



**Original Research Article**

## On Human Sorrow and Sufferance: A Theophilosophical Discourse on St Augustine, Aquinas, and Levinas

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.  
In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.  
Genesis 3:16-17 (KJV).

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Does suffering happen to exist as a will intrinsic to creation? Or as a result of genetic accident; is mankind better or worse-off without sorrow? Would the absence of distress facilitate or constraint the attainment of the purposes of life? These intriguing questions have puzzled philosophers, theologians, psychologists alike from time immemorial. However, with the advancement of life science and emergence of medical technologies as sophisticated as neuroimaging (e.g. fMRI) which allows visualizing the neuronal changes associated with emotional processing, scientists are becoming more involved than ever in exploring the underlying molecular mechanisms. This trend is co-occurring with lesser research attention on the metaphysical aspects of the complex psychological constructs with ever diminishing space for insights derived from outside the realm of neuropsychiatry. In this study, the authors endeavor to articulate the phenomenological perspectives of pain and suffering both at individual and collective level, by synthesizing from the works from three key philosophical thinkers of three distinct points in the history western philosophy: St. Augustin AKA Aurelius Augustinus (354-430), St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). For contrasting analysis, explanations were drawn from Buddhism and Hinduism as two mainstream schools of theophilosophical thinking in Asia. Special attention was given to Hindu concepts of *Karma* (Sanskrit: कर्म) and *Moksha* (Sanskrit: मोक्ष), and Buddhist concepts of *Dukkha*, meaning sorrow/suffering (Sanskrit: दुःख), which is first of The Four Noble Truths, and *Samsara* (Sanskrit: संसार) which refers to the concept of *cyclicity of all life*.

**Keywords:** Emmanuel Levinas, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dukkha, Theology of Suffering.

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## INTRODUCTION

With an unprecedented growth in wealth and prosperity and technological advances, humanity is ever more perplexed with the increasing burden of hunger, disease, disaster, social unrest, environmental degradation. In the scholarly media one of the most intriguing issues regarding human life is perhaps the existence of negative emotional experiences - pain, suffering, sorrow, grief, which appear utterly irrational and pointless especially from a utilitarian viewpoint. Philosophers, theologians, psychologists, historians have tried from their own perspectives to justify the existence of suffering in nature which is otherwise esteemed as flawless. The idea which is generally accepted is that if this world were full of only positive attributes such as joy and happiness, then we would all be ignorant of or forget God, and hence sorrow serves the purpose of reminding us of our Creator, who is representative of all-power and all-good. According to some historical trends in thought, pain and suffering are essential components of life (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2013) and should be taken as something imposed on us as a result of our wrong deeds. For example, before the technology of anesthesia was invented in the mid-19th century, surgery used to be an agonizing experience. Yet, when painless surgery was finally introduced and many welcomed it without any qualm, some did object. The Stoics for example, believed in the necessity of internal freedom. Stoics believed that unhappiness results from attempting to change the natural course of the world; thus, they were against the feeling and expression of sorrow. In Zurich, the City Fathers outlawed anesthesia based on the argument that *"pain is a natural and intended curse of the primal sin, and any attempt to do away with it must be wrong"* (Utopian Surgery). Some have expressed that the suffering is a result of failure to finding a meaning of life. In his *Ten for Joy: Meditations on the Rosary*, J. Neville Ward said that *"when someone says he has a meaning of life we take it that the individual person adopted has found a certain view of life which brings order into his experience"*.

Christian scholars in different times have given various interpretations in their attempt to address the enigma of suffering. It is generally believed that Christian suffering is not random or without purpose. As apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed". This viewpoint explains that the concepts of suffering and compassion have a lot to do with Christian faith, and more so as the church is meant to be a refuge for those suffering, it needs support to provide encouragement and to share each other burdens to *fulfill the law of Christ* (Gal. 6:2). Also, there is a prevalent notion that while sharing the glory of Christ, one must take part in His suffering as well. Thus, His followers do not have to worry about that again. The literature on

theodicy, which is involved in answering the queries regarding the occurrence of evil in the presence of Gods power, reveals that struggle with negative experience have certain positive association with spiritual growth (Exline et al., 2014).

