

Article

# Self-Pity as Resilience against Injustice

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes that being able to feel self-pity is important to be resilient against injustices because it enables self-transformation. The suggestion for this reassessment of self-pity as a crucial self-conscious emotion for a more humanistic world aims to be an example of philosophical reflection can be insightful for emotion research. The first part of the paper outlines a general introduction of philosophy of emotions and a description of how Hume's analysis of pride changed its meaning and pertinently linked it to human agency. The second part of the paper is devoted to self-pity and aims to offer a modified interpretation of its experience, ultimately suggesting that it is a way to cultivate resistance and endure injustices in the world. It begins by putting forward the generally accepted take on self-pity and then suggests that dismissing self-pity may increase its duration, and ultimately work as a type of denial of the world's injustices. After describing how self-pity can be seen as a tour de force where the self is in a relationship of pity with itself, it further elaborates how self-pity may be taken as a type of calibration similar to how sleep works for the functioning organism. This makes it possible to interpret self-pity as a way to resiliently resist injustices while not dismissing them and keeping up the struggle to make the world a better place. Finally, the concluding remarks point out some consequences for the education of emotions and possible future research directions to be explored. Analogously to the undeniable way by which Hume changed the meaning of the emotion of pride, the conclusion hopes that a new way to understand self-pity is available. The overall goal is to amplify the already existing psychological descriptions showing the complementary role of philosophical research for the development of emotion research in general.

**Keywords:** emotions; Hume; self; pride; self-pity; transformation; injustice



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## 1. Philosophical Insights

### 1.1. General Introduction

Emotion research in many areas has provided a new way to better understand some of our core theoretical concepts [1]. For example, the opposition between reason and emotion has been questioned with empirical certainty after the development of some of the neuroscience research on emotions [2]. This in turn has forced researchers from other areas of expertise to accept previous criticism of this opposition and work towards a reconceptualized notion of rationality that can integrate novel insights from emotion research [3]. The extraordinarily immense amount of literature which is published in a wide variety of fields testifies the enormous conceptual enterprise which emotion research has promoted. Philosophy is no exception and recent philosophical reflection reveals how philosophy contributes to scientific research on emotion in general [4]. Even though one may still feel the need to clarify why philosophers should be concerned with the nature of emotions [5] (pp. 8–9), since it seems to belong more properly to psychology, the focus on emotions is as ancient as philosophy itself.

Presently the philosophy of emotions adopts a variety of directions. First, it aims at identifying the theoretical issues underlying emotion research in general. Here, for example, we can find philosophers identifying theoretical incoherencies [6], or insightful conceptual

interconnections [7], or less considered elements of the theoretical considerations [8], or general evaluations [9]. Second, philosophy of emotions creates and suggests new concepts to capture the complexity of affectivity. Such is the case of existential feelings [10], acratia emotions [11], or the notion of meta-emotion [12]. Third, it reflects about philosophical problems that surround emotions such as discussions on the paradox of fiction and the paradox of tragedy [13,14], on how to individuate emotions and distinguish them from other emotional processes [15,16], and on what is the proper role of emotions in moral life [17]. Finally, many philosophers seek to elaborate theories of emotions which will incorporate all relevant issues and provide a more solid ground for empirical research and for research avenues in general [18]. Importantly, given the impact of philosophical work on education, and if we accept John Dewey's suggestion that the educational point of view is what "enables one to envisage the philosophical problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice" [19] (p. 338), philosophy of emotions inevitably provides a critical and crucial examination of the education of emotions [20]. Also, all these research directions have highlighted the importance of previous philosophical reflection on emotions to be found throughout the history of philosophy [21–23].

Interestingly, emotion research can also be seen to be at the center of philosophy's focus since philosophy is necessarily tied to the Delphic maxim 'Know Thyself' and emotional processes implicitly demand a sense of self [24]. The undeniable interconnection between emotion and self is so crucial that the very experience of being a self is shaped by the constant changing of emotions [25] (p. 187). And, without perceptions of the self it is not possible to experience some emotions such as the self-conscious feelings of pride, shame, self-compassion and other similar emotions [25] (p. 187). So, the philosophical interest in emotions is also guided by the way it pertains to the nature of its own enterprise: it is impossible to fulfill the Delphic maxim without facing the enigmatic nature of emotions and how they are intertwined with life [26] and the embodied mind [27].

The connection between self and emotions is far more complex than simply recognizing that "emotion belongs of a certainty to the self" [28] (p. 48), nevertheless it can be acknowledge with certainty that some emotions are about the self. To make things harder sometimes people are surprised by their own emotions, which asks theorists to acknowledge the reflexivity of emotional experience. This means that philosophical work on emotions, besides considering how to best capture the nature of the self, must also integrate the layered structure of the emotional landscape [29]. Recent developments in philosophy have identified how emotions can be layered instead of sequential [30] (p. 174) based on the way in which reflexivity of emotions changes their meaning. For instance, when people feel sad, a feeling of guilt about their sadness changes the fingerprint of the value of the emotional experience. Even though the meta-emotional layer is not always easy to identify, there are some moments of reflexivity of emotion that can be unequivocally observed because it is clear that people feel an emotion about their own emotions [31] (p. 157). Given their overall impact on affectivity, meta-emotions cannot be handled as a simple modified case of emotional processes and it has been shown that they transform the nature of our emotional world [29]. For example, being surprised by one's own emotional experiences offers a specific type of reflexivity in which people can install a kind of dialogue with themselves strangely similar to the one they can establish with other people [31], and this may be part of a regulative mechanism which can, at times, go astray [32].

