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The Field of Pathology as a Stimulus for Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract

Pathology can raise the philosophical question of whether humans share a common identity or are unique individuals. Traditional Pathology examines diseases at a morphological level, highlighting the similarities between people, while molecular Pathology studies diseases at a genetic level, emphasizing the uniqueness and diversity of each person. While humans share a common nature, their individuality should be recognized and celebrated. According to Aristotle, genus is the broader category that describes the common characteristics shared by a group of things, while species is a narrower category that distinguishes one thing from another. Our article offers a nuanced exploration of the philosophical debate surrounding individuality versus shared identity while acknowledging the complexities involved and advocates for inclusivity without assimilation. Similarities are shared experiences and differences are different ways of seeking satisfaction and beauty in life. Differences are not necessarily divisive and should never be the source of hatred or conflict. A sense of the differences between people, instead of triggering often disheartening comparisons, should lead individuals to live their lives authentically, in accordance with their existential identity and thoughts, as they really are, different from others, while always respecting the others' freedom, however. On the other hand, similarities are not necessarily identical. The sense of similarity of all people, instead of leading to leveling, must encourage individuals to view others from their perspective as equals and integral parts of themselves. This perspective can be a means for personal fulfillment, as any good that is offered to others is also returned to oneself.

Keywords

Pathology, Humanities, Equality, Diversity, Well-Being

1. Introduction: Our Starting Point of Thinking

The pathologist is required daily to recognize the similarity and diversity of cells, tissues, and organs. Physiological elements are organized in terms of order and homogeneity, while abnormal elements clearly stand out. The pathologist deals with both the cell, i.e., the structural unit at the beginning of life, and the autopsy, i.e. the end of life, thus covering the entire spectrum of human existence. The doctor-patient relationship involves two distinct, different roles: while some doctors sometimes feel in a position of power, as the patient's illness is safely outside their "ego" and outside the egos of their beloved ones, it is certain that at some point the doctor will find himself/herself (and some of his/her beloved) in the patient's position.

In cases where the doctor is a pathologist, he/she will probably be able to examine samples from his/her own organs, tissues, and cells. He/she will then realize, in the most tangible way, how much he/she looks like his/her patients and, at the level of morphology, that he/she is completely identical to them. The tissues of humans (but also of animals) are impressively identical at a morphological level but, due to differences in tiny parts of the genome, the corresponding beings become definitively unique and can thus be regarded as different from each other. All human genetic variation falls within 0.1% of the DNA of two modern humans (Witherspoon et al., 2007). The field of pathology can inspire philosophical contemplation on the nature of human existence.

Pathologists are tasked with recognizing both the similarities and differences between cells, tissues, and organs. As already stated, they deal with the entire spectrum of human life, from the microscopic level of individual cells to the macroscopic level of post-mortem examinations. Philosophy, on the other hand, seeks to understand the human condition more broadly, including the nature of the soul, ethics, politics, and love. Its ultimate goal is not just to gain knowledge but to live well and help others do the same. Both fields offer unique perspectives on the nature of human existence, and together they reveal the interconnectedness and fundamental unity of humanity. Pathology, with its focus on recognizing both the physical resemblance and individuality of humans, offers a scientific lens that can complement philosophical exploration. Philosophy, in turn, provides a broader context for considering the implications of pathology's findings and insights. Ultimately, the integration of scientific and philosophical perspectives can deepen our understanding of the complexities of human existence and guide us towards a more meaningful and fulfilling life (Kalachanis et al., 2018).

This paper suggests that authentic happiness and equality arise not from uniformity or social comparison, but from acknowledging the shared human experiences revealed through the lens of medicine and pathology—such as illness, aging, and death—while affirming each person's unique existential identity. By integrating philosophical, psychological, and medical perspectives, the paper contends that well-being is best cultivated through empathy, freedom, and meaningful connection, rather than conformity or superiority.