According to the statement of Buddha, *'All [is] suffering', in life can be conceptualised as an entity inseparably associated with the suffering, and the fight against which as the pursuit of happiness* (Aich, 2013; Exline et al., 2014). The concept of suffering is multifaceted and varies substantially across cultures and faith. Human being are exposed to various types of physical and mental suffering - suffering from illness, famine, natural disaster, self-inflicted sufferings such as depression, suicide, self-castigation and the like. Thus, the lot of suffering is indeed infinite, and the meaning or rational is established depending on the worldview of the individual. One things is perhaps taken for granted among all schools of thought is that regardless of whatever interpretation of suffering we arrive at, we should always keep focusing on the ultimate meaning of life rather than the individual aspects which might be misleading at times while being conscious about the tragic character of existence with which pains and pleasures are naturally involved.

From a philosophical viewpoint, the existence of pain, suffering which are often attributed to the occurrence of evil is a problem that persists in both Western and Asian religious tradition. However, it is especially a problem for believers who hold the view that God is almighty and all-merciful, all-good and all-powerful, and by means of these divine attributes, He must be able to protect humanity from the influence of evils and exempt from all sins. Varying ideas exists with regards to the process and path of salvation. Pentecostals believers affirm that Christ offers instantaneous salvation to sins; in comparison Theravāda Buddhists maintain that the passage to salvation is slow and rough and may take many lifetimes of suffering (Sri, 2014). Thus, there is a two-fold complexity here, one with the origin or source of evil and their influence on people's lives, and the second is the way of exoneration from the evil attributes. These confusions were discussed in light of the explanations by two most highly revered Christian scholars - St Augustine as one and St Thomas Aquinas. Both have enormously contributed to the discourse on reason and faith whose significance and implication remain powerful till today (Markus, 1961).

For comparative analysis of the concepts on the origin and occurrence of suffering, Buddhist and Hindu scriptures were also studied for reference and the main contrasting points were discussed. One main conflicting point between Christianity and Buddhism is the way life and soul is conceptualized. In Buddhism, there is no soul or self, and life is considered as a divine gift. While Buddhism is based upon denial of the self, and a negative view of life and birth: *'May*

*all that have life be delivered from suffering- Gautama Buddha.* It is notable that while Buddhism concept of self is non-existent, in Christian and Hindu philosophy the self holds a critical position which merits to be interpreted as solipsism.

*One who sees everything as nothing but the Self, and the Self in everything one sees, such a seer withdraws from nothing. For the enlightened, all that exists is nothing but the Self, so how could any suffering or delusion continue for those who know this oneness?— Ishopanishad: sloka 6, 7.*

### **Saint Augustine on the rational of human suffering**

St. Augustine, also known as Augustine of Hippo, is considered as one of the most influential Christian scholar and theologian of all time. For him, man is free to choose between good and evil, but to make the right choice, for which divine help and strong faith are necessary prerequisites. He is the father of ecclesiastical Latin, a unique tool for any philosophical culture of the middle ages and Renaissance, and made many important contributions to theodicy (Floyd, 2004). A common question that perplexed many early thinkers is that if God is all-powerful, why has He chosen the path for salvation to involve so much blood, pain, and excruciating death? Both St Augustine and the renowned 12<sup>th</sup> scholar Thomas Aquinas posed this question and tried to seek the answer by analysis God's nature and relationship with humanity. He wrote:

*There are those who say "What did God have no other way to free men from the misery of this mortality? No other way than to will that the only begotten Son [...] should become man by putting on a human soul and flesh, becoming mortal so He could endure death?"*

St Augustine believed that as God is the creator all things, so pain and suffering are also his will, whose rationality we fail to understand (Hale-Smith et al., 2012). If God preferred the cruel death of His Son over some other plan of salvation then God cannot be kind and merciful and good. He maintains, since God is all-powerful, we must not bear in our mind the thought that God had no other means in His choice of redemption of humanity, and could definitely have chosen a milder way instead of the cross.