Emotional reflexivity is also pertinently connected to self-conscious emotions because being surprised at feeling joy over someone else's misfortune may promote the self-conscious emotion of shame. This ultimately means that the general trait of reflexivity, and of being able to feel emotions about other first-order emotions, may also promote how people feel emotions about their own selves. The way in which meta-emotions can give rise to self-conscious emotions, which in turn contributes to a deeper sense of self-knowledge, means that reflexivity in general (on emotions about emotions or on how it promotes emotions about the self) is key to the ongoing challenge of self-knowledge and on the

possibility to transform ourselves [33] (p. 59). In sum, it seems that emotional reflexivity in general helps people to establish a relationship with themselves by way of self-conscious emotions, and this is a way to reflectively handle complex meta-emotional processes because, among other things, it provides insights for processes of change when people want to guide personal transformation. Thus, a proper understanding of the relationship between emotions and the self needs to recognize emotions' reflexivity and that emotions can be about emotions themselves which implicate a self in addition to the way in which emotions can be self-conscious and about the self itself.

Based on this intimate link between emotions and the self, this paper puts forward that we now have more refined philosophical tools to provide a different take on the emotion of self-pity, just as David Hume was able to provide a different take on pride. Philosophical research now offers a more complex conception of the notion of self, and of understanding the way in which emotions interact, and how emotions reveal both the nature of the self, of the world and how emotional reflexivity adds further insight into agency. All this can better ground a reassessment of emotional experience in general and amplify our interpretation of self-pity in particular. Self-pity is taken very negatively as a type of self-conscious emotion because it is pity directed at oneself.

The suggestion of this paper is that, instead of thinking of self-pity as an unfortunate emotional process in which people expect more from the environment than can be given to them and as a trait of a narcissistic personality, it is now possible to show that self-pity can be considered a way to maintain a healthy mind and to better deal with an unfair world. The emotional process of self-pity allows people to recognize injustice in the world without moving on and ignoring it. While the price is self-isolation, it is also a way to avoid self-delusional mechanisms. And because of how self-pity forces people to become isolated, it provides the time and space for individuals to transform themselves by establishing a specific type of dialogue with themselves. In a somewhat self-imposed isolation people try to work out how to cope with what happened to them while not denying felt injustices. The hope is that this will allow them to be able to return to the social environment as happy and lively participants. Of course, people may remain silent and somewhat isolated participants of the world when they socialize if they cannot find a way to integrate injustice to fight it.

This paper begins by showing how the work of David Hume has provided a solid ground for how the connection of emotions to the self can offer a more flexible understanding of the self and consequently a needed re-interpretation of the emotion of pride. After this introductory section, a reflection about self-pity will reveal that in addition to its negative valence it is often described as an immobilizing type of emotional experience. This conception of self-pity reinforces its evaluation and offers people who suffer from it, little to no resources to overcome it. This will then lead to a more optimistic take of self-pity, which enables a reassessment of its role, showing that a proper understanding of its nature requires incorporating a more flexible and dynamic perspective notion of the self. Finally, the concluding remarks point out some of the future possible research directions suggested by the reassessment of self-pity and underline how philosophical reflection on individual emotions amplifies the psychological descriptions already available.

### 1.2. Hume on Pride and Self

David Hume's philosophical work stands as a "pivotal point for the construction of the fictional idea of the self as an agent" [34] (p. 256) and he gives pride a specific place in his explanation of agency, which transforms the meaning of the emotion of pride [33] (p. 269): pride is no longer merely a sin but becomes also a possible mode of self-transformation. It is the connection of pride to agency that makes it possible to describe it as a crucial relationship for personal transformation because it shows that someone can modify themselves by self-examining and critically reassessing what is personally essential, and consequently modify goals of action that can make them proud [34] (p. 266). According to Rorty's explanation, this means that pain and suffering are an unfortunate consequence of the transformative

character of pride, and not a necessary condition for its experiencing. It is because of the inevitable link between pride and the sense of agency that often the things that make people proud require effort and sacrifice [34] (p. 263).

Though some people identify Hume as arguing for the illusionary nature of the self [35] (p. 522), others have identified strong similarities of his work to the narrative conception of the self [36] (p. 700). Even though it may seem that there is an intrinsic problem in Hume's take on personal identity and his description of the emotional nature of people [36] (p. 701), recognizing the important role of passions in making humans conscious of who they are, and who they want to be, dissolves the apparent tension. It is because specific emotions, which are self-conscious emotions, force human beings to recollect past events in relation to future goals that people can overcome their apparent disconnected nature [36] (p. 708). It is far-reaching to note that this grants persons a sense of understanding both other people's feelings and their own [36] (p. 713). The link between self and self-conscious emotions and the possibility of self-transformation makes the notion of self a more malleable and flexible type of identity, and the emotions one can feel about oneself become a very important focus of practical concern [36] (pp. 709–710). Even though Hume might have been skeptical himself of isolated moves of self-reform [34] (p. 266) it is possible to interpret his perspective upon the self as an open-ended narrative and not an "already determined narrative to be given in advance" [36] (p. 716). When interpreted this way, the crucial element is not that of the importance of social communication of excellence of virtue, nor one of sustaining standards of virtue, but instead of enabling the pursue of virtue by recognizing the variable and modifiable nature of the self, while simultaneously revealing the "connections between psychology and politics" [34] (p. 269).

Hume's account of emotions as part of human nature and the ability to pursue virtue makes his theory of passions the foundation for his sentimentalist moral philosophy [37] (p. 171). It is because "Hume's account of the indirect passions enabled him to explain our feelings of moral approval in relation to a more general explanation of sentiments directed at persons" [37] (p. 171), and this makes emotions a crucial element to explain why there can be communication about emotions between people [37] (p. 177). Thus, Hume's account of emotions illuminates other features of his philosophy [38] (p. 15) and helps to explain how someone can experience a passion and identify the same passion happening to someone else [38] (p. 16) Thus, self-awareness is part of the process of sympathetically connecting to others because when people experience emotions they become aware of themselves as selves, and as distinct from other selves [36] (p. 16) As McIntyre adds, this interpretation of Hume's theory of passions is what offers strength to moral sentiment [37] (p. 181). In addition, it makes reasonable people's response to feelings of other people even when they are far away and can be seen as the possibility for a sentiment for humanity in general [37] (p. 179). This justifies how even when people may only have the ideas of the feelings, the suffering and the sentiments of others in certain moments, they nevertheless sympathize with them because of how consciousness about their own feelings gives vividness to other people's feelings [37] (p. 181).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a complete picture of Hume's interpretation of emotions, but it is crucial to indicate how he represents an important example in the history of philosophy on how the reflection upon emotions in connection to the self can be philosophically insightful. Hume's philosophical work illustrates how reflection upon emotions can help reformulate other philosophical conceptions and interconnections, and how it can provide further directions for philosophical inquiry.

