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For any inquiries, please send a message to the author at razada[at]ateneo[dot]edu.

Can we teach philosophically about unspeakable human suffering?

Rowena A. Azada-Palacios
Ateneo de Manila University

Abstract

This paper is a reflective response to Tena Thau's suggestion -- in her 2024 piece 'Moral philosophy as war propaganda' -- that philosophy has little to teach about the war in Gaza (and, by extension, similar cases of widespread, horrific human suffering). I first reconstruct one of the arguments that Thau makes in her piece. I then show that her criticisms about philosophy are true for a particular way of doing philosophy, and I attempt to uncover the underlying philosophical anthropology that makes these moral philosophical approaches unsuitable for addressing grave human suffering. Finally, I propose that a critical phenomenological approach that examines widespread suffering through an anti-/post-/decolonial lens may be more suitable when teaching philosophically about human suffering.

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The current pause in fighting in Gaza (as of this writing) marks a period to reflect on the horror that has been happening there: a once-unthinkable genocide and the ongoing threat of a regional war that portends even more devastation. It seems like very long ago, then, when the *Daily Nous*, one of the Anglophone world's most widely read online philosophy magazines, ran its series on the war. The series, which ran from October 2023 to February 2024, was composed of short blog posts written by professional philosophers, on the kinds of topics one would expect from a philosophy publication, such as the concept of just war and the principle of proportionality. Put together, these short essays were meant to be one of the key contributions of the philosophical community to helping the wider public make sense of their shock and navigate the public debate.

One of those posts, however, was different from the others. Written in January 2024 by Tena Thau, the essay began with an enumeration of some of the most distressing facts about the war in Gaza: the number of people who had been killed, the percentage of which were women and children, the shortage of anaesthesia for limb amputation surgery, and so forth. Thau then criticized the philosophical analyses about the war that had come out on the *Daily Nous*, saying:

> The main problem with philosophical writing is that it is devoid of images, video, or graphic description of its subject matter. The hellish reality of this war is transfigured by philosophers into abstract thought experiments and technical prose. In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman argue that the most powerful form of propaganda is not falsehood but omission. And by omitting any visual depiction, or vivid description, of the war's consequences, philosophers invite us to think about the war in Gaza the way that [Netanyahu's government][1] wants us to: as a sanitized abstraction, rather than the bloody horror that it is. (Thau 2024)

The comments section of Thau's post was filled with a mix of reactions from readers: some agreeing with her and some defending the value of the philosophical analyses of war. Which of these two camps was right?

On the one hand, it appears that philosophers should indeed attempt to contribute to public debate in the way that the Daily Nous philosophers attempted. In their widely used textbook *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James and Stuart

[1] In this paper, I purposely replace Thau's term 'Israel' with my own phrase 'Netanyahu's government'. While I broadly agree with Thau's general sentiments, I distance myself from her attribution of actions she describes to the entity 'Israel'. Although the metonymical use of the name of a country is standard when discussing political issues, issues that demand urgent culpability and accountability require more precise language, such as that which recognises the presence of conscientious dissenters within the state of Israel.

Rachels (2012) point out that real-life ethical dilemmas are situations that are frequently laden with strong feelings. Such strong feelings, he says, can hinder rational decision-making. Reasoned philosophical thinking prevents us from being swept away by strong emotion, clearing our minds enough to allow us to arrive at well-reasoned ethical decisions.

On the other hand, some of us might agree with Thau. One of the conventional ways that philosophers discuss ethical issues is to turn them into problems, puzzles to be solved. And in the face of horrific images and descriptions of war, treating Gaza like an ethical puzzle can be unnerving, or even grotesque. Imagine if I were to write an ethics case, turning Gaza into a trolley problem: how many lives should I put on one track and how many lives on the other? Even my suggestion of doing this may make some of us recoil with disgust. There seems to be something innately disrespectful about turning situations of horrific loss and unspeakable suffering into an ethics puzzle.

Why, then, does it seem grotesque for philosophers to talk about real-life extreme human suffering, when it would appear at first glance that philosophy is equipped precisely with the resources to discuss such situations? This is the question that I seek to answer in this paper. I approach this question with a specific type of philosophical discourse in mind: the educative philosophical discourse; that is, philosophy as we do it with students, and sometimes with the general public. Against the backdrop of one of the worst experiences of mass human suffering so far this century, my aim in this paper is to answer the question of whether we can and should speak about such horrors *as philosophers*, and if so, what kind of philosophy ought we be doing.