*Other possible means were not lacking on God's part because all things are equally subject to His power (On the Trinity 8:10).*

From Augustine's writing it is deducible that as human soul a *priori* is exposed to two different times, i.e. the current life

and the one after death, it is possible that we fail to conceive that there could be both joy and suffering and generally separate the suffering of this earth and joy of the hereafter. Augustine suggests that since God is all wise and all-merciful, then we must acknowledge there must have been a just reason He chose His beloved Son as the means for our salvation. And as we are born already guilty and sunk in a world of endless suffering which we cannot bear alone, it was probably the reason God had sent his Son for our salvation, otherwise the unjust suffering of Christ is incomprehensible.

*Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? Luke 24:26 (KJV).*

More varying delineations exist regarding the existence of suffering among the earlier Greek philosophers especially Plato, with whom St Augustine's notions were similar: Suffering does not exist in reality, but only as appearance, which can be conceive as the lot of an imperfect world (Teubner, 2015). Though neither of them provided an explanation of what an imperfect world is, a similar concept is notable in the famous phrase of the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz - the best of all possible worlds (*German: Die beste aller möglichen Welten*). Leibniz says that the world we live in has to be the best possible one as God is all-good and all-knowing, He must have chosen the best of all for us. This notion, however, leads to the question that if it were true that the actual world is the best then why are there so much pain, suffering, and evil. So a best possible world may not exist. Leibniz argues that, despite the fact that the evil in the actual world is still the best as it offers to us the power of free-will, having free-will is better since all human beings are not morally all-good (Franklin, 2009). He supports his theory by the notion that if all people are good then they will have no freedom of the will to choose between good or evil. The necessity or rational of the existence of evil was further elucidated by the 12<sup>th</sup> century scholar Saint Thomas Aquinas.

### **Aquinas on the Necessity of Evils**

Thomas Aquinas is regarded as a perennial leader in Christian virtue theory and the comprehensive and systematic genius of the middle age (Lindsay, 1904). He was responsible for continuing the philosophical method, or the rational synthesis introduced by St. Augustine and he tried with renewed vigor to address the questions; Why does not God intervene at the heart of our suffering? Why he left his creatures with the possibility of sinning? Faced like many others, these questions posed by St. Thomas Aquinas do not content too easy solutions that provided him the neo-Platonic philosophy and the Augustinian school. In several passages, he brought a response from metaphysical viewpoint to the

metaphysical concept of evil whose depth remains to be understood in fully. According to some explanations, Aquinas sees evil simply as a part of the way the world which from a metaphysical perspective serves a greater good as natural evil contributes to the goodness of creation, and evil is used in times of trial to remind and train us the way of proper living (Summa Theologiae I.49). The omnipotent God should be able to make a world free from natural evils and moral avoidable. However, for God, only what is logically necessary is unavoidable. According to Aquinas, since evils are serving necessary purposes, God should not be blamed for the presence of evils, not only because they are unintended consequences, but more importantly because they are unavoidable.

Aquinas believes that there are morally sufficient reason by which God lets human undergo the sufferings, and He inflicts the suffering as it brings us closer to our full human potential and the desires of spirit, even if in most of the time it doesn't seem to be so. In a more theological manner, it is a way of saying that, suffering serves the purpose of rendering the soul holy; for out the unevenness of the soul is the necessary purification and the strengthening of the virtues that brings it near God. (Kaye and Prisco, 2009). True virtue, according to Aquinas (Summa Theologiae I-II, 71-89), is contrasted not only to semblances of virtues, but also to the influence of the evil i.e. negative human experiences of suffering and separation from God, and as humans make bad choices and adopt those moral evils; this influences human well-being and leads to suffering of the soul and the body (Anningson, 2017). Similar ideas are encountered among more recent philosophical thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead whose answer to the question of God's relation to human suffering describes Him as a "fellow sufferer who understands". John Macquarrie concludes that; A God of love is inevitably vulnerable to pain, for there is no love that will not suffer in the presence of a sinful world (Greib, 1997).