## 2. Reassessing Self-Pity

### 2.1. *Self-Pity*

The reflection on self-pity in the literature is scarce, making it a largely neglected area in psychiatry and psychoanalytic literature [39,40] (p. 180; p. 184), and similarly in philosophy. Even though it is something everyone has felt, it is mostly described as a terrible emotional experience and something to be avoided at all cost [39–41]. Self-pity

always has a negative connotation often tied to a pejorative and ironic ring [42–45] (p. 299; pp. 260–263; p. 101; p.70), and although it does not appear on the list of deadly sins, it clearly resembles them, being in close affinity to some sins such as pride and anger [46] (p. 130). The negative take on self-pity is directly linked to a lack of agency associated with an inability to alter situations [47] (p. 301) forcing persons who suffer from it to be immobilized, precisely in moments when action could be essential [46] (p. 144). Even though self-pity includes a strong interpersonal component because it is directed at attracting the attention, care, and help of others, it often results in isolation and loneliness [40] (p. 186). In fact, even if it can initially evoke attention and help from other people [48], when self-pity turns into an ongoing emotional trait of a person it ends up being the source of rejection, and even individuals who may suffer from serious ongoing ailments are only allowed a certain amount of self-pity display [40] (p. 186). Ultimately, independent of the unfortunate circumstances that have befallen people, they are expected to resume life and move beyond complaining or voicing the concerns related to their situation [40,49].

Nevertheless, it is possible to regard self-pity as especially interesting because it sharply illustrates the Janus-faced nature of emotions and how they “tell us something about the world, and they tell us something about ourselves” [20] (p. 323). First, it gives information about the world because it is the identification of a sense of injustice in the world and the impossibility to overcome it. Second, it provides information about the self because it identifies the limits of agency to change the situation at hand for the subject who experiences it. Thus, it is possible to interpret self-pity as an emotion that helps to face injustice because “self-pity is a frequent response to stressful events such as personal failure, loss, or illness” [40] (p. 184), and these can be felt as injustices. To move out of the painful self-pity mode seems to require a transformation of the self which incorporates the new information about the injustice of the world and about the persons’ own inability to cope. This means that we can interpret the final outcome of such emotional processes as a creative response to self-pity in which the self is changed, even if the solution is one of resignation and apparent passivity.

Be that as it may, the bad reputation of self-pity exists because sometimes moving on from self-pity can be difficult and people can become stuck in the sense of having suffered something unfair. It often leads to an increase in self-isolation because the emotion of self-pity seems to narrow attention such that other people’s perspectives are excluded and consequently it may also seem to dismiss how other people may be suffering too [50] (pp. 233–234). Overall, self-pity is prone to make people feel they are in a psychologically deadlock such that it can become a habitual mode of acting, or worse, it can become a part of their character as “in people who have experienced significant developmental arrest of a narcissistic developmental line” [39] (p. 178).

According to Smith, it is possible to interpret isolation as a type of self-imposed reclusion. There is a sense in which the person who suffers from self-pity joins the others in self-loathing themselves. In addition, they cannot stand being with other people because they also cannot improve their situation [50] (p. 234). As if this were not enough for everyone to avoid self-pity at all costs, taking self-pity as a way to recognize an injustice contributes to the way one can see it as a misconstrued sense of justice. This can lead some people who experience self-pity to have a mistaken sense of entitlement. In this case, it may be that they are doubly stuck: stuck by their mistaken conception of justice and the perception of injustice, and also stuck by their inability to move forward. Thus, it is reasonable to evaluate self-pity as a poor and ineffective coping strategy [40] (p. 188), which demonstrates an inability to recognize certain types of failure, losses and injustice because those who suffer from it fail to see the shared common humanity and are excessively busy with their own feelings, with their thoughts and with their life experience [51] (pp. 5–6). Not surprisingly, the psychiatric and psychoanalytic literature point out that the central issue for people who suffer from self-pity is that they have a bigger expectation from the environment than what is given to them [40] (p. 186). Thus, self-pity is generally characterized as “a narcissistic state in which one overestimates one’s misfortunes and believes that one’s

own misfortunes are worse than those of others, or one dwells excessively on one's self-representation as unfortunate" [52] (p. 314) testifying overall to a poor emotional reaction to events.

When self-pity is short lived, the sympathy of others may be sufficient to adjust and diminish the injustice that occurred, but when people have an ongoing tendency to suffer from self-pity and express the belief that their lives are controlled by external factors and that they lack agency over their life [40] (p. 209), the social isolation and loneliness that occurs only serves to increase their perceived lack of agency. In sum, expression of self-pity comes with a time limitation, and if the period of self-pity lasts excessively long it threatens to diminish the sufferer's ability to resonate with others.

## 2.2. Self-Pity for Self-Transformation

It is possible, nonetheless to give a more optimistic take on self-pity by showing the important connection between pity and compassion and transfer it to self-pity and self-compassion.

