



Geniusas, Saulius: *The Phenomenology of Pain*

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Saulius Geniusas's fruitful dedication to the task of understanding the experience of pain has now culminated in this remarkable book, renewing and relaunching a phenomenological approach to this decisive fact of human suffering. For almost a decade the Lithuanian philosopher had been publishing sound essays concerning the pain the body suffers in its own flesh; the phenomenological efforts to elucidate it (Stumpf and Husserl, Scheler and Sartre); and the theoretical models currently prevailing in pain analysis. The book that has now come to light is not at all a compilation of these previous texts, but a radical and unitary attempt, newly thought through, at a methodical clarification of this crucial experience. The author's expositions achieve a high scientific standard and display an admirable familiarity with the enormous literature on the topic, yet without ever losing sight of the phenomenon itself, and he makes himself intelligible to readers who are not specialists in phenomenology. This is certainly not a minor merit of the book.

In the Introduction—which actually functions more like an immersion in the themes of the work—the author expresses his amazement that only two previous book-length phenomenological studies have been published on this basic and undoubtedly first-person experience—namely, Christian Grüny's 2004 *Zestörte Erfahrung. Eine Phänomenologie des Schmerzes* and Abraham Olivier's 2007 *Being in Pain*. (Buytendijk's important Dutch monograph, *Over de pijn*, 1943, can be summed up by mentioning the three subtitles of its Spanish translation: "Psychology. Phenomenology. Metaphysics"—to say nothing of physiology, which he treats as well.) But whereas the monographs by Grüny and Olivier are conceived in a Merleau-Pontyan vein, Geniusas creatively works in the spirit of the founder of phenomenology: "My goal, rather, is to focus on one particular tradition, namely, the Husserlian tradition, and to demonstrate why it is of great importance for the philosophy

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of pain” (p. 6). His eight fundamental reasons “that make Husserlian phenomenology highly fitting for pain research” (p. 6) are not only an anticipation of the spirit of the book, but may also serve as a nice guide for other similar undertakings.

Accordingly, the basic methodological principles that will govern the work are set out in the first chapter: epochē of the naturalistic determinations of pain; reduction to lived experience; eidetic variation in imagination; and genetic analysis from the perspective of the lived world. Interestingly, the author pleads for a revamping of the procedure of imaginative variation in order to take into account the vast diversity of the phenomenon. His main point is that in these domains of human suffering, the “factual variations,” as he terms them, clearly outrun the richest phantasy a phenomenologist might ever come up with at his/her office. An enormous multiplicity, an almost perplexing plasticity, is already in sight just by taking into consideration clinical realities and medical disciplines, as well as multicultural practices and symbolizations concerning the phenomenon. To this primacy of the factual—which here serves as the best guide, even beyond imaginary variations, for finding invariants—there corresponds what Geniussas calls a “dialogical phenomenology” to be carried out in an interdisciplinary way. At first glance, such a revamping may look like a mere subtlety, a sophistication, since the phenomenological analysis does continue to inquire into invariant structures, allowing us to focus only upon essential possibilities. But its usefulness is amply demonstrated in the third chapter, which analyzes congenital insensitivity to pain; surgical deactivation of it; extreme reactions to it that are prior to any actual sensations (so-called *hypersymbolia*); and conversely, “pain without painfulness,” comprising actual sensations that do not give rise to any motor or emotional response (so-called *asymbolia*). The author accordingly takes all of these pain dissociation syndromes as clear hints toward the deep sense of a phenomenology in dialogue first and foremost with a boundless and overflowing experience. Let me add that this third chapter constitutes at the same time a novelty in phenomenological literature on this topic and a landmark in it.

But one must also pay close attention to the second chapter of the book, which raises “the fundamental question: what is pain?” (p. 41). The often quoted definition by the International Association for the Study of Pain, which relies upon tissue damage, was already criticized in the Introduction by the author, who now offers an alternative definition based upon “fundamental phenomenological principles”: “The answer that I wish to offer runs as follows: pain is an aversive bodily feeling with a distinct experiential quality, which can be given only in original firsthand experience, either as a non-intentional feeling-sensation or as an intentional feeling” (p. 42). Obviously this essential determination does not function as a general premise for a subsequent analysis, but on the contrary as a progressive outcome that Geniussas works out step by step. At its core lies the ancient, current, and always difficult problematic of the immanent categorization of painful experiences: the contentious discussion whether pains are to be conceived as pure disturbances of sensibility—as aversive hyletic data, sensory feelings referring to nothing else—or whether they entail a peculiar intentionality characterized by a rejection or refusal that perceives “in the flesh” the negativity (and perhaps other properties) of the sensuous facts, i.e., as intentional feelings. Both interpretations, the non-intentional as well as the intentional, must equally deal with the circumstance that the body is the unmistakable

protagonist of the painful experience. The body itself seems to feel the pain sensation, grasping it and evaluating it, completely by itself, without any further reflection or objectivation.