A consideration of one of Thau's arguments

Thau's position is that there is nothing that philosophical writing can do to illuminate the war in Gaza. Written as an informal blog post rather than a formal philosophical paper, her piece does not neatly lay out her arguments for her position. Nonetheless, in this section, I wish to reconstruct some of the possible arguments to which she gestures in her blog post. Her essay ends with these words:

> If you do not grasp, and severely underestimate, the hell that is currently being inflicted on the people of Gaza, then it doesn't matter how well you know the 'just war theory' literature, or how great at deductive reasoning you are; you are liable to arrive at the wrong answer to the question of whether this war is justified….
>
> For people in Gaza, the question of whether or not [Netanyahu's government] should continue to slaughter them is not the head-scratching conundrum that some philosophers here consider it to be. Any random child in Gaza is able to see the moral reality of this war with more clarity, and speak about it with more sense, than most of us are able to muster. As one 12-year old girl, badly

> wounded in an airstrike that killed both her parents and two of her siblings, said to a journalist: 'I only want one thing: for the war to end.'
>
> Moral philosophy is not just superfluous in this case, it can overcomplicate and sanitize what should be morally unthinkable. (Thau 2024)

I propose to reword and expand Thau's arguments in this way. As philosophers, we appeal to ethical reasoning in the face of moral dilemmas. Moral dilemmas, as we teach our students in ethics classes, are situations in which the best path is not clear: it is usually a situation in which we recognize that all available paths are morally problematic or at best, morally ambiguous. In these situations, we exercise ethical reasoning precisely to select which of these morally problematic paths is the *least* immoral.

For Thau, the war in Gaza is not a moral dilemma. It is a situation that is clearly wrong, and that must be ended. She does not use arguments to make the case for the wrongness of the war in Gaza or the way it is being conducted. Rather, she implies that if people simply watched the horrific videos, looked at the heart-rending images, we would see for ourselves just how wrong it is.

In this way, Thau performs the kind of moral intuitionism defended by Sabine Roeser, which the latter calls 'affectual intuitionism'. In contrast with Rachels and Rachels' (2012) scepticism of feelings, Roeser, in her 2010 book, argues that moral emotions – e.g., the shock, disgust, or pity that we might feel in the face of certain situations – can lead to a kind of objective moral knowledge. Without denying that affective and cognitive states can exist separately (as in the case of moods), Roeser interprets moral emotions similarly to the way some philosophers of emotion have argued that emotions incorporate beliefs: we can only make sense of emotions by referring to beliefs and intentional objects. She proposes that in certain situations, we may feel 'cognitive moral emotions', which are constituted by (1) a moral judgment, (2) a positive or negative affection for the object of the judgment (e.g., a person or a situation), and (3) a feeling in ourselves. Moral emotions, then, are 'felt value judgments' in which feeling and judging 'are two sides of the same coin' (p. 149-150).

Thau believes that opening our eyes to the horrible suffering faced by the people of Gaza should be enough for people to *know* that the war is wrong, without needing to resort to 'moral philosophy'. Writing descriptively rather than normatively, Roeser does not strongly claim that everyone *should* have the same moral emotions about a specific situation, but she does directly quote Little's (1995, p. 127) position that 'in order to "see" the moral landscape clearly, in order to discern it fully and properly, one must have certain desires and emotions" (quoted in Roeser, p. 151). In addition, Roeser also believes that 'moral emotions understood as felt value judgments cannot always be scrutinised by inferential argumentation' (p. 152). She accepts the foundationalist position that there are 'basic beliefs' that do not require propositional evidence to be justified; rather, basic beliefs are justifiable because they are either

'self-evident' or because it is a belief about a sense experience (p. 13). Basic beliefs function as 'regress stoppers', to avoid an infinite regress of beliefs that require other beliefs to be justified. For Roeser, moral emotions function in the same way: "Analogously, if somebody asks you, 'How do you know lying is wrong?', after a long discussion, all weight be able to say is, 'Because it just feels so wrong to me.'" (p. 151).