In "Pity: a mitigated defense" Kristjánsson argues that pity is a "positive moral quality that has instrumental value in developing and sustaining intrinsically valuable state of character, namely compassion" [53] (p. 344). The claim is that in order to feel and cultivate the virtue of compassion one needs to be able to feel pity for other people's misfortunes. Kristjánsson argues that in what concerns compassion, people more commonly make the mistake of erring by deficiency than by excess because it is more frequent for people to not adequately judge how other people's misfortunes feels painful [53] (p. 359). Thus, in order to have a more balanced character it is important to feel excess in specific moments in order to maintain an accurate sense of compassion. Though it has also been argued that there is no self-pity in ancient Greek culture [54], and specifically in the Aristotelian sense [55] (p. 195), Kristjánsson describes another possible interpretation of the Aristotelian picture showing how certain emotions hold a preparatory role for virtues such that pity "is required in a sustenance sense to keep the medial state of compassion alive, just as sporadic displays of wastefulness (qua excess of generosity) are needed to keep generosity alive" [53] (p. 360). In other words, the occasional giving in excess is a way to cultivate the virtue of generosity and not a deviation from it, similar to the way in which pity can offer the ground for adequate compassion [53] (p. 359). Thus, according to Kristjánsson, the Aristotelian perspective recommends the integration of pity as a preparatory emotional experience for the cultivation of virtuous compassion.

According to this description emotions can be preparatory both by helping a developmental process and also by helping people to overcome difficult experiences and gain maturity from them. For example, it is the inevitable pain and suffering of the younger people which allows them to be capable of feeling compassionate [53] (p. 360). Further, emotions are preparatory by the way in which they sustain other needed emotional processes, like how feeling pity can be what is needed to maintain compassion, and how occasional wastefulness may be at the heart of sustaining generosity [53] (p. 360).

Like pity is important for compassion, it is possible to regard moments of self-pity as having a similar role for self-compassion [53]. Taking it a step further, it is possible to imagine that the occasional excessive self-pity may be required to cultivate resilience towards injustice. An illustration may be needed at this point to argue that self-pity can be an appropriate way to deal with an injustice. Imagine a child who wants ice cream before dinner. Children who are not given dessert before the meal even after throwing a tantrum in expression of anger may end up feeling sorry for themselves. Any parents would be right to see this demand and the subsequent self-pity as inappropriate. But now introduce a detail and consider that certain parents sometimes eat ice cream before their meals. Even though they hide it from their child, they are unaware that their child may have seen them doing it. When this information is introduced in the narrative, the parent's decisions about not eating ice cream before a meal can feel more unjust from the child's perspective because it appears not dictated by health concerns, but by how one

is in a position of power to comply or not to the health recommendation. Hopefully the experience of self-pity in such a small matter will not last long enough to be a worry, and the illustration is purposely about something light, in order to show that the transformation required by self-pity can have effects on how persons deal and adapt to future situations. A child who has identified isolated moments of injustice from people they love will have a different way to handle similar moments in other pedagogical settings and acquire a way to incorporate an acceptance towards other people's misdemeanors. However, in order to move on from the self-pity mode in that instance, the child needs to accommodate a different take on parents (and other pedagogical figures) and adjust the way to engage with their wishes in life to prevent future experiences of self-pity. The child may adopt a mode of asking permission before letting themselves be taken by a wish, or they may incorporate an expected sense of injustice from those in a position of power, or may find more elaborate ways to attain their wishes, etc. That is, recognizing that self-pity is a mode of dealing with injustices as to self-transform oneself by recognizing the inability to cope with a situation requires a more detailed description of the situation. A parent without this insight about self-pity may take their child's reaction as irrational, and a parent aware of this possible reading of self-pity may inquire into what makes the event feel unfair as to overcome the miscommunication [56].

This means that it is possible to propose a different interpretation of the way people experience self-pity and suggest that instead of trying to ban it as a type of inconvenient emotion, one can respect the experience and even argue that "[b]anning inconvenient emotions serves the interest of those who benefit from the status quo and do not want to be confronted with the pain they have caused" [46] (p. 146). Under this new interpretation, regarding self-pity as a poor emotional coping mechanism actually boosts the feelings of self-pity because it increases people's misfortunes. It prolongs their misery by not letting them and others recognize their perspective on the boundaries between justice and injustice, nor on the need to be resilient to keep going. That is, "[a]t bottom, the command to 'let it go' is an order to shut up. In a system in which social responsibility and emotional maturity demand containment, expressing one's pain loudly brings offense" [46] (p. 146). The given illustration of self-pity of the child may not be sufficient to argue for this suggestion. But now imagine you are asking a person arrested under a fascist regime to stop feeling sorry for themselves, such as in Portugal during the times of the dictatorship [57]. During the regime known as *Estado Novo* (1933–1974) in Portugal, which was to be one of the longest-surviving authoritarian governments in the twentieth century in Europe, scores of political activists were arrested. Many of the arrests took place in the early 1960s, a time in which the country grappled with an academic crisis that further increased the atmosphere of fear. Countless student organizations were shuttered, and many professors were either fired or isolated. These unfair arrests have had long lasting emotional consequences to this day by promoting a type of inherited fear which plays out even in situations where danger is not clear [58]. In this scenario in which people are being arrested under unjust laws, it strikes one as absurd to deny people the insightful nature of their experience of self-pity, and it may amplify their distress [40] (p. 214). Denying people self-pity in this case is more easily seen as a way to annihilate the recognition of its role as an emotional strategy to deal with injustices as well as denying their only resource to keep up the recognition of a lack of justice. And, even though that historical period has thankfully been overcome, its emotional consequences remain. If it is really the case that thirty years after the regime of fear, the Portuguese continue to live with it, and that "Portuguese society and the Portuguese have not lost the fear" [59] (p. 78), then the lack of identifying moments of self-pity about the impact of the past also amounts to lack of self-knowledge. This is not merely a problem of Portugal but a global problem of contemporary politics. For self-knowledge it is important to keep up the ability for self-transformation, and similar to the analysis offered by Kristjánsson [53], self-pity is necessary to keep the ability for self-compassion alive, and also to make sure that the different aspects of the self are coordinated in order to keep up the humanistic take of compassion [59].