2. Philosophy as a Way of Life

Philosophy has its roots in ancient Greece, where it began as a way of explaining the universe and our place within it. Early philosophers sought to understand the natural world and the laws that govern it, as well as the fundamental principles that underlie our existence, without resorting to divine intervention (Kalachanis et al., 2018). However, over time, philosophy's focus shifted from the cosmos to the human condition, including ethics, politics, love, and the nature of the human soul. This shift is evident in many Platonic dialogues such as the Republic and the Symposium, which focus on human issues. These dialogues reveal how philosophy is not just an abstract pursuit, but a way of living and thinking that is deeply intertwined with our everyday lives. Socrates, a prominent philosopher in ancient Greece, embodied the integration of philosophy into everyday life. His life and death demonstrate how philosophy is about cultivating wisdom and a way of life guided by reason, ethics, and truth. Philosophy is not a specialized discipline or an academic pursuit, but rather something that is relevant to everyone, in every aspect of their lives (Aho, 2014).

The ultimate goal of philosophy is not just to understand the world or ourselves but to live well and to help others do the same. In the Apology of Socrates (38a, 5), Plato mentions a famous quote of the philosopher according to which "the unexamined life is not worth living". Philosophy challenges us to examine our lives, question our assumptions, and strive for a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the world (Plato, 2016).

For this purpose, Philosophy actually has to be a way of living rather than being strictly a field of professional philosophers (Aho, 2014). Such a practical and simple way of living was adopted by Epicurus and his followers, who offered helpful advice on how to deal with adversity and challenging emotional content, and they were quite correct in articulating the circumstances of happiness. Less well received were Epicurus' beliefs that people should isolate themselves from society and that happiness is the same as the absence of sorrow. This led him to believe that, if one is in the correct frame of mind, happiness will come naturally and that one need not actively seek out interactions with the environment in order to improve one's life conditions (Bergsma et al., 2008) Later, in the 19th century, Marx famously criticized previous philosophy by saying that the point of philosophy is not to know things, or even to know things about activity, but rather to change them (Sitton, 2010).

3. Similarity or Diversity?

The question of whether we are all unique individuals or share a common identity has been a topic of philosophical inquiry for centuries. While each person is indeed unique and should be respected as such, there are also many similarities between individuals that arise from shared culture, as explained by Aristotle's concepts of genus and species (Trepanier, 2014). In Aristotle's natural categorization, genus refers to the common entity or category to which many species belong. For

example, the genus "animal" includes many species, such as birds, reptiles, and mammals. A species refers to a specific entity belonging to a particular genus. For Aristotle, the distinction between genus and species was important for understanding the nature of things and their natural order. Therefore, in Aristotle's logic, man is the genus, and each individual is a unique species of that genus, with unique characteristics and peculiarities. Our connection to humanity is also obvious from our social nature. Humans are by nature social beings as Rousseau and Aristotle have argued, and we are bound to each other (Hamedi, 2014). However, it is also a fact that others may not understand us, and we may not even understand ourselves at times. Yet, we can recognize ourselves in others when they attract us, when they suffer, or when they think like us (Hossain & Ali, 2014), a trait which is also known as empathy (Riess, 2017). The philosophical opposition of whether we are all unique individuals or share a common identity is a complex and multifaceted issue. While our individuality makes us unique and irreplaceable, our connection to humanity is undeniable due to our shared culture and social nature. Similarly, the Hegelian movement marked the first point at which the constitution of the self did not take place from within the self—as happened for Descartes (Curley, 1984; Berenson, 1982), for whom the only truth was the truth of "my" existence; with Leibniz (Datta, 1936), for whom the monads were "windowless"; or with Fichte (Altman, 2018) for whom the "I" was absolutely self-constitutive–but from the outside. Heidegger was probably right in seeing being with others as an essential element of being human (Withy, 2022). In his view, our existence is always a shared existence, and we are always in a world with others. Heidegger believed that our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world comes from our interactions with others, which help us to recognize ourselves as unique individuals within a shared cultural context (Withy, 2022). The question of individuality versus shared identity is also relevant to the field of pathology, which seeks to understand and classify diseases based on their unique characteristics and symptoms. Pathology recognizes that each disease is a unique entity, with its own set of causes, manifestations, and treatments. At the same time, it acknowledges that diseases can also share common features, such as their underlying mechanisms or risk factors. By understanding both the individuality and commonalities of diseases, pathology can help diagnose, treat, and prevent a wide range of health conditions, ultimately improving the lives of individuals and communities (Robbins et al., 2010). In conclusion, the question of whether we are all unique individuals or share a common identity is a complex one that has been explored by philosophers throughout history. While our individuality sets us apart and makes us irreplaceable, our connection to humanity is undeniable due to our shared culture and social nature.