Where Roeser is more nuanced than Thau is in her stance towards the usefulness of further thinking. Roeser directly quotes Martha Nussbaum's (1994, p. 41) statement that "there will be certain contexts in which the pursuit of intellectual reasoning apart from emotion will actually prevent a full rational judgment" (quoted in Roeser, p. 151). However, she also highlights the value of other kinds of reflection "such as our imagination and empathy in order to consider other perspectives" (p. 152). Moreover, she admits that, as with all other cognitive faculties, emotions are not infallible indicators of moral knowledge. Her position is not that moral emotions must replace moral reasoning, but rather, that they are a necessary component of moral knowledge and ought to be included in the critical examination of moral positions.

While Roeser's work on affectual intuitionism provides one way of expanding Thau's argument, the same conclusion that Thau reaches can also be reached without appealing to moral emotions. It is not controversial to claim that humans have a moral duty to relieve suffering. Jamie Mayerfeld (1999) develops a strong version of this claim, arguing that agents universally have a 'prima facie duty' to relieve suffering that is significant in intensity and duration, because it is "bad" — "[its] occurrence makes the world that much worse" -- and also because it "ought not to occur" (p. 111). His position is consequentialist: it demands a "reduction in the "cumulative badness" of suffering, determined by factors such as the intensity of suffering, its duration, and the number of victims, such that "[the] more we reduce the cumulative badness of suffering, the more we comply with the duty to relieve suffering" (p. 118). By beginning her reflections with an account of the intensity of suffering, its duration, and the number of victims, Thau implies that simply confronting the fact of the horrendous scale of suffering in Gaza would suffice to reinforce the strength of this duty, without the necessity for further argumentation.

Unlike Thau, Mayerfeld does not negate the need for moral argumentation. He accepts that there may be other moral considerations — other prima facie duties — that may override the prima facie duty to relieve suffering. Nonetheless, amidst this, he strongly emphasises the salience of the prime facie duty to reduce and minimize the cumulative badness of suffering. For example, when considering whether it is appropriate to sanction those who fail to relieve suffering, he argues that these sanctions should still be evaluated insofar as can be potential instruments for reducing the cumulative badness of suffering. While Thau and Mayerfeld may disagree on the need for moral reasoning, they converge in the belief that the presence of significant suffering is a primary, fundamental moral concern.

To return, then, to Thau's position: for her, in the face of a clearly wrong situation, the philosopher's task is not to engage in ethical reasoning, but to, as a

human being, engage in ethical *response*. At best, philosophical reasoning about a clear moral wrong is useless: it adds no new insight. "I am not sure what there is for philosophy to teach us about the ethics of Israel's assault on Gaza that the facts above do not already make clear…" she writes. But at worst, by applying ethical reasoning to a situation that is not an ethical dilemma, it obfuscates our moral clarity by creating an illusion that moral wrongness is up for debate. This is why Thau titles her blog post, 'Moral philosophy as war propaganda'.

'Sanitized', 'abstract' moral philosophy

Does this mean then that there is no point in speaking philosophically about the kind of immense suffering we might see in Gaza or other war-torn places, like Sudan? Thau's reflections are powerful, and I agree with many of her sentiments. However, Thau's conclusion is to criticise the entire field of philosophy for not having the power to teach anything about the war in Gaza. My contention is that her criticisms of philosophical writing are true for a particular way of doing philosophy (and philosophy education), but that there are other ways of doing philosophy that are more fruitful.

The rationalism of conventional moral philosophizing

The specific kind of philosophy that Thau criticises can be gleaned from a line I quoted earlier: "The main problem with philosophical writing," she writes, "is that it is devoid of images, video, or graphic description of its subject matter. The hellish reality of this war is transfigured by philosophers into abstract thought experiments and technical prose."

This 'abstract', 'sanitized' way of doing philosophy – and more specifically, of engaging in moral reasoning – is an approach to philosophizing with which many philosophers and philosophy teachers are familiar. Although philosophers like Roeser (2010) have tried to argue for alternative approaches to moral reasoning, such as those that make space for intuition and moral emotions, these alternative approaches have not been as popular. (I scoured through some of the reviews of Roeser's book, and the majority of them were critical of her arguments, defending the conventional, rationalist approach.) This raises the question, why *does* conventional moral philosophizing tend to be rationalist?

