

ANGUISH, TRAUMA AND RESPONSIBILITY: ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ONTOLOGICAL NARRATIVE FORMATION

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Abstract: This article discusses the issue of anguish from a philosophical perspective combining it with the issues of trauma, responsibility and ethics. It is argued that anguish is a painful emotion that has ontological roots and can be etched into a positive form of either arts or writing, which helps to express this particular emotion, according to Maurice Blanchot's philosophical viewpoint. Further, the article focuses on the ethical narrative formation regarding the victim and the nature of trauma. The paper refers to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to explain that the abuser's narrative is usually abjected by the society by excluding the abuser from the ethical narrative, while the victim is seen as deficient due to the trauma experience. The article suggests that the trauma narrative can be reformed and changed in such a way as to include both the victim and the abuser into it. The text argues that demystification and dialogical relationship between the victim and abuser, as well as the reduction of the role of narcissism in the abuser's narrative, can help create an ethical narrative that allows to humanize both the victim and the abuser. The article further argues that the abuser has to take the responsibility for the wrongdoings, which usually falls too often on the victim. There is a further argument about a shift in narrative formation in the society which creates certain values, meanings and socially accepted emotions. The article also emphasizes that empathy and love are important for considering trauma narratives in order to learn to accept new accounts of trauma.

Keywords: anguish, trauma, responsibility, ethics, empathy.



Introduction

Anguish is a tough emotion that one finds hard to express in words. Usually, we feel anguish in the moments of great stress and in traumatic experiences. According to Maurice Blanchot, anguish is born from the objects that are stolen from it, and anguish is the projection of an eventual greater emptiness from the limited emptiness of which it makes us afraid (Blanchot 2001: 38).

Oftentimes, it is not easy to express anguish, as it is a hard emotion to articulate. However, anguish can provide ontological, ethical and political dimensions of expression as it opens up the possibility for new signification and narrative formation. Anguish, usually understood as a negative state of mind, can be productive as it opens up dialogical relationships and narratives if it is expressed in language. The idea of anguish is not always clearly formulated, but the notion does have certain properties that define it, or drives that can be transformed into the materiality of language or art. Also, it is crucial to note that we signify things for reasons of power and knowledge, and when we speak, we gain control over things (Bruns 1984: 29).

In today's society, we lack empathy and care for the other, therefore, expression of anguish in a constructive way can lead to setting up dialogue between different sides and different stories, thus establishing the understanding and relationships. Emotions are involved in our moral judgements, therefore the rough emotion of anguish can help establish an ethical dimension.

This article argues that anguish is a starting point of the ethical subject formation through language via signification and narrative creation. Firstly, the article discusses the concept of anguish from the ontological perspective using Maurice Blanchot's arguments. Further on it looks at the traumatic narrative formation and diminishing the abject qualities of both the victim's and abuser's narratives. And lastly, the article touches upon the issue of community violence and suggests ways to show it in the ontological narrative produced out of anguish and create empathy.

Anguish in Maurice Blanchot's Philosophy

Blanchot talks about the process of drives and their articulation through language. He starts from the dreadful feeling of anguish which can leave one in existential crisis. Due to this, anguish is similar to repudiated emotional memories from pre-conceptual traumas that are accumulated unconsciously as unprocessed sensory experiences or "undigested mental facts", waiting for a thinking mind to contain them, which can create mental growth (Corvo 2012: 886).

Anguish, according to Blanchot, is a destructive force. The writer encounters one's anguish as an enigma, but one cannot resort to enigma in order to follow the dictates of anguish. We cannot believe that by writing under a mask, by borrowing pseudonyms, by making oneself unknown, one aligns oneself with the solitude, or that it is one's destiny to apprehend in the very act of writing (Blanchot 2001: 10). Even though one faces one's own anguish in the process of writing, nevertheless, it allows us to convert the anguish and see it from a distance in the material form of art. In Blanchot's point of view, anguish is a starting point of language and ontology. The philosopher sees anguish as the beginning of language and writing despite its painful nature:

The author has produced something more than himself; he has carried what he has received to a higher point of efficacy; he has been creator; and what he has created is from now on a source of values whose fecundity greatly surpasses the energy expended in bringing it to birth. The writer thrown into anguish feels acutely that art is not a ruinous operation; he who seeks to lose himself (and to lose himself as a writer) sees that by writing he increases the credit of humanity, and thus his own credit, since he is always a man; he gives art new riches and aspirations that fall back heavily on him; he transforms the desperate orders he receives into forces of consolation (Blanchot 2001:6).