4. How Is Diversity Defined?

In spite of the fact that humans share many things in common, several differences among groups of people and individuals arise in certain issues such as: ethnicity,

race, gender, geographical area, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, professional and personal background, interests, cultures, world and life viewpoints, life experiences, skills, career interests, aptitude, perspectives, hobbies, exceptionalities, language, political leanings, religion, etc. Diversity should generally not necessitate only respect and tolerance for difference, i.e. a kind of positive acceptance of a belief that, for some reason, we still do not find as attractive as the one we hold. Diversity should necessitate the inclusion of those who are not the majority, just as they really are, without seeking to absorb the other into the horizons of one's own self-understanding—i.e. unity in diversity, not in similarity (McLaughlin, 1992). What is also of major interest is the Aristotelian account of diversity, which focuses not on individual interest but on the common good. Actually, the particular objectives and virtue of the political community exist for the benefit of the whole. According to Aristotle, this is civic education's ultimate goal. Therefore, when pursuing the common good, well-educated citizens must strike a balance between their own interests, those of the political community, and morality itself. Personal interest, odd goals, and virtue are examples of the variety of goods that can only exist if pluralistic institutions and a variety of goods are preserved (Trepanier, 2014) The issue of promoting harmful practices in the name of cultural diversity is closely related to the philosophical branch of ethics. Such practices can have severe consequences for individuals and communities, as evidenced by female genital mutilation and child brides, which are recognized as unethical by international organizations. Promoting these practices in the name of diversity can lead to physical and psychological harm. The promotion of harmful practices also raises fundamental human rights concerns, as the universality of these rights can have implications for individuals, including the restriction of certain behaviors or actions that conflict with the rights of others. This highlights the need for ethical justifications for human rights and a simultaneous acknowledgement of pluralism and particularity. The foundation for an ethical approach to human rights lies in the recognition of human dignity and the uniqueness of individuals with respect to their autonomy. Protecting and promoting human rights is crucial for respecting diversity.

5. Differences Easily Trigger Comparisons

In the Platonic dialogue "Theaetetus", Plato mentions that the human mind, in order to gain knowledge, very often makes comparisons (Halvorson & Higgins, 2013) (Kalachanis, 2014). Stoic (Hooft & Athanassoulis, 2014) and contemporary philosophy, psychological research, and religion explain how to escape, or at least tame, insidious social comparison and make space for a more considered life. The theory of "social comparisons" states that there is a natural drive within people to evaluate their own attributes (looks, wealth, and capabilities) by looking to others. The phenomenon of social comparison has been extensively studied in social psychology as it is a fundamental mechanism that shapes people's judgments, experiences, and behavior. Individuals engage in constant comparisons with others,

