

Gary B. Madison, *On Suffering: Philosophical Reflections on What It Means To Be Human* (Hamilton: McMaster Innovation Press/Les Erables, 2013).

This outstanding and, in some ways untimely book, written in non-technical language for a broad audience, is concerned with a problem that lies at the heart of philosophical anthropology: *what does it mean to be a human being?* It is a deeply personal book—the last book the author ever wrote, which he himself identifies as a “philosophical will.” Yet it is by no means a book of merely personal significance. Rather, the book is focused on human suffering, which, according to the author, is an irreducible feature of human existence. Drawing a sharp distinction between suffering and physical pain, Gary B. Madison maintains that suffering is not a neurological, but an existential, or spiritual, phenomenon. It is not bodies, but persons that suffer, which means that suffering constitutes not a physiological, but a moral-philosophical problem. Suffering cannot be confronted physiologically but must be encountered philosophically. The author argues throughout this study that suffering is part and parcel of human existence (in this regard, it is unlike various diseases or other physiological phenomena). The question is not whether we shall suffer but *how* we shall suffer. The goal of the book is to show how philosophical reflection prepares us to confront our own suffering. While we cannot help but must confront it, it is ultimately up to us to see how we relate to it. The book aims to show that the history of philosophy provides us with highly valuable guidelines to confront suffering successfully; should we follow these guidelines, suffering would provide us with a possibility to achieve genuine selfhood.

In his analysis, the author engages in a confrontation with various forms of reductionism that, he maintains, make up the modern worldview. Under attack is the bio-technological conception of a human being, which essentially understands a human being as a neurobiological, homeostatic machine. By contrast, according to the author, being human is a matter of *becoming* human; a life worth living is a life in pursuit of virtue.

The book provides a critique of technoscience within a broader historico-cultural context. This critique is of crucial importance both for our understanding of suffering as well as for our understanding of what it means to be human. What is at stake is finding a properly humane way of dealing with suffering. Within such a framework, the author engages in reflections on the human condition, the epistemological basis of modern science, the project of domination and control over nature, the mind/body problem, the nature of consciousness, the nature of rationality, also the relation between faith and reason. The analysis of these issues is undertaken with the goal of spelling out a human way of confronting suffering.

Methodologically, the book is an existential-phenomenological and hermeneutical investigation. It is set against metaphysical speculation; its object is the human existence as regards some of its essential features; its goal is to discern what it means that human existence is necessarily prey to the realities of pain, suffering, and adversity. The stoic background is especially strongly articulated in this book.

The principal cause of suffering is our inability to manage our own thoughts. Written in a profoundly dialogical fashion, the book engages in a discussion with ancient and modern thinkers, both from the West, and from the East.

At the time when academia's interests are directed at posthumanism, the book provides a welcome challenge by dialogically articulating a passionate defense of classical humanism in the framework of technological as well as ecological concerns. Written in the age of specialization, the book demonstrates that thought-provoking philosophical reflections can be written in a non-technical language for a broad audience. *On Suffering* is an extraordinary contribution to philosophy and, arguably, the most important of Gary B. Madison's philosophical works. It is a real masterpiece, which will retain its philosophical significance for many decades.