Blanchot states that anguish is not something that we can portray easily in a spontaneous expression. It is something that lies inside us, and one has to overcome some pains to find the right form of expression for the anguish drive. Drives can be targeted at non-specific objects like sexual tension or intercourse and aim to release the tension existing inside a person. The unconscious sequence of events that structure the "pre-conceptual" trauma follows a logic based on a kind of pseudo-causality or chain of beta elements in wait for a mind that could change them into a meaningful "concept" (Corvo 2012: 878).

The physical expression of anguish allows creating the external manifestation of our subjectivity and the narrative which allows us to better understand ourselves, as well as to define ourselves as subjects. As soon as anguish becomes part of a narrative and appears to be the expression of calculation, it loses its inherent multiplicity and becomes fixed in the form of an artifice whose outer complexity is steadily reduced by the intention that gave it "birth" (Blanchot 2001: 10).

Anguish and Trauma Narrative

If two or more people share similar painful experiences, they are able to bond over those experiences, as they are capable of understanding

and empathically comprehending them. Anguish put into a narrative helps to create a container for those traumatic events and be in control of the narrative formation as one becomes responsible for the representation of traumatic events. The chain of associations present in this kind of symbolism is structured using different containers carrying the same meaning, or contained, as can be observed, for instance, in the transference–countertransference dimension, where the representation moves away from the original trauma without any abruptness or tearing (Corvo, 2012: 888). In such a way, one is able to transform anguish into a productive form in order to structure the knowledge of it as something coherent that does not float in the form of unexpressed drives or emotions. We can make anguish conscious to us by using signs to represent certain meanings of our desires, memories or inner reality.

Even if the expression of anguish as a link is painful by nature, it allows people to establish a common narrative, therefore, painful narratives can lead to transformation of the old narratives, which actually gives voice and agency to those harbouring anguish and helps create a community of others who have also endured similar experiences.

Usually, the victim's narrative is not seen and not talked about, however, one can express the anguished feelings of trauma in a narrative that itself becomes transformative. It opens a dialogue to discuss the wrongdoings of a person or a community, and initiate a new discourse in the society.

On the Abuser and Victim Character Formation

Anguish can be seen as a powerful emotional response to situations of extreme stress, trauma, or existential crisis. When connected to the object, anguish becomes a part of the process through which individuals cope with or react to what is fundamentally inassimilable or horrifying in human experience – things that are expelled from our symbolic order but continue to haunt us. The object (the repulsed and repelling, the morally and literally unassimilable) is reflected in how abusers are often depicted or perceived – as inhuman or monstrous, thereby denying their humanity and complexity. Such treatment of the narrative can create a kind of anguish in society – a trauma or a crisis of representation and ethics – because it simplifies complex human behaviour into binary moral categories that exclude meaningful dialogue or understanding.

Reyes Mate highlights the need to repair the damage and injustice inflicted on the victim by society. This way, the victim is not forgotten, and society must look at its own representation and confront its own

image, its crimes and wrongdoings, which becomes a tough ethical and political dilemma. The problem with the victim's narrative is victim-blaming mentality, while the perpetrator or perpetrators are not represented in the narrative and are usually abjected.

In the previous section we briefly discussed the issues of the victim's narrative formation, and here we are going to explain the toxic narrative of the abuser that is usually abjected. We are going to use Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to talk about the abuser's dehumanization by emphasising the need to recreate the victim's and abuser's narratives as they block changes in the victim-abuser narrative formation.

Auge points out that there are some individuals who are defined by societal rules and customs, and in particular cases, they become unthinkable and untouchable (Auge, 2023: 19). This issue can be seen in the narrative of the abuser, as the abuser is viewed from non-human perspective. The abuser is imagined to be inhuman, which means that such a person has a rather mythical and undeveloped narrative without either ethical or political dimension, only causing negative fascination or fear. Thus, the abuser's narrative can be related to Kristeva's notion of the abject. Kristeva points out that the abject is a confrontation with radical otherness that is both a burden, repellent and repelled, and intimate:

The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior ... Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Basically, the abject is turned towards the definition of the Outside. The abject is created by jouissance, but there is nothing objective in the abject, as the abject remains a repulsive passion that is rejected by the subject "I", and yet it remains (Kristeva 1982: 9). The pleasure is something that forbids one from either integrating the abject or defining it as an object. For example, if we read horror stories of murderers, we get the pleasure out of fear or excitement, which makes the murderer or the abuser in the narrative an abject that is not fully integrated into the subject who reads the story. The aesthetization of violence creates a mystified view of the abuser and abuse, which leads to sensations and emotions of disgust and rejection. The question arises, how to fight the pleasure principle and make the murderer not a freely floating abject, but an ethical subject?