which can evoke universal human emotions such as pride, admiration, and envy. Researchers have sought to understand why people engage in social comparisons, who they compare themselves to, and how social comparisons affect the self (Chadee, 2022). By comparing ourselves with others, we perceive what we look like and how we differ from them, so we manage to better understand who we are. However, when social comparison becomes a dominant mode of functioning, we are more likely to harm than help ourselves. Chronic "comparing" starts to be detrimental when it leaves us constantly feeling that we lack what everybody else seems to have (Butler et al., 1994). It is hardly an objective view, of course, but our view of how favorably (or unfavorably) we compare to others is often a contributory factor in our level of self-esteem. When one searches hard enough, one can always find someone bigger, stronger, richer, more beautiful/handsome, cleverer, or happier (at least outwardly). Some people over-estimate the attributes of others while under-estimating their own talents. Social comparison is a key driver in modern social media use, often resulting in anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially among youth. Understanding this dynamic could promote digital well-being programs in schools. In other fields such as Economy, many people tend not to use their income to meet their needs, but mainly to compare themselves with other people and appear to be superior: "most of us feel better if we make, say, $100,000 if the majority of our neighbors make $75,000 than if we earn $150,000 when most of our friends bring in $200,000" (Luttmer, 2005). Regarding the issue of human comparisons, it is interesting to read the article of Halvorson & Higgins, (2013) who focus on the psychological motives behind the comparison of ourselves with others. In this context, they argue that comparing oneself upwards can be damaging but also instructive, while comparing oneself downwards can provide relief but can also create feelings of superiority. The important thing, however, is that comparisons are interpreted correctly so that the correct conclusions can be drawn and personal improvement and self-awareness can be achieved. Nevertheless, our job, for example, should not define us or anyone else by itself, and neither should some jobs be more valued than others. What we do in our job has value, not the job in itself. We all seize opportunities to look cleverer, funnier, better read, or more loyal or cynical-whatever is prized in our circle. However, even those who appear to be high achievers usually compare themselves unfavorably to others in their field. The original Stoics, who believed in egalitarianism as a virtue (Hooft & Athanassoulis, 2014) did not talk a lot about happiness per se, but they aspired to live in a state of tranquility, and they recognized that, for many people, the social hierarchy game was a hindrance. The tendency to compare fortunately wanes with age. According to Irvine, a prerequisite for a good life is to take into account opinions of people who care about us (Irvine, 2009). When you face veiled insults from those looking to gain an upper hand, you can disarm their barbs by criticizing yourself even more harshly, or by ignoring the comment entirely. Social comparison theory is a well-established concept in social psychology that highlights how people have an innate tendency to evaluate themselves by

comparing themselves to others. This mechanism can have a significant impact on individuals' self-esteem and mental well-being, and it is a relevant consideration in the field of medicine. Social comparison theory contributes to philosophical questions about self-worth and identity. Constant comparison may lead to anxiety or depression, undermining one's autonomy and authentic self. Philosophically, it challenges the ideal of living a self-determined life, echoing existential themes about the dangers of conformism and the loss of individuality. In existential philosophy, comparison robs the individual of agency by orienting value externally rather than intrinsically—a life lived for others' judgments rather than one's own meaning. Medical doctors may encounter patients who suffer from issues related to low self-esteem and depression, and a thorough understanding of social comparison theory can help guide the therapeutic approach. Moreover, the idea of authenticity, which is a core principle in existentialist philosophy, can also be a valuable concept for clinicians to consider. Helping patients cultivate a sense of authenticity, purpose, and meaning in their lives can be a powerful tool in treating mental health issues.

6. Authenticity as a Key Theme of Existence

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that places great emphasis on individual freedom and authenticity. It asserts that every person is responsible for creating meaning in their own life and living it with passion and sincerity. While authenticity is considered the most important virtue in this philosophy, freedom is its primary value. However, existentialists caution against reducing authenticity to a mere trend associated with individualism. They believe that both the "common" and the "exceptional" are essential for personal growth and value. To be truly authentic, one must pursue their own freedom while also nurturing and allowing the freedom of others. This philosophical approach is evident in the work of Kierkegaard, among others (Li, 2019). The notion of authenticity is often erroneously linked with individualism and contrasted with the theme of others as the "crowd." The preservation of one's independence and difference from the crowd are valued in being authentic. Those who are inauthentic lack individuality and accept values and beliefs from others without questioning. However, some existentialists consider individualism a historical and cultural trend, or even of questionable political value, obscuring the importance of collectivity that is crucial to authentic existence (Anderson, 1994). For Heidegger, living inauthentically involves being absorbed into a way of life created by others. Nevertheless, inauthenticity may also be inscribed into one's mode of being, and it cannot be erased as an external negative influence (Withy, 2022) While Nietzsche harshly condemns those who are unwilling to challenge their fundamental beliefs, he does not consider them dispensable. By mentioning aphorisms, he focuses on the need of the common in order to grow up the exceptional (Anderson, 1994). Many existentialists struggle to reconcile the value of individual existence with the alienating effects of the crowd, resulting in an uneasy relationship with the value of the every-