I argue that this conventional approach is founded on a certain philosophical anthropology, composed of two presumptions about the human person. The first presumption, which reveals a particular conception of the human intellect, is that a person can only be considered a moral agent if they have the internal ability to determine their own actions; the most important element of this ability is *reason*. The second presumption, which reveals a particular conception of human will, is that a person can only be considered a moral agent if they are *autonomous*, that is, free from external constraints that make them unable to govern themself.

These presumptions have shaped the conventional practices of moral reasoning in two ways. First, they have shaped the *way* that moral reasoning is conducted.

Because what is considered to be most important for moral decision-making is reason itself, then moral decision-making is often distilled and abstracted to only the aspects of situations that can be analyzed and weighed rationally. This is one reason *why* conventional moral reasoning is often 'abstract' and 'sanitized'. These two postulates have also shaped moral reasoning in a second way. They have influenced ***whose*** voices, positions, and perspectives are prioritized in moral reasoning. Because these two presumptions about the human person have become widely accepted as the conditions for moral reasoning, they have led to the creation of an implicit two-part eligibility test. Part 1 of the eligibility test consists of determining who are and who are not capable of autonomous self-determination. (Note: This appraisal is done by people whose autonomous self-determination has already been established.) Part 2 of the eligibility test consists in permitting only those who pass the first part of the eligibility test to actively engage in moral decision-making.

The contingency of conventional moral philosophizing

What are the real-life implications of this? First, it is undeniable that this 'test' is useful in various contexts. Some version of it is used in criminal law, to gauge a person's criminal responsibility. Some form of it also guides the healthcare sector in determining whether a patient is able to make medical decisions for themself. Within educational settings, we commonly acknowledge gradations in children's capacity to make decisions, which (sometimes controversially) shapes the extent to which we allow them to choose their own educational paths.

However, historical hindsight also shows us how the same test has been used as a mechanism for subjugation. In Great Britain, it took almost a hundred years before women activists finally won the right to vote on the same terms as men; many lawmakers suppressed women's suffrage by arguing that women were not capable of autonomous and rational decision-making (see Harrison 1978/2013). Across the age of European empire, until only about 60 years ago, colonised peoples were frequently not admitted into governance discussions about their own communities, much less granted the right to self-determination, and the historical legacy of colonialism continues: there are peoples today, such as in the unincorporated territories of the United States of America, whose political representation still remains limited even in so-called liberal democratic states. There are also horrific educational examples as well, such as how, in Australia and North America, until the 1980s and 1990s, Indigenous children were taken from their parents and placed in residential schools, subjected to a kind of schooling that the government of Canada – but not yet the government of Australia – now admits was an act of cultural genocide. Even in our classrooms, when we teach the postulate that the morally capable person is autonomous and self-determining, we equivocate about which people we really mean. We quote the canonical philosophers who came up with these postulates — thinkers like Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill. We present these ideas as if Kant and Mill were speaking about all human beings. Often, only when students challenge us with boundary cases do we begin to admit that their postulates were not *really* meant to be universalizable: we begin by admitting that Kant and Mill were really only referring to adults, not young children. Then we admit that Kant and

Mill were really only referring to adults deemed ‘normal’, and that there were people whom Kant and Mill didn’t really think about, such as Disabled people.

However, there is no reason to pretend that Kant and Mill intended their philosophical anthropologies to be universally applicable to all human beings. Kant and Mill explicitly intended to apply their philosophical anthropologies to a much narrower population than many philosophy teachers care to admit. When Kant and Mill wrote about ‘Man’, they primarily had in mind the bourgeois white European male. As numerous feminist, anti-colonial, and critical scholars have pointed out, Kant explicitly thought that only bourgeois European men naturally had the internal capacity for self-determination (see Mills 1999, Boxill 2017, Lu-Adler 2022). Mill believed that bourgeois European women should be acknowledged to have *some* capacity for self-determination but still believed that the roles they played in society should be different from men’s (also see Knüfer 2023). For most of their careers, both of them did not think that *non*-Europeans – that is, non-white people – had the internal capacity for self-government. To be fair, Mill was at least somewhat optimistic that, through the tutelage of benevolent European rulers, the people in non-white colonies might *eventually* develop the capacity to individually and collectively determine their own lives, and Kant eventually became critical of European colonialism even as he strongly retained his white supremacist beliefs.

