



BEYOND “WHY ME?”: SUFFERING, SOLIDARITY AND RELATIONSHIP IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

When people experience suffering, they are faced with questions of the origin of suffering, its role and presence in the world; in brief, it is a question about the meaning of suffering. The understanding of human suffering within Christianity is multidimensional. In this paper, I will discuss the different perspectives of suffering as understood in the context of Christianity. Firstly, it will explore Suffering as purificatory, which moulds and shapes human character in personal piety and purity. Second, it will contemplate the concept of Suffering as Transformative, which, in the context of Christianity, states that not all suffering is harmful; it can be construed positively for moral learning and spiritual growth. Lastly, it will emphasise suffering as liberative, discussing service in love. When we think about suffering, we tend to question the existence of God or “Why me?” We human beings, as social animals, need companions to survive. Though suffering might be individualistic, to combat the suffering, one requires a compassionate attitude, which is the source of life. But in a world of suffering, communion and solidarity continue to be challenged. Hence, in this paper, I will also discuss how, while suffering, human beings enter an authentic relationship with God and try to understand the meaning of suffering in one's life.

Keywords: *Suffering, Christianity, God, compassion, well-being*

Introduction: Delving into the Depths of Suffering and its Spiritual Dimensions

Suffering, or in other words, pain, is considered one of the primary aspects of life, and people have reflected on it and tried to study it throughout history across all cultures. Throughout history, many philosophers and theologians have attempted to define suffering in ancient epochs and the epochs of modernity. They tried to show why it exists and how much it influences people's lives. This exploration aims at realizing suffering as a complex concept; on the one hand, suffering can be regarded as an unwelcome intrusion; on the other hand, it can become an array. When the word "suffering" is included, it transforms the paradigm from a purely negative one to something beyond that. It examines suffering as a means of purification and an avenue towards freedom through love. This outlook is called the redemptive coping perspective, which originates from spirituality and religion. Its central belief centres on cultivating good character while maintaining heartfelt empathy in times of hardship. This study intends to explore the religious and philosophical aspects of pain and its control by applying various religions, philosophies, psychological principles, and sociological approaches. It aims to expand knowledge on growth, prosocial behaviour, and spirituality by examining how suffering can lead to positive individual changes. This exploration will unfold through a multifaceted approach:

1. Defining Suffering: First, let us analyse the existing definitions of the given term; second, we will comprehend various sorts of suffering that belong to the sphere of the given term and include physical, emotional, and spiritual sufferings.
2. Suffering as a Purifying Force: This section will concentrate on suffering and the change originating from suffering sources in connection to religion, philosophy and psychological data.
3. Transformation through Suffering: In the following discussion, we will demonstrate how suffering can result in post-traumatic growth, the "self" and "self and others," social growth, empathy, and appreciation of humankind.
4. Liberation through Love and Service: In this section, the author analyses the argument regarding suffering, which can lead to more influence or desire to alleviate other people's suffering and become a means of salvation from this round of rebirth.

This wide-ranging analysis aims to clarify the multifaceted and mostly contradictory nature of suffering as a process capable of causing pain and hopelessness and spiritual development, change, and enlightenment. Pain, a complex and subjective

phenomenon, cannot be defined as a phenomenon with one ordinary meaning (Phillips et al., 2023). The fact that experience is subjective contributes to the critical elements of why suffering cannot be determined uniquely. To a significant extent, this is because the definition of suffering is further compounded by the fact that suffering involves an individual finding meaning in their situation, which can be subjective when two people might be experiencing similar circumstances. Yet, the way that they are perceiving these circumstances and the ways that they are thinking about them is different. This shows how two people fighting the same disease, for instance, may give it a completely different dimension.

Thus, one inclined to have a robust support system and personal development may find meaning and strength in suffering. In contrast, the other who does not have a support system or has different beliefs may be pulled into hopelessness and despair. This underscores the powerful influence of personal narratives, belief systems, and sense of self in shaping how suffering is interpreted, endured, and ultimately integrated into one's life story (Hall et al., 2018). Doing this sets the foundation for future studies to build on while also focusing on the most relevant aspects based on the expectations established for the area.

Thus, suffering is further regarded as an action involving meaning construction that includes these subjective meanings and recognizes that for one person, the experience of suffering may be an opportunity for growth or positive change. In contrast, in the case of another person, an understanding of pain is shaped by different variables unique to him/her, making the pain experience entirely personal" (Fillingim, 2017). Thus, apart from the physical aspect of the pain experience, which also varies from one person to another, which is the level of pain experienced, this includes other elements like how emotionally strong a person is, the culture the person is part of, including their beliefs and even what one has been through before. For example, to one person, an injury that for example cuts the skin and causes the person harm may be perceived earnestly and may even lead to a fight to avoid anxiety or because the person is already traumatised.