day person. Every authentic project must embody a certain level of freedom for oneself and for others. While Nietzsche (Anderson, 1994) and Heidegger (Withy, 2022) propose the idea of an authentic person being with others, they do not fully explore this concept. In Sartre's "Notebooks for an Ethics" (Gordon, 1995), he emphasizes that cooperation with others is essential for the realization of one's projects. However, this cooperation depends on the freedom of others and the recognition that judgment about a person must involve that person at least to some extent. Thus, enabling and fostering the freedom of others should be a central aspect of all one's projects. In Camus' "The Rebel" (Gloag, 2020), the slave initially demands justice but ultimately seeks to reign as a monarch. This desire for dominance highlights a problem: although individuals may rebel against unjust social conditions and even against the universe as a whole, the practical implementation of such a revolution often involves denying the humanity and freedom of others in an attempt to impose one's own individuality on them.

7. Equality among People

Based on the work of E. S. Anderson (1994) it is important to understand that equality does not mean that men are identical, but rather implies similarity. The misconception that people, in addition to being equal are also the same, leads to a pernicious leveling mindset that obliterates the special gifts of each person imposing a general homogenous mediocrity. The concept of equality should be interpreted as ensuring equal opportunities for education, healthcare, culture, and overall well-being for all members of society, without any exceptions. Universal access to healthcare, for example, including mental health services, is a practical application of the moral equality discussed, ensuring all individuals receive care regardless of socioeconomic status. This notion of equality is rooted in the belief that every human person possesses the same fundamental worth or moral status (Cohen, 1989). In terms of its social dimension, equality should foster collegiality, which in turn promotes solidarity among individuals. For example, education systems that offer need-based scholarships and inclusive curricula help reduce inequality by overcoming both material and cultural barriers. However, it is crucial to note that solidarity should not prevent people from exercising their freedom to pursue their own paths towards creating and actively achieving well-being, not as permanent passive recipients of the solidarity of others. The most undeniable equality among people is their shared experience of death. In 1848, Bouguereau painted an image of an angel of death covering a young man's body with a shroud (Figure 1), serving as a reminder of death's inevitability. The preparatory drawing for this painting carried a message that one's life would be meaningless if they had not done any good on earth when the angel of death covers them with its shroud (Whitman, 1891). The idea of equality that Bouguereau portrays in his work is quite different from the social and political objectives pursued by 19th century liberals. Bouguereau's concept of equality is rooted in religion, where it only exists in the afterlife. The painting of the Angel of Death is used symbolically to under-

score a universal truth: death is the great equalizer. It reminds us that no matter our social status or achievements, we all face mortality. While Bouguereau's view is rooted in a religious context, its inclusion here serves a broader philosophical purpose: to challenge egoism and foster empathy by invoking humility in the face of life's ultimate reality. Even outside of religious belief, the concept of mortality can inspire reflection on how we treat others and how we define a life well-lived. We should consider that by living life with a sense of arrogance and self-importance, without empathy for others, one risks a life of vanity and narcissism, which ultimately leads to eternal damnation (as depicted in Figure 2). Unfortunately, many individuals today display such traits, striving to appear superior and disdainful in order to validate their worth. However, behaving in such a manner often closes doors in life rather than opening them.

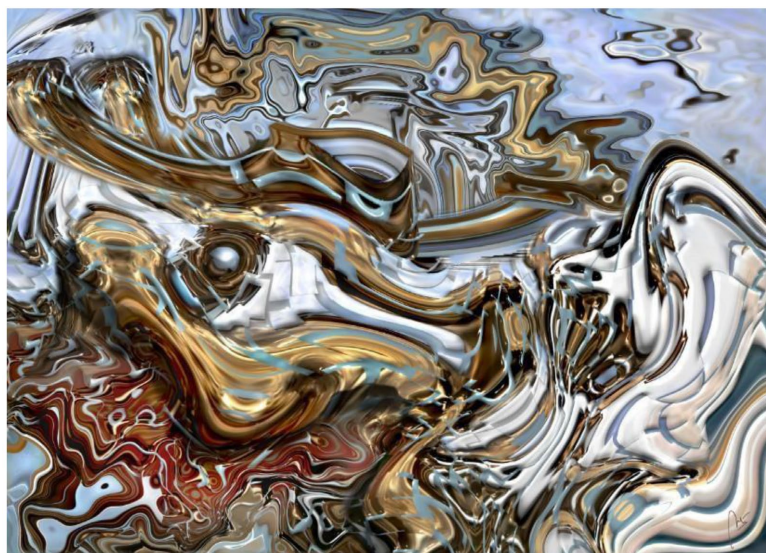**Figure 1.** W.-A. Bouguereau, "Equality Before Death" (1848).

