for example, examine the moderators of the relationship between suffering and various aspects of subsequent flourishing, such as the meaning or character or close relationships. The initial empirical results noted above suggest that growth and transformation do not happen for everyone, and do not happen on average. However, under certain circumstances or with certain responses to suffering, suffering may lead to growth, transformation, and greater flourishing; and we need to try to better understand this. Religious and philosophical traditions on suffering might provide clues as to where to begin this empirical study.

In our view, one potentially promising direction of empirical research would be to examine the extent to which individuals engage in responses to suffering that seek to transform suffering into a greater sense of compassion, make use of suffering to grow in character or to facilitate spiritual growth, find deeper meaning, or increase hope, faith, or love. Such responses may be viewed as trying to make use of a real loss or privation of some good to attempt to attain some greater good (Scheler, 1992; John Paul II, 1984). That goal of transformation through suffering is presumably more likely to be attained when it is explicitly sought.

To carry out empirical study, we would arguably need better assessments of ways of responding to suffering that seek transformation. We would view such assessments as somewhat different from more traditional coping assessments. For example, much of the coping literature focuses on strategies aimed at either tolerating (emotion-focused coping) or removing (problem-focused coping) the suffering that is encountered (Skinner et al., 2003). Responses to suffering that seek transformation are aimed at making use of suffering, not principally at getting through it, or eliminating it. While one might refer to this “transformative coping” (Wong & Wong, 2006), and while seeking transformation might serve as a coping strategy, we would nevertheless view the principal objects as distinct. Traditional coping is focused on getting through or removing the problem; with responses that seek transformation the focus instead becomes the growth of the person. Responses that seek transformation through suffering, however, are not incompatible with, and may take place concurrently with, various traditional coping strategies. Nevertheless, our speculation would be that it is not traditional coping strategies that constitute the principal moderators of the effect of suffering on subsequent flourishing but, rather, responses to suffering that themselves seek transformation.

It should also be noted that the possibility of seeking transformation through suffering is not a justification for the suffering itself. Rather, it is an acceptance that some degree of suffering in a person’s life is inevitable and a realization that the suffering itself may be a source of growth, or even of the expansion of the potentialities of the human person necessary for deeper dimensions of flourishing. In the words of Wong (2023), suffering may be “necessary for flourishing as a tree must sink its roots deep into the dark soil to grow and bear much fruit.” A better scientific study of the transformation of suffering would help to understand when and how that growth and transformation can take place, when and how the anecdotes of transformation through suffering can be attained, and when and how the spiritual and religious traditions pointing towards that transformation can be realized.

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