Geniusas begins his task by reconstructing this fundamental debate with the help of its two contradictory “proto-phenomenological” (p. 52) representatives: Stumpf and Brentano. In addition, he pays careful attention to the subsequent voices (up to the present day) who have dealt with the issue and enriched the reasons for and against each model. More specifically, he argues for a new reading of the *Logical Investigations*, one that avoids aligning Husserl, in any absolute or exclusive way, with Stumpf’s non-intentional model. His integrative solution aims to conceive painful experience as a “stratified phenomenon” that is grounded on a founding sensory stratum, yet admits a founded intentional articulation as an upper level. As I shall attempt to show, his original contribution to the classical and decisive debate is nevertheless somewhat masked by the disjunctive particle in the final clause of his alternative definition when he writes that pain must be thought of and explicitly thematized “either as a non-intentional feeling-sensation or as an intentional feeling” (emphasis altered).

And a key to the entire argument in this second chapter lies in a novel reinterpretation of the *Logical Investigations* on this particular issue. According to Geniusas, the “apprehension–content of apprehension” scheme that Husserl makes use of in order to analyze sensory perception as a basic objectifying act could (and *mutatis mutandis*, should) be transferred to painful experiences. There are, on the one hand, affective painful sensations, which—like visual or tactile data—are lived through and do not appear as correlates; §15 of the Fifth Logical Investigation unequivocally assumes such algeonic data, as Geniusas terms them. On the other hand, however, all sensations can be taken up into an apprehension or “interpretation” that establishes an intentional reference and makes a correlate appear. Whereas in the case of other sensory data, such as tactile sensations, it is thanks to this “apprehensional animation” that I tactually recognize the glass of water that I left on the bedside table, in the case of the aversive affective sensations in question, I painfully come to feel a bodily location that appears to me as such. But a further intentional performance can also come into play, permeating the experience with a negative atmosphere at this precise moment of time and in these precise circumstances. This, then, is pain as intentional feeling. Here I am at least grasping an affected part of my body, and I evaluate the personal and environmental circumstances now taking place. In favor of this reading, Geniusas invokes the Appendix to the *Logical Investigations*, where both a pain boring into my tooth and a sorrow gnawing at my heart are treated by Husserl as perceived objects, that is, as transcendent objects of my experience. Thus according to the Lithuanian phenomenologist, Husserl himself would have refused to characterize pain as “essentially nonintentional experience” in the same measure as he would have rejected conceiving it as “essentially intentional experience” (p. 58). Instead of exclusively belonging to just one phenomenological category, painful experience turns out to be an “irreducibly ambiguous phenomenon” (p. 59)—or in other words, as Geniusas himself puts it, “an equivocal notion” (p. 55).

Insofar as this integrative treatment of pain occurrences is called upon to guide future phenomenological discussions, it might be useful to point out some

conceptual difficulties that, in my opinion, remain unsolved. A purely terminological doubt concerns the strict parallelism in the application of the “apprehension–content of apprehension” scheme and suggests to me the question whether or not one would be forced to consider sensory experience as a “stratified phenomenon” as well. Visual and tactile sensations could be notions no less ambiguous or equivocal as long as they can be given, and usually are given, at both the pre-intentional and the intentional level. What seems even more problematic to me is the circumstance that the founded level can take on different intentional configurations, perhaps in an alternative sequence, now this, now that, without the author clearly declaring which of them is the fundamental form, if there is to be one: “One must stress that it [pain as intentional experience] can be so conceived of in no fewer than three ways: either as an intentional feeling, or as an intentional object, or, finally, as an intentional atmosphere that covers all intentional feelings and intentional objects” (p. 52).

In any case, the true problematic comes to the fore if one focuses on the apprehensional factor, which is to allow us to speak of pain as an intentional feeling. In my opinion, an essential ambiguity or irreducible equivocity would arise if and only if the pre-intentional level—where no distinction is to be made between paining or being in pain and something pained, as the book lucidly argues (p. 45)—would coincide or overlap with the subsequent higher-level factor generating the intentional reference to this same pain. In such a case, the hyletic painful core would in addition operate as the apprehensional factor bestowing sense upon the experience and as the correlative intentional object thereby appearing. But in my view, it is by no means clear that the Appendix to the *Logical Investigation* authorizes this reading, where “the intentionality of pain” is both a subjective and an objective genitive. On the contrary, it sustains the opposite view: the grasping of my pain as residing in my wisdom tooth requires a different act, an objectifying act that is heterogeneous with regard to the immanent flowing of the affective experience. And this is precisely the reason why the information concerning the exact anatomical location of the pain may not be so exact after all—it may turn out to be fallible, while the sensation itself is always adequately, infallibly given.