The argument might be made that the discourse about ethical reasoning have moved on since Kant and Mill. There is some truth to this: most explicitly, the racism and misogyny within the philosophy canon and in the construction of the canon have been increasingly unveiled over the last few decades (see, for example, Clack 1999; Park 2013; Waithe 2020; Lu-Adler 2022). However, change in philosophy education remains slow or insufficiently radical. A cursory look at recently published moral philosophy textbooks and student readers demonstrate that Kant and Mill retain their central places in the canon (e.g., Adkins, 2017; Wolff, 2021; Shafer-Landau, 2024). To address the problems I have raised above, one response has been to try to extend these conventional European bourgeois male philosophical anthropologies to all humans. In the classroom, if philosophy teachers talk about the misogyny or racism of our favourite liberal philosophers at all, a common approach is some version of ‘interpretative charity’ (Lockard 2023): for example, a teacher might label this misogyny or racism as the one historically contingent aspect of their thought, amidst mostly universalizable ideas. And a teacher might follow this up with, ‘*But in many ways, they were really ahead of their time, because people during Mill’s time didn’t know that colonisation was wrong!!*’ (a particularly comical claim, because the people from the colonies undoubtedly knew that colonisation was wrong!). This approach is similar to strategies deployed in the history of political resistance, by which reformists ask for a seat at the table, rather than question the criteria for admitting people to the table. For example, many of the Philippine reformists of the 19th century – especially those who had been educated in Europe – did not question the stadial theory of human development. Instead, they insisted that by the criteria of the stadial theory, Filipinos too should be treated as equal subjects of the Spanish Crown, with the same rights as Spanish subjects in Spain (see Mojares, 2006). Their experience was similar to the one Frantz Fanon would write about half a century later in *Black Skin*, *White Masks*: ‘Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs,

the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect' (Fanon, 1986, p. 12). But all such approaches do is to retain the experience of the European bourgeois male as the norm, the measure of the human condition, rather than decentring and provincializing that experience.

This decentring is accomplished only when thinkers articulate – in oppositional fashion (Mills, 1998) – philosophical anthropologies based on the experiences of the Global Majority – that is, the experiences of humans living in conditions of colonialism, postcoloniality, and continuing coloniality. A number of postcolonial and decolonial scholars have attempted to articulate what the human condition looks like from the perspective of the Global Majority. Homi Bhabha (1994), for example, rejected the Cartesian image of the unitary subject, arguing that the postcolonial subject experiences not a unitary self, but a split self. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), reacting to Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, wrote that 'the colonized is … not ordinary Dasein' because 'the encounter with death' for them is 'no extra-ordinary affair, but a constitutive feature of the reality of colonized and racialized subjects …. It is the encounter with daily forms of death, not the They, which afflicts them'. Finally, also reacting to the Cartesian subject, Charles W. Mills (1998), while looking for an organizing principle for a university course on African-American philosophy, arrived at the concept of 'subpersonhood' as 'the defining feature of the African-American experience under conditions of white supremacy' (p. 5).
What is clear from these examples and others across the literature is that the primordial human experience for colonized and racialized peoples includes an experience of suffering that goes far beyond Heidegger's or Sartre's descriptions of alienation. Part of the fundamental experience for many among the Global Majority is systemic oppression within global structures of subordination. The mythical state of nature in most of the world is a state of domination.

This leads to a second reason why conventional Western moral philosophy tends to be 'abstract', 'sanitized', and – especially in Anglophone philosophy – relatively silent about the phenomenology of human suffering. The philosophical anthropology on which Western moral philosophy is grounded is a philosophical anthropology based on the lives of 18th and 19th century bourgeois European men. Their experiences are, of course, important to help us understand one aspect of the human condition. However, their experiences are also severely limited, often characterized by a privilege that makes them, not completely ignorant of human suffering – Mill famously wrote about his six-month long depression – but ignorant of particular modes of suffering, domination, and systemic oppression. As Mills (1998, pp. 141-142) said about communities privileged by unjust social orders, Kant and Mill could not develop the same level of sensitivity to the inequities of this social order, which in turn limited their ability to generate moral prescriptions or more generally their perception of personhood.