Figure 2. Carlos Fernández Chicote , "Bones of a victim of selfishness" (2014).

We all suffer the pangs of old age and disease, the loss of loved ones, and impermanence, including the loss of good things when they pass away. We all seek social recognition, satisfaction, or happiness, too; we seek a fullness of life in community with others that so often eludes our grasp, as well as desire to avoid suffering and be happy. We all share these desires. As we travel through life, we experience common emotions: joy and sadness, trust and disgust, fear and anger, surprise and anticipation. Whenever differences are divisive, we need to affirm similarities. A better world begins with this recognition of common experiential bonds. Similarities, however, should not be over-emphasized. Sometimes similarities are real and yet not what is most important to the people at issue, because their desire is to enjoy the dignity of being different. We should bear in mind that divine oneness is akin to a field of wildflowers, each containing a different tone and hue. Love rightly begins, not with imposing one's perspective on others, but in listening to other people on their own terms and for their own sake, with sensitivity, to what is most important to them, which may be different from what is most important to us.

8. Conclusion: To a Happy, Full Life

A common affiliation to the laws of nature brings people together on the journey of life. Similarities, such as those highlighted by traditional Pathology, can unite people and warm their hearts, irrespective of whether they come from the north, south, east or west. Regardless of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences, the characteristics of each one's personality are those that count on his/her self-esteem and his/her autonomy over other people. According to Haybron (2011), "researchers often seem to identify happiness with subjective well-being, sometimes with life satisfaction, and (perhaps most commonly) with an emotional or hedonic state" (Feldman, 2010). We should create rejuvenating moments in our everyday life and keep a positive mood: this should be our goal. The beauty, tenderness, poetry, and joy of life are often not dependent on us; we should practice experiencing them on a daily basis to discover the genuine, sincere feelings of at least some people in our everyday life, and respond accordingly. These feelings are more likely to come from non-highly educated people, as education often involves a false self-discipline covering true feelings. While education offers critical thinking and self-discipline, it can occasionally lead individuals to suppress genuine emotional responses in favor of socially expected or the so-called "intellectualized" reactions. On the contrary, people with less formal education may express emotions more freely, offering valuable insights into authentic human connection.

Thus, common people should not be downgraded in any way; engaging with genuine, otherwise common, people offers life the rare gift of immediacy. Selflessly offering to others will continue our existence after the end of our life on earth, and sweet memories will overwhelm the people with whom we have been communicating, including our beloved ones. However, it is also important to acknowledge that those with less formal education seem to struggle sometimes

with articulating emotions in ways that are socially constructive, potentially leading to misunderstandings. Thus, while both highly educated and less educated individuals may face challenges in expressing emotions; the form and context in which those emotions are expressed can reveal much about authenticity and honesty in human relationships. Going through the path of our life authentically—i.e. according to our personal existential identity, which is largely genetically defined—is a prerequisite for happiness. "Authentic" means being in accordance with his/her own freedom and with the freedom of others. One cannot make others like him/her, love him/her or think like him/her; they are free to do so or not. One should prove himself/herself to himself/herself and not to others.

We should avoid criticizing others because they are moving based on their own existential identity; if we do not fit with that identity, we should keep a safe distance but also keep in mind that an egocentric life filled with deceptive feelings of superiority leads to the depression of isolation. As long as we recognize elements of ourselves in others, everything we offer them in a way returns to us. From our point of view, by encouraging others and giving them hope, we may begin to feel hopeful and energetic ourselves. The more effort we make for other people's happiness, the happier we feel.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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