Geniusas does not actually claim that an intentional pain feeling could exist wholly independently of any algeonic base in sensibility. But to this extent it seems to me unclear whether or not there is sufficient reason to assign an essentially equivocal condition to the painful phenomenon as a whole. Whatever the intentional articulation of the higher stratum might turn out to be—either objectivation of the experience or affective reaction to it or general atmosphere—it can never lack a hyletic disturbance as its one-sided foundation. Therefore the phenomenon essentially belongs to bodily sensibility, which hurts, and so remains when this or that intentional configuration is based upon it. The intentional configurations operate as motivated possibilities, as directions demanded by a given pre-intentional experience, which may even sustain no founded level. Such seems to be the case, in the author’s view, in weak, unnoticed pains, and such is the case, in my own view, in extreme pains, totally invasive affections that allow no other response than bodily suffering: “To qualify pain as pre-intentional is to suggest that it *can* undergo an objective interpretation (although, admittedly, it need not—we can feel our pains without apprehending them), due to which we can localize a particular pain in our

bodies, conceived of as intentional objects of experience” (p. 57). Does this quotation formally authorize us to conclude that as long as the founded stratum is to be described with a “can,” the clause where the word “or” is used in the pain definition must be supplemented with a “too” and “at the same time”: Pain can be given either as a non-intentional feeling-sensation or *at the same time* as an intentional feeling *too*? Is the alleged ambiguity of pain more a plea for a complete fundamental analysis rather than a formal statement of an equivocal condition?

The fact that bodily location plays such an important role in the discussion of the phenomenological status of pain appears highly relevant to me in this connection. Geniusas seems to want to use localization as an argument against the non-intentional model: “If pain sensations were not objectifying in any sense of the term, we would not be in the position to point at the pain in our bodies, nor could we say that we are suffering, say, from a toothache or from the pain in the abdomen” (p. 56). But I said “seems to want to” because he does not actually go so far as to take this step. The second chapter announces that besides being indicated, named, and anatomically fixed, painful bodily locations can be “felt” in the first person, that is, pre-perceptually given. Moreover, this very announcement finds a magnificent fulfillment in the fifth chapter, “The Body in Pain: *Leib* and *Körper*,” another crowning achievement of the book, offering some extraordinary insights into the tensions between pain’s indubitability and its spatialization. With profound understanding, the author examines the shortcomings of five successive accounts (semiological, causal, associationist, representationalist, and perceptual), arriving at the phenomenological account by way of the notion of the *lived body*. Since the lived body is neither a non-spatial consciousness nor a physical entity in space, it feels the experience from within in its original or primordial spatiality.

Here Geniusas mainly turns to *Ideas II*, and he particularly draws upon the essential distinction between *Empfindungen*, as presentive sensations, and *Empfindnisse*, sensings of the tactile sphere that are endowed with intrinsic localization, spatialized in their own right. To be sure, physical pain does not belong to all sensory fields, as Grüny still defended, but exclusively to the tactile bodily field. Here the clarity and the power of Geniusas’s exposition are so admirable that I myself wonder whether the difficulties with the second chapter have more to do with the excessive privilege he concedes there to the *Logical Investigations* and thus with the fact that his conceptualization of the hyletic stratum lacks the crucial improvements coming with *Ideas II* and with the genetic understanding of hyle and of instinctive drives (as in Hua XXXIX, Hua LXII, or Hua Mat VIII).

Geniusas not only calls for a “dialogical phenomenology,” but puts it into practice in a high style. Contributions from the philosophy of medicine, from narrative and psychosomatic medicine, from cultural anthropology and cultural psychopathology, from health sciences, etc., are taken into account in a vigorous phenomenological spirit, never degenerating into a methodological reflection or a mere syncretic survey. This demanding spirit especially permeates the two final chapters, dealing with relevant interdisciplinary issues: the understanding of chronic pain (chapter six) and the analysis of the processes of somatization and psychologization that are involved in human suffering (chapter seven). The Lithuanian philosopher casts an original and instructive light on all of these issues because he is simultaneously pushing the