Anguish, in this context, can be seen as the emotional resonance or response to the abject. It's the intense, often negative feeling resulting

from confronting these repulsive yet compelling aspects of reality. When people read about murderers or encounter stories of violence, they are drawn into a psychological and emotional turmoil that combines fear, excitement, and revulsion. This mix of emotions is emblematic of anguish — arising when the mind grapples with the abject elements that defy easy categorization or assimilation into one's moral and symbolic frameworks.

Another issue of the victim's and abuser's narratives is that individuals have to recognize themselves in a narrative. An event, a narrative or a subject has to be made known, apprehended and recognized to be made accessible to a discourse (Auge 2023: 37). The problem is that abusers fail to recognize themselves in the abuser-subject as the abuser is seen as inhuman, thus unable to recognize him/herself. On the other hand, the victim is made to appear weak, which creates a negative view of the victim as lacking something that was lost during the experienced trauma. This raises the question of why the abuser identity is so mystified and alienated? Why does society tolerate abusers who inflict harm, and yet they remain hidden and untouchable? Abusers are made to be foreign, while in reality they are human beings as well.

South of Forgiveness. New Victim and Abuser Narratives

Writing texts implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play (Kristeva 1982: 16). The abject can be integrated into society by accepting one's ethical status and transforming oneself into the subject. As Kristeva suggests, one form of controlling the abject is sublimation that can be established via restructurization of the narrative. Nomadic pseudo-subjectivity of the criminal or abuser as a form of the abject is unable to stabilize itself into the realm of subjectivity and narrative. Therefore, such abjected narratives and abusers require a new form of inscribing anguish into language. We can metaphorically say that in order to transform this nomadic pseudo-subject, the "pain has to start to speak" to establish an ethical dimension.

In order to be ethical, one has to learn to take responsibility for one's actions and wrongdoings, as well as to transform them into a new form in order to reflect on one's past and to present the narrative to the others in the form of literature, speech or art. For example, Thor-dis Elva's book *South of Forgiveness* shows a new anguish narrative transformation into a written form. Anguish serves as an initial emotional state that drives the need for expression and transformation. In the context of Elva's *South of Forgiveness*, the anguish experienced

by both the victim and the perpetrator prompts a dialogue that seeks resolution and understanding. This dialogue is an attempt to give voice to that anguish, transforming it from a state of suffering to a platform for ethical engagement and narrative construction.

This book presents a story of rape in which the perpetrator takes all the responsibility for the crime. The book shows a dialogue between a *former* rape victim and the perpetrator, and via dialogue in letters (which later is transformed into a book), they go through anguish to heal the past wounds. Such dialogical relationship is a way to inscribe anguish into a written form. Anguish is not merely a painful emotional experience; it becomes a catalyst for dialogue, understanding, and ultimately, healing. *South of Forgiveness* is a book that shows the unseen narrative via expressing anguish as the key drive by showing the victim's strength to endure and thrive, while putting all the responsibility on the perpetrator for his wrongdoings. The abuser takes the ethical burden of the responsibility, and thus via anguish, is able to describe his own state, feelings and emotions related to the crime.

The abuser stops being a floating pseudo-subjectivity in this particular book, and he is actually seen and apprehended in *South of Forgiveness* instead of being shown as an inhuman creature. Open truth in *South of Forgiveness* presents a narrative without any kind of stylistic embellishments that would create the abject, and it helps to establish empathy by seeing people as humans and developing emotional response to the narrative, because reading is a phenomenological experience. Additionally, it draws out the abuser from the state of the abject by showing that the former rapist has feelings, emotions, morality, actions and agency, as well subjectivity and responsibility towards his actions. Dialogue between the former victim and former abuser shows the communication between two subjects. The abject is repressed and dodged, made to be something unseen, but the dialogue opens up the possibility of expression and dialogical formation of the subject and the narrative. Similar to the case of a psychoanalyst and a patient, the communication between the victim and the abuser proceeds “incessantly disrupting the equilibrium, making the tension of the exchanges vary, responding without responding and insensibly transforming the monologue without issue into a dialogue where each of them has spoken” (Kuzma 2019: 33).