Kant's and Mill's ignorance, however, was not only a sin of omission. Their 'view from the top' also made them guilty of a more egregious transgression. Their accounts of autonomy falsely portrayed autonomous self-determination as a 'natural' characteristic of European bourgeois males, when the material conditions that allowed this autononous self-determination to be manifested were in fact created by

the invisible labour of others. This was true both in their personal lives and in collective Western European culture. John Stuart Mill funded his leisure time for thinking and writing partly through the salary he contracted from the British East India Company (see Harris 1964). Henry David Thoreau famously managed to go to the woods to live deliberately partly because his mother regularly delivered him snacks and collected his laundry. On a larger scale, the material and political modernization of Europe – which created the conditions of wealth that allowed Enlightenment and liberal ideas to flourish – happened through the extraction of resources from the colonies and the subordination of colonized peoples. As Walter Mignolo (2017) put it: modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin. Yet by presenting the emergence of the modern mind as a 'natural' occurrence, philosophers of autonomy created justifications for perpetuating structures of domination and subordination.

More than a hundred fifty years after Kant's and Mill's deaths, ethics and moral philosophy education does not yet decentre the European male bourgeois experience. It does not yet even allow expressions of the experiences of the Global Majority to share centre stage. To be fair, a few authors of recent textbooks have done more than their predecessors to devote a few pages to such perspectives. However, in no way can this be characterized as 'decentring'. Of the 23 chapters in the third edition of Russ Shafer-Landau's (2024) *Living Ethics*, one is on feminist ethics, one is on globalization and immigration, one is on racism, and one (the last) is on sex and gender. Of the 16 chapters of the latest edition of Jonathan Wolff's (2021) *An Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, one each is on race and gender.

The above descriptions of conventional moral philosophy and philosophy education support Thau's broad position by providing two additional reasons why this kind of philosophy is not suitable for teaching about unspeakable human suffering. First, this kind of moral reasoning is premised on certain presumptions about autonomy and self-determination that tend to downplay the *experience* of suffering because it evokes strong emotions, which are in turn viewed with suspicion. But by failing to highlight the reality of suffering, such approaches to moral reasoning distract from a key moral duty, which is to *relieve* suffering (Mayerfeld 1999). Second, this kind of moral reasoning is founded on a limited philosophical anthropology that tends not to be sufficiently sensitive to specific kinds of systemic suffering. This lack of sensitivity dulls its power to explain or contribute new insights into students' apprehension of suffering.

Is there a way of doing/teaching philosophy that can be more illuminating in the face of suffering?

From the above arguments – both Thau's and mine – we can extract the following normative claim: an appropriate philosophy for talking about suffering should reinforce the moral duty to relieve suffering. However, given the predominance in philosophy education of the conventional philosophical approaches described above, a more appropriate philosophical approach would not only try to avoid making the same mistakes, but rather, it would try to be reparative: it would try to repair some of the ways that the approaches to moral philosophy described above

have created harmful rather than helpful discourses around suffering.

To both unveil the reality of suffering and also repair the discourse around suffering, I argue that a more appropriate and a reparative philosophical approach needs to, firstly, focus on the voices of those who suffer. Doing this would repair the ways that the eligibility test described above has silenced them. Secondly, it also must aim to uncover the structures of power disparity that create, perpetuate, or exacerbate both the suffering and the privilege that allows people to ignore the suffering.

From where in the vast repository of philosophical resources can we draw to meet these criteria?

Focusing on the voices of those who suffer: A phenomenological approach.

The first approach I propose, unsurprisingly, is a philosophical mode known for unveiling the depth of human experience: phenomenology. Classical phenomenology has, rightly so, often been criticized for being apolitical at best, bourgeois at worst, and Husserl himself explicitly said that his project had no political intent. The past few years, however, have seen a growing interest in a critical form of phenomenology, which emulates the works of authors like Simone de Beauvoir, Iris Marion Young, and Frantz Fanon.