#### **Emmanuel Levinas on *The Uselessness of Suffering***

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Lithuanian born French philosopher and Talmudic commentator, is famous for his unique contributions to philosophical literature with ideas such as the uselessness of suffering (French: Suffrance inutile), and *The face of the other* (French: L'autrui). Throughout his life Levinas enjoyed living through diverse cultural worlds and the company of many prominent scholars of his time. He was born to Jewish parents, had deep immersion in and understanding of Russian, German and French sensibilities, had exchanges with Feodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Jean Paul Sartre, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and had his funeral attended by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. During World War II,

Levinas spent most of his time in captivity Germany (Hanover), which is expected to have strong influences on his views on human suffering and makes him highly distinguishable from the two earlier thinkers discussed above. Levinas sees pain as an ethical requirement and suffering as any other sensory experience such as color and taste with the exception that it is too much for our sense to bear.

*Suffering is surely a given in consciousness, a certain 'psychological content', like the lived experience of colour, of sound, of contact, or like any sensation. – Useless Suffering.*

For Levinas, pain and suffering are different, as the latter results from inability or incompliance of its existence. He writes; suffering is suffering because of 'the denial, the refusal of meaning' that attends it (Farley, 2004). From this it is assumable that the subject holds certain capacities to deal or do away with the negative emotional condition that one is undergoing. A similar remark is found in the writing of the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami; -

*Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. -What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*

Interestingly, Zen Buddhists also recognizes the occurrence of suffering and he also notes that it is a needless suffering to suffer along with those whose suffering we try to relieve. To gain a proper understanding of the phenomenology of suffering in light of the explanation that Levinas offers faces some intrinsic difficulties;- his style of abstraction and the use of complex situations and ideas of complexities of human uniqueness. Suffering, for Levinas, is not only about the inability to process the sensations that are being thrust upon and within one; it is also an imposed state of passivity and vulnerability, of the experience of the incapacity to process what one is undergoing (Geddes, 2015). Another notable feature of Levinas's notion of suffering is the distinction that makes between the suffering for the self (La souffrance de soi) and the suffering for the other (La souffrance d'autrui). The complexity of this distinction rises partly from the idea of concept of *The face of the other* (Le visage de l'autre), and can be compared to the closely related context of Fyodor Dostoyevsky who puts it in his masterpiece:

*Everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything.*

*—The Brothers Karamazov*

Levinas proposes that suffering is at the same time a restriction of individual freedom which obstructs possible spontaneous movements, and also overwhelms one's

humanity in such a harsh manner that can only be described absurd or evil (French: *Mal*), (Simon, 2009) which he defines as a quasi-contradictory structure:

*Taken as an experienced content, the denial and refusal of meaning which is imposed as a sensible quality is the way in which unbearable is precisely not borne by consciousness, the way this not-being-borne is, paradoxically, itself a sensation or a given. This is a quasi-contradictory structure, but a contradiction which is not formal like that of the dialectical tension between the affirmative and the negative which arises for the intellect; it is a contradiction by way of sensation: the plaintiveness of pain, hurt (mal).  
- Useless Suffering*

Levinas' phenomenological approach to analysing the nature and presence of suffering also offers an understanding of the ethics of suffering both in the self, and in the other. He maintains that the justification of the suffering of the other can be regarded as the source of all immorality, and at the same time a demand for a faith beyond all theodicy. To conclude on Levinas' discussion, it is necessary to note that he offers no clue on the justification or significance of suffering in a physical context; however on psychological suffering he maintains that pain can be meaningful in metaphysical aspects envisaged by faith which can help establish inner peace amid the distresses of the world. Some of his predecessors claimed that spiritual suffering such as despair, guilt, anguish, loneliness can lead to a deeper level of self-understanding (White, 2012). Kierkegaard regards suffering as a necessary precondition for all spiritual growth, and in Nietzsche's point of view sufferings that does not cause the perish of an individual does make him stronger.