What separates the social acceptance of an occasion of self-pity from its condemnation seems to be connected to its duration. However, not recognizing the link of self-pity to self-transformation and an important step towards self-compassion, may make the occasion last even longer. This means that avoiding the person who suffers from self-pity can further alienate the person from their own sense of self and their idea of justice. And makes it possible to suggest that perhaps it is precisely the lack of recognition of the more general impact of self-pity which turns it into an inadequate emotional experience.

### 2.3. *Self-Pity as an Imaginative Tour de Force and a Dynamical Conception of the Self*

The above description about the role of self-pity for coping with a damaged sense of justice provides a more positive interpretation, and we can find echo of such take on self-pity in the writings of Max Scheler. In "Fellow Feeling, Benevolence, Forms and Kinds of Love," Max Scheler writes,

For it is said of someone that he "pities himself" or that he "rejoices to find himself so happy today" (statements which undoubtedly designate phenomena of a quite different kind), a closer analysis invariably discloses the presence of an element of fantasy, in which the person concerned regards himself "as if he were someone else" and shares his own feelings in this (fictitious) capacity [60] (p. 72)

Here, Scheler proposes to take self-pity as a modified version of pity in which one requires oneself to look at one's own self as if one were another. Thus, its excruciating pain is also due to the way it "demands an imaginative tour de force: we must stand outside ourselves in a fantastic doubling" [50] (p. 233). In fact, when the reflective element is introduced, self-pity appears as a transformative mode of coping, which aims to modify the meaning of the event by the emotional attitude adopted.

It is more reasonable to explain why a person may need solitude when we see self-pity in this way because it recognizes it as a self-conscious emotion that requires becoming two in order to help process what has happened. If there are many people around the person who suffers from self-pity trying to help them out to move one from what has affected them, it may be too difficult for that person to carry out a conversation with themselves. Smith writes,

"splitting ourselves in two like this, self-pity seems a rather beneficial emotion: when things don't go our way, one half of us gets to feel superior to the other, enjoying the relief that pitying someone else can bring" [50] (p. 233)

The duplication within the self is what offers the person a sense of hope that the experience is going to be processed and overcome.

Taken in this way, self-pity can be placed among self-conscious emotions not simply because it is directed at the self but because it involves a self-evaluative process that requires self-awareness and self-representation. Although the literature of self-conscious emotions has often not included an analysis of self-pity, it is easily identifiable that self-pity shares the three general components of self-conscious emotions: first, it is usually experienced in interpersonal contexts and incorporates a sense of public analysis of the self, as well as public comparisons between the self and others; second, it entails a self-referential evaluative process, and finally it has an impact on different aspects of the self and on behavior.

To take up this different perspective on self-pity it is necessary to have a notion of self that adequately fits into this modified version. The literature on self-conscious emotions usually refers to the notion of self either as non-problematic or by placing a specific adjective that captures an aspect of the self, following the general theoretical procedures available [61] (p. 2). While it is also true that the literature on self-conscious emotions recognizes that "[o]ne of the major ways in which humans differ from nonhuman animals is that they have a complex sense of self" [25] (p. 189), it is nonetheless also the case that the concept of the self is never defined clearly [61] (p. 2). Given that the manner in which one refers to the self

is insufficient to capture the richness of the concept, it always leaves the reflection upon self-conscious emotions somewhat incomplete.

In general, it is possible to distinguish two types of conceptions of the self in social sciences and the humanities. There is the self as a principle of unity (of a variety of preferences, values, images, etc.), and the self as a fragmented entity [62]. More recently, a dynamical conception of the self has provided a different way to understand the connection of the self with emotions because it conceives it as a dynamic process, rather than an entity unified or fragmented. This conception of the self enables seeing it as a dynamic process of becoming [35,61] and is more capable of capturing how emotions fluctuate and are in “constant interaction with the fluctuations in other emotions or emerge from interactions between emotion components themselves” [63] (p. 23). When a dynamical conception of the self is theoretically introduced, it is easier to see self-pity as transformational coping mechanism that may take different periods depending on the types of changes required. This is another reason to consider as to why a dynamical conception of the self can better accommodate the zestful nature of emotions.

This dynamic conception of the self can be based on the proposal of a pattern theory of the self [61,64], which provides a deeper way to explore the link between emotions and self. The pattern of self enables seeing how its narrative component reflectively reiterates the self, and also that “every emotion experienced will be uniquely influenced, and in some cases dramatically shifted, by the involvement of self-processes” [25] (p. 190). Understanding the self in terms of a pattern is to view it as a complex cluster of aspects which in isolation cannot count as the self, and that “selves operate as complex systems that emerge from dynamic interactions of constituent aspects” [63] (p. 3). Gallagher proposed a tentative list of different aspects of the self that include (1) minimal embodied aspects that include biological and ecological aspects; (2) minimal experiential from pre-reflective experience; (3) affective aspects; (4) intersubjective aspects; (5) psychological and cognitive aspects; (6) narrative aspects; (7) extended aspects; and (8) situated aspects [64], (pp. 3–4). In addition, it may reveal how certain self-conscious emotions are influenced by self-processes because “dynamical self-patterns involve and are revealed in self-narratives” [61] (p. 1). Gallagher’s pattern of the self is capable of capturing “the plurality of factors involved in self and the idea that the self (as an agent) is more ‘in the world’ than ‘in the brain’” [61] (p. 2) and in this way may provide an ideal topography to grasp the social and interpersonal nature of self-conscious emotions. In fact, the pattern theory of the self may provide the model of the self which can accommodate the suggestions that emotions change and transform, and that “discontinuities deserve a much more prominent role in models of personality growth” [31] (p. 53). This can provide a robust philosophical picture of the self to explain why emotions can be both malleable to adapt to specific situations while simultaneously maintain a stable structure throughout people’s lives [31] (p. 53). That is, when we combine the suggestion of Scheler that the self is really pitying itself with the notion of a dynamic conception of the self, we attain a more complex picture of the overall emotional experience of self-pity. Among other things, the dynamic conception of the self can provide a deeper analysis of what aspect of the self is being pitied, and how it can be specifically changed.