Like classical phenomenology, critical phenomenology has often been beset by debates about which ‘method’ can rightly be called ‘phenomenological. Johanna Oksala (2022) argues against the term ‘phenomenology’ loosely being used to apply to all first-person descriptions of experiences. ‘Phenomenology’, she insists, must be distinctly ‘‘philosophical’. But what does this mean? To put it another way: in addition to a first-person description of experience, in what way would a phenomenological approach be *different* from Thau’s straightforward enumeration of the *facts* of suffering to trigger a moral intuitionism?

Two answers are offered by Johanna Oksala and Sophie Loidolt, respectively. Oksala (2022) focuses on Husserl’s transcendental reduction and adaptations thereof as a central component of a critical phenomenology. Reading Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Oksala claims that Beauvoir takes a reductive step when, having described her own experiences as a woman, she engages in a self-critique to surface her own ‘privileges, biases, and blindspots’, engaging too with various forms of knowledge ‘such as history, biology, sociology, and psychology’ to allow each to reveal the limitations of the other. Loidolt (2022) takes a more pluralist approach, acknowledging transcendental, existential, hermeneutic and other strands of phenomenology, each of which may be appropriate for different phenomena. She describes, though, across these different strands is a range of both “core convictions” and “family resemblances” in the form of attentiveness to “experience, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, appearance, world, and meaning”. Insofar as phenomenology has the potential to say something about politics, Loidolt (2021) suggests a phenomenological approach to work in tandem with political and legal theory-building. She acquiesces that other philosophical methods are better suited to

discuss abstract ideas such as complex institutional systems; however, she defends the role that phenomenology can play in revealing the lived experiences within subject-positions produced by power disparities within those systems. Those accounts, she argues, would thus have the potential to expand existing theories. Specifically, she describes how one form of phenomenological analysis, inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, might explicate how different "spaces of meaning" – such as politiicized, racialized or economized spaces – condition people and their experiences within those spaces.

What would it look like, then, to talk about suffering to students in a phenomenological way? The phenomenological reflection might, in certain carefully facilitated cases, be done on the teacher or students' own experiences of suffering, as might be the case when a community has experienced a collective catastrophe. For many – possibly most – of us, though, the experience of unspeakable suffering is not a first-person experience, but an experience we read about or hear about. The phenomenological mode might then be applied to the experience of reading, watching, and hearing about suffering, examining one's own internal reactions and critically appraising one's own presumptions.

Uncovering structures of power disparity: an anti-/post-/decolonial approach

However, this alone does not make it a *critically* phenomenological approach, and a secondhand reflection on others' experiences of suffering falls into the danger of reverting back into the subjectivist navel-gazing for which classical phenomenology was often criticized. Both Oksala and Loidolt emphasize that critical phenomenology, unlike classical phenomenology, also has an explicitly normative intent. First, it presumes that any reflections we undertake are made within 'normative practices of power' (Oksala, p. 4), and the reality that we reflect about is not simply ontologically given, but 'the outcome of profound historical and political constitution' (Oksala, p. 5-6). But beyond this, critical phenomenology is willing to make normative claims, which proceed not from abstract principles but from 'existential contentions about the human condition' (Oksala p. 10).

In this sense, critical phenomenology has the potential to meet the second criterion that I proposed above: that philosophical teaching on widespread suffering include the unveiling of structures of power that create, perpetuate or exacerbate that suffering. Nonetheless, I want to advocate specifically for an anti-, post- and decolonial lens when reflecting phenomenologically on 'spaces of meaning' and 'normative practices of power'. In the next paragraphs I give two reasons why I think such a lens is particularly helpful.

The first reason has to do with the fact that for many of our students, such experiences of suffering will be secondhand, and the phenomenological reflection will be, as I described above, reflections about their own reactions to other people's suffering. In some of these cases, the suffering that they will be reflecting about will be the suffering of people geographically distant from them. Moreover, many of the stories of suffering – even when articulated by the suffering people themselves – will be received by our students through the mediations of mass media. The geographic

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distances and mediations exacerbate the risk of turning suffering, once again, into 'abstract cases' and puzzles to be solved.