#### **'Life is suffering': The concept of *dukkha* in Buddhist worldview:**

In Buddhism, the concept of sorrow and or suffering consists one of the *Four Noble Truths* namely 1) *dukkha*, 2) the arising of *dukkha*, 3) the cessation of *dukkha*, and 4) the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (Sanskrit: चत्वारि आर्यसत्यानि *catvāri āryasatyāni*), attainment of which leads to *Nibbāna*- a central pillar of Buddhist faith. Buddhist scholars maintain that *dukkha* is universal. Some scholars maintain that ignorance (*avijjā*) of the Four Noble Truths is the root cause of our suffering (Visuddhankoon, 2018). Regardless of the causation of suffering, the approach to the discussion on *human suffering* in the context of Buddhism differs conceptually as the Buddhist worldview is fundamentally different from other mainstream religions in that there is

no concept of single creator (in Christianity) or Supreme Being (In Hinduism). In addition, the concept of heaven and hell is also substantially dissimilar to the ones found in other religions. Teaching of Buddha indicates that heavens and hells exist in this very world itself, and hence the concept of a particular place designated as heaven and hell do not align with Buddhist principles. According to the Buddha, there are eleven kinds of physical pain and mental agony that inflict humans: lust, hatred, illusion sickness, decay, death, worry, lamentation, pain (physical and mental), melancholy and grief (Anningson, 2017). In this respect, hell is representative of a psychological state instead of a physical one that involves suffering (*dukkha*). Similarly, heaven is also a state where an individual enjoys pleasure and happiness, rather than a place people achieve as a result of their goodness on earth (Anningson, 2017).

Thus, the meaning of suffering in Buddhist philosophy goes far beyond the usual sense (the opposite of happiness), and has a much deeper significance. According to prominent scholars, the term *dukkha* can also imply the concepts of impermanence, emptiness and selflessness, and not merely physical or moral suffering. Thus, anything temporary can be regarded as *dukkha*, including joy and happiness. In contrast, suffering in a general sense corresponds to all forms of physical or mental suffering such as birth, illness, death, negative life events and conditions, loss of beloved ones. One thing important to state here is that, suffering, from this point of view is inevitable since the positive emotions such as pleasure, success, happiness, are essentially temporary and undergoing constant change. According to the Buddha, *dukkha* is caused by attachment, specifically to a particular outcome or possession. Overcoming the *dukkha* or sorrow or suffering, is by breaking the cycle, which is known as *Samsara*, and enter the state of *nibbāna*, is the central theme of Buddhist philosophy.

To gain a fuller understanding of the idea of *dukkha*, it is important to clarify its connection to *Samsara* as well. In general sense, *Samsara* refers to an infinitely complex process of interdependently originating and re-originating phenomena, characterized by change (*anicca*), non-self-identity (*anatta*), and suffering (*dukkha*) – the so-called Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhana*) (McCoy, 2016). From a Buddhist point of view, every living being that ever exist, do so either in the state of *samsara* or *nirvana*, and not anywhere else. *Samsara* is the general state of existence, while *Nirvana* refers to a state which is achieved when human beings perceive reality as Buddha did. Until the perception of the ultimate reality is attained, we exist in the state of *samsara*.

#### **Karma: The Hinduist approach to understanding sorrow**

In Hinduism, suffering constitutes an inescapable and integral part of human life. When people are ensnared by worldly

life and desires and are ignorant of the transience or the ephemeral experiences, sorrow ensues. Examples of profound sorrows and sufferings exist even among the key figures in the scriptures. In the opening chapter of Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna (Sanskrit: अर्जुन) wants to know whom he is about to fight in the battle of Kurukshetra, and was overcome with profound sorrow upon learning that the army towards which he is raising his arrow are his very kinsmen.