However, such tension may be possible to endure by another cultural or personal belief. Some even consider their own beliefs as structures through which suffering can be understood so that even such an injury as one will incur a fractured limb will give different levels of experiences, crippling on some and just a mere distraction to others. This clearly shows why suffering is a physiological phenomenon but also a complex of sensations within and feelings about a person, self-deployment, and even management in society. The definition itself is complicated further by the ever-present, changing dynamics of suffering because what makes one suffer is not stagnant; it is somewhat fluid and changes with time, situation and individual development. According to Egnew (2018), "Suffering propels one to realise there is much more to the universe and our place in it than just being there. And people tend to tell that story in terms of individual suffering, which is full of perception and meaning." This suffering narrative is subject to constant shifts into other worlds as we acquire new horizons, shift our perceptions, and adapt to life's constant interruptions. For example, the agony once believed to be inconceivable in one's youth, such as love sicknesses or career destructions, could be treated with a more philosophical self in some other stage, considering the more mature self and life's challenges. Grief is no exception, as it is one of the events that leads to pain. Almost all people can grieve the image of the loss of a loved one. However, the perception of grief and how it is represented by such processes and phenomena in people's minds varies throughout a person's lifetime. Therefore, any definition of suffering must account for such dynamism, where the impact and interpretation are not at one static moment in our lives but intricately woven into the dynamic complexity that constitutes life.

Suffering pertains not only to the elementary physical level but is also accompanied by complexities related to definitions of emotions and existential and social aspects that are not so readily defined. Phillips, Uygur and Egnew put it best, 'Suffering is personal, it is individual, connected to anguish within the armour of oneself which encompasses the 'whole', it is not just the body' (2023). This broad conception recognizes the profound psychological aspects, which are almost always present in suffering pain caused by loss, unbearable fear, and insatiable, debilitating anxiety. More intense, but in some cases less visible, suffering can be in the form of meaning crises in which people feel as if they have lost purpose in their life and even question the value of life itself while realising the fragility of life (Walsh, 1995). Social and psychological suffering can take the form of stigma and discrimination, trauma from childhood abuse, loneliness, and other factors. Thus, broad definitions should not only include superficial forms of pain and focus on physical pain alone. They should begin incorporating this all-encompassing emotional cocktail that adds to the experience of pain.

Cultural and societal influences profoundly shape the experience and expression of suffering, adding another layer of complexity to its definition. As Peacock and Patel (2008) explain, culture provides a "lens" through which individuals perceive and understand pain, influencing how it is communicated, coped with, and even valued. What might be considered unbearable suffering in one culture, warranting immediate medical intervention, might be met with stoicism and acceptance in another that emphasises resilience or spiritual growth through pain. For example, while seemingly extreme to outsiders, certain cultural practices involving physical endurance or pain rituals hold deep meaning and significance within their cultural context. Furthermore, societal norms dictate how certain types of suffering are perceived and addressed. Mental illness, for instance, continues to be stigmatized in many societies, leading to shame, isolation, and inadequate access to support (Loh et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the cultural and societal contexts in which suffering occurs is essential for providing culturally sensitive care and challenging stigmatising attitudes exacerbating individual pain.

It sorts a spectrum of physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions as a concept. By the rule of thumb, physically, suffering manifests pain, illness, or some form of disability. It is usually felt as an intrusion into one's body integrity and a rupture of its normal functions. Emotionally, suffering is shorthand for a host of negative affective states, like anguish, grief, despair, fear, and anger, usually following much loss, trauma, or the threat to one's well-being or sense of self. On the spiritual level, suffering also

involves questions about meaning, purpose, and possibly the human condition; this usually arises from experiences that threaten one's conceptions of themselves or some higher power to which they relate. This dimension involves feelings of isolation, desertion, or perceived disconnection from the divine or an ultimate reality. In any case, it is the understanding that such suffering has all these facets, extending beyond pure physical pain to encompass the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the human experience.