Also, the exposal of such narratives allows for creating a bond between people who have experienced similar traumas, helping them at the same time to process their own experiences and show that a trauma victim can thrive and recover. Therefore, such a narrative has ethical connotations, which can potentially be political, because it can impact society's development and self-understanding and shift the victim's and abuser's narrative formations. Therefore, society learns to give voice and attach responsibility to the new narrative, to offer it

a vocal force, which lies exclusively in writing, literature and art. Also, one has to become familiar with the abusers and the dark potentialities of human behaviour in order to accept them as part of us, which functions as the key to make them never to be actualized.

From Closed Narratives to Expression of Anguish

We learn emotions in the same way we acquire our beliefs – that is, from society, and these emotions are channeled into stories that become internalized and later shape how life is felt, and construct a perspective on life (Nussbaum 1990: 287). Fictional narratives play a central and positive role in self-understanding, a role that is not adequately fulfilled by texts that lack narrative form; and all narrative forms contain certain emotions that have the power to shift the socially accepted narratives and emotional responses. Love is among one of the most important emotions that helps to create acceptance and closeness (Plato 2000: 38). Emotional responses are learnt via social forms of life in which emotions are housed and as a result constructed in one's mind (Nussbaum 1990: 293).

This means that if we construct new narratives and tell stories in a novel way, we are able to construct new literary forms of life that can impact social forms of life. Society structures emotional beliefs in certain highly specific ways, and undoing them will have to be correspondingly specific in order to counter the very thoughts that grip us (Nussbaum, 1990: 293). An empathic revolution can happen via creating new narratives that focus on the emotions, vulnerability and openness. Such narratives demystify the abject in them and allow establishing a new form for the abject to be included into the narrative as an object or subject.

Anguish could be related to the unconscious desire to let out certain painful emotions and transcribe them into art, literature or language. On the other hand, we have the emotion of love and empathy. Even if anguish and love may seem to be total polar opposites, it is love and empathy that can help us go from anguish to love. Nussbaum states that love cannot be grasped scientifically. The mind of the other is not approachable and is unknowable; it becomes available only in fantasies and projections that are elements of the knower's own life, which represents constructive workings of one's own life (Nussbaum 1990: 271). Love is the permanent structural feature of our soul, love is able to unite and show us the unity in different disappointments and sufferings. Love is a complex way of being, feeling and interacting with another person. One has to initially discover their vulnerable

and passionate side instead of denying it and make oneself evolve into a more trusting person (Nussbaum 1990: 279).

Love allows the emotions to contribute positively to an ethical life. Both partners in a romantic relationship recognize each other as individual but utterly imperfect agents, and meet each other's imperfections with merciful understanding as it is shown on the example of *South of Forgiveness*. This book has an expressive verbal structure and serves as a source or paradigm of emotions. It articulates anguish, guilt, shame, anxiety and pain, while it simultaneously contains humor, honesty and reconciliation and shows personal development and growth. This story is told as a real-life story, and both the victim and the abuser are shown as human beings capable of emotions, ethical comprehension and empathy. Love is a human emotion that creates a link between two people. Therefore, even though we witness a brutal story in *South of Forgiveness*, we can also perceive that there is love and empathy in the book that manifests itself in a genuine form of the dialogue where both counterparts exhibit compassion, individuality and reciprocity.

Nussbaum's idea of empathy is that it is "an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience without any particular evaluation of that experience" (cited in: Gluchman 2018: 98). For Nussbaum, empathy requires recognition of the otherness, rather than simply feeling as if it were one's own pain, which is emotional infection. Thus, empathy means both an awareness of another's pain and yet knowing that it is not one's own. Empathy is portrayed as a transformative tool that can alter the experience and perception of anguish.

In the context of anguish, empathy enables people to connect with the pain of others without necessarily experiencing it firsthand. This connection is crucial for transforming a person, often isolating experiences of anguish and putting them into shared narratives that can be comprehended and addressed by a broader community.

Ethics, Responsibility and Community

Political and ethical direction of responsibility to the party who inflicted damage is a way to change community's view on their own actions, their own understanding of the victim and perpetrator images. Responsibility is a certain burden that one is forced to take justly or unjustly in certain situations. Victims of abuse take too much responsibility that does not belong to them. As a result, they feel shame or dread, the error of injustice which must be fixed.