*O Lord, please stop my chariot between the two armies until I behold those who stand here eager for the battle and with whom I must engage in this act of war. (Chapter 1. Verse 20-22)*

This is famously known as *Arjuna Vishada Yogam* or Arjun's dejection, and is symbolical of all human sorrow and suffering. Vishada refers to sadness or sorrow of the spirit. It is noteworthy to remember that led by the sorrow, Arjuna considered leaving the battlefield for the sake of peace and, which is known as Arjuna's dilemma, which is representative of the universal dilemma.

*O Krishna, seeing my kinsmen standing with a desire to fight, my limbs fail and my mouth becomes dry. My body quivers and my hairs stand on end. The bow slips from my hand, and my skin intensely burns. My head turns, I am unable to stand steady, and O Krishna, I see bad omens. I see no use of killing my kinsmen in battle. (Chapter 1. Verse 27-31),*

In Hinduism Vishada (विशद), apart from *Vishada*, two words are necessary to be explained to understand the theme of suffering in Hindu philosophy. Moksha (Sanskrit: मोक्ष), the central teaching of the Gita is the attainment of freedom or happiness from the bondage of life by doing one's duty. Karma in the Sanskrit language means actions or deeds and can be regarded as the common thread between Hinduism and Buddhism. It is also known as cause and effect. In Hinduism, karma is believed to result from thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. Depending on the type of karma, the soul can go up or downwards in the cycle of rebirth. The concept of karma is believed to be associated with samsara. As karma also means deeds, and deed must have a cause, so deeds have reactions that are essentially inescapable. The sorrows, sufferings or happiness in the current life can be a result of the karma in the past lives.

*Your entitlement is to Karma alone, and never at any time to its Phalam (fruits). Never be the cause*

*of Karmaphalam. However, never become attached to inaction. (Chapter 2 Verse 47).*

Moksha is a term in Hinduism and Hindu philosophy which refers to various forms of emancipation, liberation, and release (Bytetime, 2014). The term moksha is more prevalent in Hinduism while nirvana is studied more commonly in Buddhism. Moksha is a central idea in Hinduism, and along with three other concepts such as dharma, artha and kama consists the key goals of human life. Dharma (Sanskrit: धर्म) in vedic scripts. Artha (Sanskrit: अर्थ) literally means essence or significance, but has a deeper meaning depending on the context e.g. means of life, the activities or resources that enable one to live a moral life. The pursuit of artha is considered an important aim of human life in Hinduism (Spargo, 2006). Samsara is an infinitely complex process of interdependently originating and re-originating phenomena, characterized by change (*anicca*), non-self-identity (*anatta*), and suffering (*dukkha*) – the so-called Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhana*). This construction is driven forward by karma, the law of cause and effect. Every thought, word, and action is itself simultaneously a cause and an effect, and will inevitably result in some other thought, word, or action, exactly proportionate in quantity and quality to that which gave rise to it. Everything is connected to everything else in just this way. Everything experienced is the result of karma. Another remarkably similar concept linking suffering between Hinduism and Buddhism is desire. The second chapter of Bhagavadgita Lord Krishna states 'O Pârtha, When the living being abandons all material desires that enter the mind and becomes self-satisfied within, then that person is said to be situated in divine knowledge' (Chapter 2, Verse 55).

## CONCLUSION

Human existence is inextricably pervaded by pain, grief, illness, death. Many philosophical theories exist on the indispensability and consubstantiality of the negative life experience. Based on the analysis from three key figures in western philosophy, and two mainstream theological school of thought in Asia, we conclude that the presence of sorrows and sufferings in human lives are not incidental neither old world, but of essence for remaining sentient to their superior meaning in pursuance a moral, virtuous and ethical life. From this viewpoint it follows that perplexity of suffering can stem to a large part from misperception or misinterpretation of the hermeneutics and exegesis of the metaphysics of mind. Being conscious to the ultimate meaning of life appears to be a dominant propoundment in Buddhist and Hindu axiology to apply the philosophical underpinnings to the intricacy of suffering. However, the validity of the explanations on suffering are reliant upon individual phenomenological understandings

and deontic judgments of the emotional reflexes, and perception of the complex psychological constructs - unhappiness, sorrow, evil.

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