

Psychology catharsis and literature philosophy essay



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You might have heard this expression a number of times yet may not know what exactly this means. If dust goes into our nose, we will immediately sneeze. Often the sneezing is quite violent. The whole body participates in the action. After all should we need all that force and fury to throw away the dust? Yes, the body reacts this way. In fact these are reflex responses of the body and they are usually very forceful if not violent. The moment our body feels that a foreign material has entered, it reacts strongly in such a way as to oust it at the quickest possible manner.

Now let us come to the level of the mind and examine a similar situation. We may be surprised to note that poison getting into the mind remains beneath the mind for years together. Often there are no automatic mechanisms like the reflex action to cleanse the mind. Not only that poisons in the form of undesirable thoughts lie deep in the mind and manifest as disorders. This is because we suppress them if our mind feels that it is socially inappropriate to express. If the suppression is strong and goes to the unconscious, Psychologists call it as 'Repression'. Suppressed and repressed thoughts do not lie dormant in the mind forever. They often try to come out. The threat of these surfacing creates tension and anxiety to the person concerned. The reemergence of these suppressed and repressed materials can also shape itself into other disorders. In fact the celebrated Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud argued that our entire Neurotic, Psychotic and Psychosomatic disorders are due to suppression and repression.

Psychologists have discovered that Hypnosis, Psychoanalysis and Catharsis are the ways through which we can overcome the difficulty. If the material has already gone to the unconscious mind we may require Hypnosis or <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-catharsis-and-literature-philosophy-essay/>

Psychoanalysis to bring it back to the conscious mind and to and to externalize it. But here I am going to discuss about Catharsis. If the suppressed material is still in the conscious mind we need Catharsis. In psychology Catharsis is a technique through which we talk to a professional Psychologist anything and everything that comes to our mind. The Psychologist tells us to express our thoughts as and when they come to mind without any inhibition. In the all-accepting atmosphere of the clinic one would be able to express one's thoughts which are forbidden by the society. As the free flow of thoughts start we might experience emotional out bursts. It is not uncommon for people to cry or show anger etc. during Catharsis. A couple of good sessions of Catharsis make the person feel free from the disturbing thoughts and emotions, which the person has suppressed early. Many people report a feeling of unloading and relief immediately after a session of Catharsis. Catharsis is a mental purging technique and is effectively used by Psychologists. Many Psychologists use this technique as part of supportive Psychotherapy.

The word catharsis is derived from the Greek word which is translated as 'cleansing' or 'purification'. Most of the definitions emphasize two essential components of catharsis: the emotional aspect (strong emotional expression and processing) and the cognitive aspect of catharsis (insight, new realization, and the unconscious becoming consciousness) and as a result - positive change. Breuer and Freud described catharsis as an involuntary, instinctive body process, for example crying (Breuer & Freud, 1974).

Schiff (2001) emphasized both essential components of catharsis: emotional-somatic discharge and cognitive awareness which he called 'distancing', <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-catharsis-and-literature-philosophy-essay/>

when the person experiencing catharsis is maintaining the 'observer' role rather than the participant, which involves a sense of control and full alertness in person's immediate environment. Schiff indicated that it is most common that towards the end of somatic-emotional discharge the detailed, vivid recalling of forgotten events and insights often occur. There is a certain amount of confusion about the definition and interpretation of catharsis: some perceive catharsis as emotional discharge, some emphasize the cognitive aspect and the new awareness that emerges after reliving traumatic events from the past

Catharsis in medicine, religion, and cultural rituals

The idea of catharsis in medicine is similar to that in literature. It means 'purging', 'purification', although in a medical sense this implies a physical release, for example, expectoration of the sputa implies healing of cold. It was not until Hippocrates, that menstruation, diarrhea, and vomiting were regarded as cathartic process (Schiff, 2001). Hippocrates associated catharsis with healing, because it's role of a "purification agent" affecting the course of disease (both physical and mental). The spiritual meaning of catharsis is very much the same: discharging everything harmful from one's mind and heart, so that one can become pure. The ritual of purification usually implies that a person had engaged in some prohibited actions or sins. Catharsis helped to return to the previous status - before the violation of generally accepted rules and norms. In various religious practices, the action of purification is fulfilled with the help of water, blood, Fire, change of clothes, and sacrifice. The rituals are often considered as part of a persons healing from the devastating effect of guilt.

Further, the key mission of mysticism is to understand the return or unification of one's soul with God. The ritual of baptism (purifying person with water) in Christianity has cathartic meaning of revival. Confession has the same underlying assumption, and it is similar to the concept of cathartic treatment introduced by Freud and Breuer, because confession involves the recall, revealing, and release of forbidden thoughts, actions, and repressed emotions.

Spiritual and cultural rituals have been known throughout the history to help people process collective stress situations, such as death or separation, or major life changing events like rites of passages, weddings, and such.

Traditional societies have ceremonies of mourning, funeral rites, and curing rituals, which most often include cathartic activities, such as crying, weeping, drumming, or ecstatic dance (Szczeklik, 2005).