The suggestion is that looking at self-conscious emotions through the pattern of the self can offer a new way to relate the different aspects of the self with each other and reinforce the place of agency in connection to emotional processes, despite their apparent passivity. Further insights upon self-conscious emotions, namely their regulatory role, can help to explain why the sense of self is an enduring, yet modifiable organizational whole because it is made upon partial resolutions of emotionally charged events over the course of several years [31] (p. 57). The pattern of self indicates how various aspects of the self are interrelated in important ways such as to enable self-transformation by decision. As Gallagher writes,

“the sense of agency in some basic way may be tied to motor control and the sensory-motor operations of the body, but it is also related to social and cultural norms and

expectations (which may place limitations on agency) and to psychological/cognitive processes of deliberation and decision making” [65] (p. 5)

In other words, because the pattern of self can offer a plural way to consider agency, the interconnectedness of the different aspects of the self can provide a more complete description of the emotional processes and, in turn, it can show how self-processes interact with emotions and with its own structure.

A dynamic conception of the self can also be taken up by adopting the “suggestion of the self as a historical product of dialectical attunement across multiple times scales, from species evolution and culture to individual development and everyday learning” [35] (p. 521). This helps to better demonstrate that the notion of self-conscious emotions is connected to various emotional layers and how they pertinently interact with each other, while also highlighting how the contemporary literature about the self “appears divided in a number of different roles, such as ‘self-image’, ‘self-conception’, ‘self-discovery’, ‘self-confidence’, etc” [35] (p. 522). All these self-referential processes need to be integrated to expand the notion of self and recognize that it is impossible to understand the self independently of the body, social interaction, and society in general [35] (p. 522). This highlights that when a person changes the world, she also changes herself because by acting on the environment she acts on how she embodies its structure and dynamics [35] (p. 524).

In addition, and more poignantly, it also means that when self-transformation occurs it simultaneously transforms the environment since it changes the person’s participation in the world. No matter how slight the change, the transformation that occurs testifies to how the self also participates in the transformation of the world, reinforcing the link between self-awareness, affect and the world. That is, even though organisms straightforwardly comply to either adjusting themselves to reality or changing reality [35] (p. 524), adjustments can also be taken as a mode of changing reality in which persons contribute to the maintenance of the world as it is or contribute to promoting specific changes in the world however subtle they may be.

By taking up self-conscious processes as ways to transform the self also entails suggesting that whenever self-transformation occurs and modifies the environment there inevitably also requires a reconfiguration of the self itself [35] (p. 529) creating a loop between self, emotional processes and the world. This more detailed description of how emotions interfere with the different aspects of the self may also offer a renewed way to understand Hume’s insights about the nature of self-conscious emotions, and the way in which the literature on self-conscious emotions usually deals mostly with emotions such as shame, guilt, and pride [25,66,67].

#### *2.4. Resilience against Injustice*

In sum, there is a way in which we can understand self-pity as a type of self-nurturing which allows people to express a painful experience. It is by expressing and sharing these painful narratives with others that people control and heal from them [46] (p. 129). Further, it can be argued that sometimes being able to express one’s sufferings and the injustices that one has experienced is the only way to be recognized as an agent that could not do otherwise. This description of self-pity makes it easier to see that there are many moments in life which can give rise to feeling sorry for oneself with varying degrees of intensity. It is not only the loss of a loved one or the loss of a job that can cause self-pity, but also much less-grave occurrences such as being treated with indifference by someone intimate due to the daily rush, “or simply not getting enough attention may provoke feelings of self-pity” [40] (p. 185). And in some serious occurrences it may be the only way to make clear to those who participated in the injustice the pain they have caused [46] (p. 129).

Though empirical study of emotional outcomes of unfair situations and processes are under-researched [68], the most well-known emotional response to injustice is anger, which has most famously been described as the appropriate response to the perception of injustice [69] (pp. 1135b28–1135b29). The philosophical tradition that establishes the link

and sees anger as the recognition that a serious wrong was committed reaches as far back to Aristotle and is still strong nowadays in contemporary philosophical literature [70].

The suggestion that self-pity is decisive for adaptation to an environment that cannot be changed makes it an important candidate for learning to live in an unjust world. The way in which emotions are one of the mental tools to overcome unjust situations, as to prevent them as much as possible from happening again is given mostly by the way in which they guide agency. If we consider that anger is a way to promote action to correct unfairness, then we can consider self-pity as a way to promote action that changes how the self is adapted to the overall environment. The experience of a powerless state in the face of injustice installs an emotional tension in which the person feels incapable of action while also feeling they should act in some way. The suggested argument is that this makes the person immobilized and in need to revise the values and the way they are overall organized in life, or so it is now proposed. As Otis describes,

“For the disempowered, publicly baring one’s wounds may be the only course of redress available. The keynote in condemnations of self-pity is a drive to blame individuals for their own pains. For those who have suffered, self-pity can be empowering, as long as it does not last a lifetime” [46] (p.129)

That is, injustices that can be easily forgotten and overcome can be kept in people memory as a way to remember that the world is not always a just place, and thus self-pity can be interpreted as a temporary indulgence which everyone is entitled [50] (p. 233). Of course, self-pity is not the only emotion that can have that role and obviously self-pity is not the sole emotional response towards the self [69]. Nevertheless, because self-pity can modify the self in more than one way, it targets the self in an incomparable fashion. And, for example, when we compare self-pity to other similar self-conscious emotion such as self-compassion, we can better see the way in which self-pity cannot be easily processed and is a much more demanding emotional experience.