corresponding phenomenological inquiries further. Thus chronic pain is experienced by a lived body—a body that belongs to a personal embodied subject for whom such a recurrence of suffering means a deep depersonalization. Geniusas takes on the psychiatric and philosophical treatments of depersonalization as rupture and damage in the relation between the self and the body, in the relation to the world, and in relation with others. But in precarious coexistence with the pain assault, what can also happen, according to his proposal, is a repersonalization, understood as a reorganization of experience along all those structural axes. An “embodied, ensouled, encultured” (p. 155) subject is capable of cognitive, emotive, and bodily responses to pain, which are personal initiatives that at the same time make the unshareable affection an “expressible phenomenon.” Philosophy of medicine, articulated on the physician–patient relationship, needs to take account of how these repersonalization possibilities imply the active presence of others. Here Geniusas adds a nice enumeration of the conditions involved in the physician’s effective listening to the patient’s narrative—and by the way, useful lists ordering the arguments at play are found everywhere in the book.

The seventh and final chapter is devoted to understanding how personal and social tensions are painfully somatized and how pathological bodily disturbances are painfully psychologized. Both apparently opposite processes are brilliantly integrated by the author into the encompassing problematic of the lifeworld. Geniusas’s proposal appears truly sound and promising. On the one hand, the development of the entire book now supports the thesis that “pain concerns not only the objective body (*Körper*), but also the lived-body (*Leib*); not only the lived-body, but also the person; not only the person, but also the life-world” (p. 165). On the other hand, the author contrasts Husserl’s emphasis on the intuitive concordance and consistency permeating the lifeworld with a stress on the severe inhospitality that the intersubjective world may adopt toward individual subjects or minorities: “the sufferer’s life-world is his home, yet at the same time, he finds himself homeless in his homeworld” (p. 165). As soon as the expression of individuality in the social world is obstructed, repressed, or delegitimized, the living subject tends, with astonishing frequency, to somatize the damage or to psychologize the wound; these function as coded metaphors even for the subject him/herself.

Geniusas’s elaboration of the lifeworld as the “wherefrom, wherein, whereto of experience,” which at the same time can host a desolate space of distress and rejection, deserves to be counted, in my view, among the most significant contributions made in the last decades to this key Husserlian notion. It partly recalls Jan Patočka’s view that the lifeworld is above all “a domain of goods and evils,” which, seen in terms of the intersubjective dimension, amounts to a space not just of cooperation, but also of struggle and subjection. One can truly admire the way in which Geniusas concludes his inquiry in a theoretical crescendo. The dimension of “intentional feeling” already included in the definition of pain expands its scope and organically culminates in the insight that “almost as a rule, pain is a mosaic of physiological, psychic, cultural, historical and social factors, unified in the framework of the personal meaning” (p. 170).

Insofar as Geniusas’s Conclusion highlights his definition of pain and counts it as one of the more important accomplishments of the study, I would like to contribute

to his methodological effort with a final comment. The critical remarks he poses against the biomedical definition of the International Association for the Study of Pain are clearly justified. Furthermore, it makes sense in general to adduce—against Grüny’s essential determination of pain as “a blocked movement of flight” and against Olivier’s characterization of it as “a disturbed bodily perception bound to hurt, affliction or agony”—the fact that both definitions may equally apply to a number of non-painful bodily disturbances such as nausea, vertigo, heartburn, hunger, thirst, etc. To this extent, “they do not provide us with the differentia” (p. 192). My comment concerns his alternative definition, since I myself wonder if it can provide something similar to a specific differentia only by recurring to a formal reference—namely, the allusion in the definition to the “distinct experiential quality of pain.” But what, concretely, is such a quality? How is its distinct, exclusive nuance to be acknowledged? Such an indeterminate clause might also apply to each of the non-painful perturbations and would then turn into a mere formal determination, meaning that each one is identical to itself and distinct from the others.

I therefore tend to think that just as with color or sound, the effort to fix “the” specific pain-differentia does not succeed. It is primitively obvious to experience that pain hurts and makes one’s body suffer, just as colors are visually seen and sounds are heard. Thus any attempt to fix this quality more precisely already presupposes it and points back to it. Of what I have no doubt at all, however, is that Saulius Geniussas’s work is a successful achievement in the philosophical exploration, and not just the definition, of pain. He largely proves the relevance and validity of phenomenology, particularly Husserlian phenomenology, and makes very significant progress in the philosophical and interdisciplinary understanding of painful experiences. Of course, it is not possible to exhaust this enormous problematic within the compass of a single volume. But in a certain sense this is fortunate, since the work may not only function as a milestone in the phenomenological investigation of a highly relevant dimension of human experience, but as pointing the way toward further research in the field. Any future treatment of pain in a phenomenological or philosophical perspective will accordingly have to pay very serious attention to this book.¹

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