Catharsis in modern psychology

According to Schultz and Schultz (2004), the idea of catharsis was popular in scientific circles in Germany in the 1890s and there were numerous articles published on the subject. Freud and Breuer officially brought the 'cathartic therapy' as therapeutic method into modern psychology (Brill, 1995). They used hypnosis to recover repressed memories of negative traumatic events. The Breuer and Freud theory that symptoms are caused by repressed emotions is based on the observation that: "each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect" (Freud, 1893, p. 6).

Since Freud introduced catharsis into the professional psychology field, many contemporary modalities consider catharsis a significant curative aspect of their therapeutic approach (Frank, 1971). Today there are many fields of psychology in which catharsis is used as a treatment. For example, it is used in the hydraulic model of emotions and venting theory, in Psychodrama, in Primal therapy, and it is also used in Emotion-Focused Therapy effectively.

Catharsis in Psychodrama

With the growth of behaviorism, the role of catharsis as a beneficial psychological technique was underestimated until Moreno introduced Psychodrama in the 1930s. Moreno used the concept of catharsis as Aristotle and Freud suggested it and developed it into a new psychotherapeutic modality. Reenacting scenes from one's past, dreams, or fantasies helps the client bring the unconscious to consciousness, eventually experience catharsis, and thus achieve relief and positive change (Moreno, 1946).

Catharsis in Primal Therapy

In the early 1970s, Janov (2007) elaborated on Freud's ideas and claimed that if infants and children are not able to process painful experiences fully (cry, sob, wail, scream, etc.), (in a supported environment, their consciousness 'splits', pain gets suppressed to the unconscious and reappears in a neurotic symptoms and disorders in later life. Painful experiences become 'stored' and need to be 'released' in therapy by reliving and discharging suppressed feelings. Janov claimed that cathartic emotional processing of painful early life experiences and the process of connecting them with the memory of the original event could fully free

clients from neurotic symptoms. Janov argued that cognitive remembering of suppressed traumatic experiences is not enough for healing to occur.

Catharsis in Emotion-Focused Therapy

Greenberg (2002) concluded that emotional arousal and processing within a supportive therapeutic relationship is the core element for positive change in therapy. He emphasized the cognitive aspect of catharsis and the need to understand and make sense of emotions. Greenberg argued that awareness, healthy emotional expression, and cognitive integration of emotions combined produce positive change. It appears that Emotion-Focused therapy appropriately addressed the cognitive component of Catharsis and safety issues. Emotion-Focused therapy employs empty chair technique for clarification of inner conflicts, as well as for finishing unsolved relationship issues from the past. Empty chair technique can be useful as a tool to facilitate catharsis, as well as to help clients to increase distance from their conflicts and overwhelming emotions.

Anyhow the existing scientific evidence about catharsis resulting in a positive therapeutic change is controversial. The confusion occurs because of a lack of careful definition and agreement as to what constitutes catharsis. The research that 'venting anger' doesn't automatically reduces anger demonstrated that aggressive behavior actually increased arousal levels and didn't produce desired positive change, but its relevance to the phenomenon of catharsis is very limited if any. The complexity of phenomenon of catharsis involves experiencing repressed emotional traumas within safe and supportive environment, involving emotional discharge, as well as appropriate cognitive processing and insight.

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Catharsis in Literature

Catharsis is taken from the Greek verb, katharos which translates as to purify or to make clean. The term has been applied to numerous situations. In literature, catharsis takes on a slightly different meaning than that of in psychology or medicine. Aristotle first used the term to apply to literature in his work Poetics to discuss how drama can affect the individual viewer. Good drama helps the viewer identify with the experiences, especially sorrowful ones, of characters in a play. Drama can evoke powerful emotions, and people who watch it are moved leave the theatre clean, refreshed, and purified in emotional experience. Although the term 'Catharsis' is used only one in the course of Aristotle's Poetics in the fourth chapter. Yet there is hardly any other term which has given rise to so many different interpretations and controversies. The difficulty arises out of the fact that Aristotle does not define or explain the term. Perhaps, he did so in the second book of the Poetics, which is lost.

Aristotle further claims that having expressed some of their emotions, the audience has a sense of relief that helps them handle daily living in calmer fashion. This is directly antithetical to Plato's claim that drama and poetry could produce ill effects on viewers and readers, leading them to act more extremely. Aristotle instead contends that catharsis through drama leads to a more rational mind since the extremes of emotion are tapped and left in a safe setting.

Now because Aristotle hasn't defined the term in his Poetics, critics explained the term in the light of its use in Aristotle's other works, such as his Politics and Ethics. It has also been noted that the term 'Catharsis' has <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-catharsis-and-literature-philosophy-essay/>

three meanings: it could mean “purgation” or “purification”, or “clarification”. Critics have interpreted Aristotle’s views in the light of each of these meanings-and it has not done much to ease the difficulty. Only one thing has been agreed upon-that tragedy arouses pity and fear. But there is difference of opinion as to how the arousal of these emotions leads to ‘tragic pleasure’.