Self-compassion is described as having more benefits because it breaks the way self-absorption can be detrimental and instead relates one’s own suffering to other people’s similar processes. In this way, self-compassion manages the pain in a type of mindful awareness that contributes for a better well-being [51] (p.6). So, it would seem that self-compassion is more desirable and better for growth and overcoming emotional stagnation [55]. However, self-pity forces transformation and it may be a necessary step for genuine self-compassion, as pity may be taken as a needed preparatory emotion for compassion, Self-pity demands transformation in a way that self-compassion cannot because of how it causes pain. If we accept Aristotle’s description that pity is a kind of pain [45] (p. 129), and that consequently self-pity is also a kind of pain, it is possible to further suggest that it is precisely the painful character of its nature which forcefully demands change in a way which self-compassion cannot. When people experience an injustice which they cannot remedy, their default mode is to feel self-pity as a way to overcome the identified injustice, as to transform the world by transforming a certain type of participation.

In contrast, it seems that self-compassion demands only to accept the powerless position of an instance without much need for a transformation. The pain that accompanies self-pity is uncomfortable and makes people move in the directions of change as to transform the conditions of the overall experience. This move does not have to be extraordinary or require a huge amount of effort. Yet the acceptance demands that something is changed within the self, even if the transformation is simply an adjustment of the expectations for future experience. And the transformation is only successfully felt to the extent that it appeases the pain. And it may be the case that sometimes a simple adjustment of feelings, expectations or action are insufficient and, worse, sometimes it may not be clear what needs change, leaving the person who suffers from self-pity trapped by her own self.

The expression of self-pity is therefore important if one considers that those that express it are looking for clarity. The duplication enables the subject to engage in dialogue with oneself and by communicating the experience to oneself, the person attempts to acquire clarity and keep up the need to move to install some change, transformation or

adjustment that erases the sense of pain. At this point the pattern of self can provide a deeper interpretation because transformation may occur in minimal embodied aspects that include biological and ecological aspects, or affective aspects which are not visible in a conscious manner. In fact, the presentation of the self as a pattern can accommodate how self-organization can suffer instability and, instead of gradual changes, there may be sudden changes which illustrate how “self-organizing systems jump abruptly to new stabilities, and they do so at all scales” [33] (p. 41). This means that the pattern self can capture sub-personal descriptions of transformation located in minimal embodied aspects and these minimal transformations may not need to be self-consciously experienced.

The self-transformation required by moments of self-pity may be hard to describe and not easily identifiable as in some cases in which the layered emotional processes regulate the overall emotional experience. And given that there are many ways of self-transformation, an event may simply require a regulation of emotions experience, which also can be carried out in a variety of ways [71]. For example, it can be attained by meta-emotional processes such as when people are embarrassed about their jealousy and overcome the first order experience altogether.

The isolation of self-pity and the way it stands as a self-imposed immobility precisely at the moment when movement seems essential [46] (p. 144) suggests that something complex is at stake. For instance, it may mean that it requires different types of changes for the self-transformation to happen. Some modification may occur during a resting state and underlie once more the importance of sleep for self-preservation. It has been suggested that there is a type of regulatory mechanism in the emotional landscape in which the resting state plays a significant role for emotional experience as a type of calibration [72] (p. 165). Calibration can be required when certain changes occur and can be seen as a part of the overall attunement process. For example, it is a good idea to calibrate a scanner every time a new toner is added to best coordinate the printed output. Calibration is also important when certain occurrences and events put into question previous modes of operation, such as when an instrument has been exposed to a shock or some physical damage compromises the previous calibration. These types of regulatory processes may be part of processes of adaptation to the environment identified in the notion of self as a historical product of dialectical attunement, but calibration is different from attunement because it is concerned also with the internal structure besides aiming to contribute to the flexible adaptation to external changes in specific situations and in the overall environment.

Given that attunement occurs at various scales: there is a low-level attunement which is achieved beyond the level of awareness and is largely automatic during embodied interactions [35] (p. 530), and there is also a high-level attunement which captures the full complexity of the human mind as an active environmental reflection [35] (p. 530). Thus, it is also possible to conceive that calibration can occur both at different levels and contribute to the overall process of attunement which can happen simultaneously or not.

If one conceives of calibration as a needed process whenever something has been exposed to a shock or physical damage that compromises its functioning [69] (p. 166), it is possible to interpret sleep as one moment in which people calibrate their self-organization structure. If the self can be taken as a pattern, then it is possible to suggest that some passive moments are needed to calibrate the self-organization structure, while others require consciousness (even though not necessarily self-consciousness). In line with these various suggestions, it is possible to consider self-pity as another strategy for this type of regulatory mechanism because the self-isolation and absence of social activity may provide a similar opportunity for calibration. If self-pity is taken as a calibration mechanism, then the way it forces a reasonable delay on social harmony among peers may be the best way to enforce the necessary changes for future experiences, and better explain why only with the full transformation can the person abandon self-pity. Some instances of felt injustice may require calibration at different levels and need a calibration stage which, unlike emotional calibration undergone in the resting state, requires people’s consciousness while not consciously processing the changes.

In sum, similar to the way various instruments can require calibration it may be the case that selves require moments of solitude and experiences of passivity and resignation to calibrate the different aspects of the self and their dynamic interconnectedness. If this is the case, the apparent cruelty of the social norm to treat those who suffer from ongoing self-pity with disapproval may be merely an unfortunate consequence of the process of transformation which requires isolation. In fact, it is possible to assume that once the person who feels self-pity is pitied by others, she will also feel inadequate about that emotional reaction of others. The goal of self-pity is not, as in the case of anger, that others recognize the injustice and the source of pity but is rather an elaborated sense of responsibility for the world and the need to transform as to better contribute to the eradication of injustices. If this is correct, then self-pity is completely different from self-compassion even if it partly depends on it and stands as a preparatory mode for it.