As mentioned above, one of the key convictions of phenomenology is its emphasis on interrelational structures and the intersubjectivity of experience. Postcolonial and decolonial thought offer powerful lenses for helping us recognize those interrelational structures and intersubjective connections. One of the most important insights from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions is the reminder that all of us humans share a world, and that our actions and discourses affect one another across great distances. One of the first targets to be attacked by the seminal theorists of postcoloniality, such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, was the subordinating colonial gaze, and the 'Othering' of people from other places, as evident in Global North literature and art about the Global South. The decolonial offshoot of postcolonial theory drew on World Systems Theory to map out the interlinked histories of people from different places and how disparities of power across those places have shaped the present day. Postcolonial and decolonial thought can therefore, to some extent, bridge the distances between our classrooms and sites of suffering, emphasizing how we are all beings-together-in-a-world of unjust structures that we may challenge, resist, or be complicit in.

The second reason has to do with my focus in this paper on 'widespread' human suffering, suffering that affects, not just a small group of people, but entire communities, polities, identity groups, and possibly nations. Other than the war in Gaza, I have not specified other examples of such suffering, but examples I have in mind include the effects of economic collapses, and disasters following the occurrences of natural hazards such as typhoons, forest fires, or the effects of climate change. Typically, when the occurrence of a hazard causes widespread suffering, the suffering is not just due to the hazard itself, but to political, economic, and social systems that increase the vulnerability of certain people to those hazards. The study of decolonial thought helps sharpen our sensitivity to these kinds of systemic injustices at the root of widespread suffering.

Concluding Remarks: Towards a humanizing philosophy in the classroom

In my reflections above, I have arrived at a proposal for philosophy teachers to take a critical-phenomenological approach and use an anti-/post-/de-colonial lens when teaching about widespread suffering in the classroom. I remain mindful, however, of Thau's original worry, criticism of moral philosophy: that it can become a 'sanitised abstraction' that hides rather than reveals the horror of such suffering. I wish to take Thau's critique as a warning, while also adding another layer to it. Thau's main concern is that such moral philosophy runs the risk '[oversanitizing] the morally unthinkable' and thereby obscuring the path to moral action. To her worry, I wish to add my own that philosophical conversation about suffering might obscure the human experience of suffering itself, and I believe that it is important for philosophy educators to take care to prevent this from happening.

I end this paper, then, with an excerpt from the memoirs of a philosopher about a

moment when he had witnessed and was witnessing widespread suffering. I will not aim to discuss the excerpt; instead, I will hope that it speaks for itself.

In his memoirs, the Filipino metaphysician-phenomenologist Roque Ferriols (2016) writes about an experience he had had as a Jesuit scholastic in the wake of the brutal Battle of Manila, which ended three harsh years of Japanese occupation in the Philippines, but turned Manila into one of the most destroyed cities of the Second World War. The American and Filipino forces eventually prevailed against their enemy, the Japanese troops. In the days after the battle, a young Ferriols and some of his Jesuit brethren had been granted permission by the American authorities to collect firewood from the rubble, to be used as cooking fuel for themselves and for the refugees staying at their residence, and Ferriols had an additional errand of returning a borrowed bicycle. Ferriols describes the sensory experience of walking and cycling through the war-torn city while on these errands: the stench of corpses, the sounds of occasional gunshots, and his difficulty recognizing streets where he had grown up because of the extent of the devastation. Cycling past the tramline, a young Ferriols saw the corpse of a dead soldier, lying face up. Ferriols writes:

> I knew he was a Japanese soldier because of his shoes. Except for his pair of shoes, he was not wearing anything. He was completely naked, and his penis was erect. Someone threw some earth at his body. Oil had been dumped on his face. But you could make out the emotions he had before he died. His face was that of a young boy gripped by fear. The last thing he saw in his dying moments was what triggered his fear. And a voice told me, 'Don't ever forget that these Japanese are human. Never forget this. All human beings are human.' (p. 146)

Last year, I was invited to share some reflections at an intimate session about the war in Gaza, among a group who were geographically distant from the events but indirectly connected through work or through professional or personal relationships. Although I was invited as an academic analyst, I shared the above quotation. In the conversation that followed, it was this quotation that elicted the most emotional response. Perhaps this is unsurprising: inasmuch as violence is often a consequence of dehumanization (see Keen, 1987), our moral disgust when we see violence can also engender dehumanization.

If philosophy is to say anything in the face of unspeakable horror, perhaps, as philosophy teachers, we can hope that it encourages our students to hold fast to their humanity.

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