Now I will talk about the three theories of catharsis briefly.

Purgation Theories

The term ‘Catharsis’ has been interpreted in medical terms, meaning purgation. In medical terms (especially in the older sense), purgation meant the partial removal of excess “humours”. The health of the body depended upon a true balance of the humours. Thus purgation of the emotions of pity and fear does not mean the removal of these emotions, but that the passions or emotions are reduced to a healthy, balanced proportion. Catharsis in this sense denotes a pathological effect on the soul comparable to the effect of medicine in the body.

Like curing the like : Some critics who favour the medical sense of the term, explain the process in the light of “homeopathic” treatment, in which a little substance of something cures the body of an excess of the same thing. It is a case of the ‘like curing the like’. A passage in the Politics of Aristotle bears this out, where the effects of music on some morbid states of mind are talked about. The emotions should not be repressed. In the Poetics, Aristotle refers to the curing of religious frenzy. According to Plato, a crying child is

rocked to sleep by singing a song. The outward restlessness (induced by the rocking) allays or cures the inward restlessness, and brings about calm.

Unlike curing the unlike : In the neo-classical period, the medical interpretation of the term took on an "allopathic" light. Catharsis was seen to be in the nature of the unlike curing unlike. The arousing of pity and fear, the more tender emotions, brought about a purgation or evacuation of other emotions like anger and pride. The sight of the incidents aroused pity and fear and the spectator is purged of those emotions which caused the incidents of sufferings in the tragedy. If the suffering in the play was caused by anger or pride, the spectator was cured of these emotions.

Purification theory of 'Catharsis'

One meaning of Catharsis is 'purification'. Some critics have interpreted the term in the light of this meaning. These critics reject the interpretation of Catharsis in the light of medical terminology. Humphry House, for instance, says that Aristotle's concept of Catharsis was not as a medical term. He interprets the word to mean a kind of "moral conditioning", which the spectator undergoes. He comments that purgation means 'cleansing'. This cleansing may be a quantitative evacuation or a qualitative change in the body. In this context he says "A tragedy arouses pity and fear from potentiality to activity through worthy and adequate stimuli; it controls them by directing them to the right objects in the right way; and exercises them, within the limits of the play, as the emotions of the good man would be exercised. When they subside to potentiality again after the play is over, it is a more "trained" potentiality than before...Our responses are brought nearer to those of the good and wise man." Catharsis results in emotional

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health. It is a purification of the excess and defect in our emotions, so that emotion equilibrium can be restored. According to House, Aristotle's whole doctrine only makes sense if we realize that the proper development and balance of the emotions depend upon the habitual direction of them towards worthy objects

Butcher, too, agrees with the purification theory. He observes that Catharsis involves "not only the idea of emotional relief, but the further idea of purifying the emotions to be relieved." He says, further, that the poets found out how "the transport of human pity and human fear might, under the excitation of art, be dissolved in joy, and the pain escape in the purified tide of human sympathy." Tragic experience, on stage, purifies the feeling of pity and fear of its morbid content.

The clarification theory of 'Catharsis'

There are some critics who show that the implications of Catharsis are to be found in the Poetics itself without any need to refer to the Politics or the Ethics. Writing of the imitative arts, Aristotle points out that the pleasure in the imitative art is connected with learning. Pleasure does not come from joy alone; even the pictures of dead bodies can give pleasure if well executed. This shows that pleasure is linked with learning; that pleasure is there in anything fitted to instruct. It is a paradox that even the ugly and the repellant can and does give pleasure. A similar paradox lies there in tragedy. The incidents of tragedy are painful. They might present the horrible situations of man blinding himself, or a woman killing her husband, or a mother killing her child. Such events would horrify us and repel us in real life;

yet in tragedy, they afford us a special pleasure. It is pleasure peculiar to tragedy.

Aristotle himself tells us that tragedy has its own kind of pleasure, and that we must seek from it this pleasure- " the pleasure proper to it." And catharsis involves such a pleasure. The function of tragedy is to provide the pleasure peculiar to it. This pleasure involves the presentation of events which arouse pity and fear. According to this theory, Catharsis becomes an indication of the function of tragedy, and not of its emotional effects on the audience. Catharsis is related to the incidents of the tragedy, not to the emotions of pity and fear evoked in the audience.

Now to conclude I would say that Aristotle is a great critic, and what he said centuries ago will continue to influence thinking as it has done all this time. It is unfortunate that he has not explained some of the terms which seem so very significant to his central thesis. The term Catharsis, for instance, has been interpreted so variously that it is difficult to come to an agreement as to what Aristotle really meant. Of the theories advanced to explain Catharsis, the clarification theory appears to be the most acceptable, perhaps, for it tends to relate catharsis to the work rather than to the psychology of the audience. And, after all, Aristotle was writing on the art of poetry, not about the effect of poetry. All the same, the last word on Catharsis has not yet been said.