Under this hypothetical interpretation self-pity grants a clear evaluation of injustice in the world, an important need to self-transform without denying the injustice of the world. Despite the felt inability to change, self-pity functions as an indirect way to deal with injustice demanding a more radical effort for self-transformation. As such, it enables a new interpretation of resignation and passivity because it shows that mere acceptance found in self-compassion is possibly a consequence of self-pity, a stage in which people undergo self-transformations in face of situations which they consider hopeless and tragic. Incapable of changing the injustice or the state of the world which led to it, people isolate themselves to install some change in themselves in order to prevent it from happening again. Consequently, social expectations that are based on “[b]anning inconvenient emotions serves the interests of those who benefit from the status quo and do not want to be confronted with the pain they have caused. At bottom, the command to ‘let it go’ is an order to shup up” [46] (p. 146).

### 3. Concluding Remarks

The paper showed that it is possible to interpret self-pity as a demand for self-transformation. In this interpretation self-pity is much more than an unfortunate emotional occurrence [73] and is, in fact, a way to maintain resilience against injustice. To continue to believe in changing the world into a better place requires people to accept their own participation in what can be described as an unjust world, and self-pity can be seen as part of making out what is within the scope of personal agency and how to be able to still be able to identify injustices, even when nothing can be done to change them. Nevertheless, the undergone reflection is simply a beginning to a more complete revision of the literature on self-pity.

Some topics already outlined in the paper suggest that the revised understanding of self-pity needs further philosophical work to be fully accomplished. One would need to develop research on how the phenomena of self-pity can be taken as fitting and morally appropriate depending on the sense of justice at stake. And, what is its prudential value for the overall emotional landscape, given the way in which other emotional experiences are tied to ideas about justice and fairness, and how misguided senses of justice can affect emotional experience. Also, a more detailed connection between the layered structure of the emotional landscape and self-conscious emotions is needed for a proper understanding of the impact of taking up a dynamical conception of the self. In addition, further philosophical reflection is needed to complement empirical research, and to verify in which way philosophical research can be corroborated by empirical data. For example, for a more precise analysis it would be important to survey how self-pity varies across different social and cultural settings. Also, future research work ideally should be able to ground the distinction left unexamined between what makes the shift from experiencing something as terrible, to the self-conscious move of feeling sorry for oneself for having experienced something unfair [45,54] (p. 65; p. 1;) and subsequent moves to a position of resilience. The link between self-pity and the pattern theory of self may also be able to provide further clues to better understand the various subtle self-transformation that can possibly occur.

All this added research could perhaps enable a more precise definition of the inter-connected terminology of empathy, sympathy, compassion and pity, as well as how to establish a fruitful dialogue with other philosophical figures who reflected deeply about the importance of emotions such as Aristotle, Sartre, and Dewey. In what concerns the argument for a reassessment of self-pity, the philosophical analysis does not aim to be a substitution of the psychological evaluation already given in the literature. The overall goal is to show that a philosophical analysis of emotions can amplify already established research in other areas and reveal pertinent links to other philosophical concepts ultimately reinforcing the importance of certain research directions. Otherwise, philosophy would not have much to add to the already existing rich and prolific research on psychology of emotions.

Thus, the connection of self-pity to a resilience against injustice increases its meaning to the already available psychological description and points out other ways in which self-pity is an emotion that is still waiting for a more detailed analysis within the self-conscious emotion literature [67]. The philosophical input strives to contribute by taking up the logic of emotions [74,75] which complements their psychological description by pointing out future research directions. For example, the present suggestion about self-pity highlights in the long run the importance of considering the problematic issue of consciousness or lack of it for emotional processes [76], indicating that interesting consequences may be attained in comparing and contrasting the literature from various fields of expertise regarding this issue for a continuous rigorous Emotion Theory [67,77–82].

The present reflection has already indicated some of the richness for further exploring and amplifying self-pity because it is now easier to explain why people appear stuck in self-pity modes. Also, it suggests a better understanding of self-pity's potential for being regarded as a creative move to deal with stressful situations, which can in the future be highly important given that self-pity reactions have been identified in differences in individual experience of depression [40] (p. 186). In addition, future research may provide insights from the pattern theory of self that may even offer different resources to help people identify how and when they can move out of the self-pity mode without ignoring the felt injustices. This new interpretation could prove to be helpful for therapists to better relate to their patients who suffer from self-pity and recognize it is not just another emotional response which excessively focuses on the self, but its strong interpersonal component is linked to the meaning of justice. This turns self-pity into a deeply revealing emotion of the human capacity for self-transformation, for overcoming human limitations and revealing that it "can be a deeply reality-revealing emotion" [52] (p. 313).

To conclude, the suggestion that self-pity is a way to face up injustices without dismissing them fosters an education of emotion that cultivates awareness of feelings beyond the identification of discrete emotions [83–86]. The hypothetical possibility that self-pity is a more important self-conscious emotion than has been recognized so far, and that it may stand as an important anchor to act against injustice should make us wonder about a society in which "social responsibility and emotional maturity demand containment" [46] (p. 146) and where suppression of pain is the general educational recommendation. Given that self-conscious emotions trigger and maintain a relationship of the self with itself in various ways, the education of emotion should deliberately cultivate awareness of feelings as a form of preventive healthcare.

Since it is by now clear that the ability to regulate emotions is crucial for healthy functioning [87], and that self-conscious emotions are undoubtedly an added strategy for healthy emotional regulation, the meaning of self-pity may be modified even if its valence cannot be changed. And self-pity connection to resilience may turn out to be especially important for the education of emotions. It may be the case that the amplitude of self-transformation is tied to the way in which self-development has been cultivated as to empower emotions regulative and reflexive character more generally. That is, if self-conscious emotions have the regulatory then being aware of one's feelings and their layered nature is central for a type of preventive take on mental health, then maintaining a good

emotional well-being is necessary for a fairer world and it depends on insightfully linking it to agency and explore the various interconnections between emotions and choice [88].

In light of what Hume's work did to the notion of pride, and what can be similarly attained by reflecting on self-pity, one may add that an analogous philosophical analysis can be made for other emotions as to show that there is a logical force that guides the emotional landscape and can complement the already available psychological descriptions.

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