As Blanchot points out, the way to treat this responsibility is by writing, which can create a neuter voice in itself to become an ethical and political force of change (cite in: Appelbaum 2017: 123). In relation

(without relation, of the third kind) to it, responsibility appears; it “comes as though from an unknown language which we speak only counter to our heart and to life” (Appelbaum 2017: 209). Writing is a form of testifying that absolves personal responsibility for one’s own account to be transformed. Responsibility demands an accounting, an answering-for-oneself with respect to the general. Responsibility is a way to create an ethical and metaphysical dimension in one’s own story. Change of narrative helps to shift the focus from the victim as the oppressed in order to pay more attention and give responsibility to the perpetrator, to stop the victim-blaming culture, dismantle the myth of the inhuman perpetrator, because that stops harming the victims as perpetrator takes the responsibility for their actions. By creating narratives where perpetrators are made responsible and victims are allowed room for recovery and redemption, we create an emotional unburdening for the victims.

It may sound paradoxical, but the narrative of the abuser is needed for the victim to rediscover oneself. The victim is left with all the blame and pain, while most of it has to go to the abuser in order to revive the victim and allow them to be proud of their survival. The abuser, on the other hand, has to learn to also recognize him/herself in the narrative in order to take the blame and responsibility to become an ethical subject.

Also, creation of the new narrative allows to escape the societal control which is represented by the control of one’s subjectivity, not allowing one to become an authentic subject. What we experience is the anthropotechnical control of the subjectivity that is happening as a control of the way our life is shaped, the control of life’s forms. The way to solve this issue is to become an authentic subject capable of ethics, being dialogical and refusing to be placed within the society’s established forms of being.

Another way is writing and literature. For Blanchot, writing is inseparable from ethics, and the proximity between literature and ethics is that they both displace the subject through language (Claret 2022: 39). As Blanchot sees it, literature and poetics are “the experience of the anonymity of language that seems to be spoken by no one, and which Blanchot calls the neuter” (Haase, Large 2001: 80), a narrative voice which comes from outside.

Basically, Blanchot states that literature and language are able to produce a neutral voice which has the potential to become ethical. The neuter voice is considered to be impersonal, however, it can mark certain emotions, drives and narratives that are put into a certain form. The neutrality of the written word gives the opportunity to express a narrative from which the author is freed. That is, the neutral narrative remains to be ethical and political as it is cable of anonymously changing and shifting other people’s subjectivities.

As the example of *South of Forgiveness* shows, literature can produce a neutral voice and a neutral narrative in Blanchotian sense that allows expressing certain existential experience and giving it an ethical and political dimension. Literature, according to Blanchot, is one of the ways to reach ethics.

Conclusions

Blanchot suggests that anguish is the starting point of the ontological and existential being. Anguish, in this context, is perceived as an emotional response that might initially arise from deep-seated, often painful emotions that are unconscious or suppressed. Blanchot states that one has to express anguish in the physical form of art or writing, which helps to express anguish in a positive way avoiding uncontrolled and toxic patterns of behaviour.

Anguish can be transformed into the narrative form to create dialogical and empathic relationships, because narrative gives a possibility of containing anguish, distancing it from the subject and giving it an object status that functions as the representation of emotions. These emotions find expression through literature, art, and language, which serve as mediums to transform personal anguish into a shared narrative experience. This transformation is crucial as it brings otherwise private anguish into public discourse, enabling empathy and communal understanding.

Literary narrative in the book *South of Forgiveness* presents a dialogue between a victim and an abuser. It also represents emotions, such as shame, guilt and anguish, highlighting, meanwhile, reconciliation, bonding and forgiveness. Besides, it shows the possibility of shifting accountability onto the abuser, as victims take too much responsibility in our societies. A new narrative formation related to love and empathy allows seeing both the victim and the abuser as human beings, opens up dialogue and considers a possibility of reconciliation, demonstrating a way of shifting responsibility onto the actual abuser.

The narrative of the abuser is needed for the victim because it helps the latter to return to the story of anguish and rewrite it, as well as “rewrite” their own subjectivity, improve it and move away from painful experiences. This process opens up the realm of emotions such as love, empathy, respect and care for others. The new narrative formation that emerges out of anguish allows changing the way society forms and designs certain emotions and emotional responses that are made to become part of social nature of human beings living in a society.

By reshaping the way stories are told, emphasizing the emotional journeys of individuals including those marked by anguish, society can

foster a greater understanding and acceptance of these painful emotions. This narrative shift encourages a collective engagement with anguish, instead of making it a secluded, individual burden.

Writing is seen as a way to create a “neuter” voice, which can articulate experiences of anguish in a manner that is removed from personal bias or direct emotional expression. This form of writing helps in providing an ethical and political dimension to personal suffering, allowing for a broader societal engagement with individual anguish.

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