Suffering as a Purifying Force

Being generally an unwanted enemy, suffering can sometimes be a crucible in which personal growth is forged: resilience, empathy, and spiritual deepening. Many religious traditions view suffering as the means of spiritual purification and Closer Communion with the divine. The biblical story of Job, for example, depicted how holding onto faith through hard times can result in transformation. Buddhist thought also holds that suffering is evidenced in life since attachment and, therefore, a function of desire. It postulates that suffering can be conquered through mindfully accepting or meditating upon a given reality and enlightenment and liberation. Philosophical reflection has also engaged the question of the nature of suffering. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, thought that evils such as suffering were primarily neutral and invited growth and self-overcoming. (Came, 2008). He felt that characters are shaped out of adversity and become stronger and more aware of themselves. This view has been reiterated in various psychological studies that show that a person who undergoes any adverse situation often develops better coping mechanisms, becomes resilient and finds meaning in his life. For example, posttraumatic growth has shown the possible positive psychological change resulting from highly stressful experiences (Taylor 2012). Suffering can be painful, yet it may form the basis of radical personal change, spiritual growth, and deepening in self and other understanding.

Suffering and Transformation

Suffering can be seen as bad, yet it contains the power to transform and change within it. It is the crucible that often tempers people, helping them develop resilience, empathy, and a more profound realization of the human condition. People usually have improved coping mechanisms and an increased ability to handle adversity when facing difficulties and struggles. Suffering can encourage empathy by providing a more profound understanding of suffering, ours and others. This enhanced sensitivity gives way to greater compassion and an increased concern for relieving suffering in others. Moreover, struggling with intense suffering tends to force people to confront the basic existential questions regarding meaning, purpose, and life's vulnerability. This grappling process with questions of fundamentals can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself, the human condition, and everything being interrelated. Thus, although not easy, suffering may catalyze change that can have very positive results in building resilience, empathy, and a deeper grasp of the human experience.

Liberation through Love and Service

Suffering, the most personal and intimate of experiences, can ironically be the path to spiritual freedom through a deepened sense of compassion and the zeal to serve others in their suffering. This refers to the common belief held in spiritual writers and philosophers worldwide that contact with one's pain may give birth to an empathy well that would compel one to do something for those who suffer, an act of service. For, in the Mahayana school, the concept of a Bodhisattva is fully expressed by waiting for all beings to be saved before one is taken care of (Blo-Bzan-Rgya-Mtsho, Phu-Khañ Dge-Bśes & Samuels, 1997). First, Jesus is the source of life and teacher of the truth of love, compassion, and unselfishness, and that was done through his teachings and is displayed in his preaching & scarification. Therefore, the concept of liberation through love and service crosses religious lines and is also an essential virtue in secular philosophies, which emphasise that all people are one. Their change can come through regular altruism. In developing compassion by working to remove the misery of others, a person can find enlightenment from the emotional cage, and purpose and value are realized so that the whole thing may be labelled as spiritual liberation.

The Paradox of Suffering: A Catalyst for Growth and Liberation

Suffering, however, can engender a much-sympathized shocking empathy in the afflicted, which makes one sincerely anticipate pain, whether theirs or that of others. That goodwill can make them even consider more seriously contributing to relieving people's troubles by demonstrating service or love. This can be regarded in Mahayana Buddhism in the bodhisattva's vow to save all beings first before attaining nirvana. The same can be seen in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, where selfless love and compassion are highlighted in the example of a person coming from suffering to agape service for all, which is a goal for each of us.

And yes, there is a fatalism in 'suffering' that also needs to be addressed, and that is quite how suffering may be toxic to the individual having prolonged reasons to embrace sorrow or rather hate, etc. Derogatory views on imperfection are indeed unfortunate consequences of ethical suffering. Individual differences, the type and extent of suffering, and the support provided instead of suffering make a difference. So yes, one cannot wholly dismiss the elephant as suffering in this case and the changes it is likely to bring in its wake to the person concerned. This is, in some respects, captured partly by posttraumatic growth theory, in which a person is given the opportunity or is otherwise able to find meaning and direction out of an immense loss and afterwards experience psychological change positively.

One should recognize the existence of pain but, in intellectual appreciation, accept pain and suffering as positive; it is indeed a realist contradiction. Suffering can help us flourish and build painful empathy and a deeper understanding of ourselves and

human life. This, in turn, may stimulate a more profound sense of concern and motivation for trying to relieve the suffering of others, as well as serve as a pathway toward inner peace and a kinder and fairer world.

Conclusion: Reframing Suffering into a More Caring World

Nevertheless, while suffering is conventionally recognised as something nobody wants, investigating it reveals that it is not the only aspect to consider, and it can be approached constructively. Many religious and philosophical orientations and soon-to-be-operational psychological research similarly reflect that suffering inspires positive personality growth and attaining a spiritual state. In analysing this point, we can notice that suffering has become the cause of a change in the lives of Job, one of the biblical figures (Pirkowski, 2019); Buddhist teachings on Bodhichitta (1997), and the life of Jesus Christ communicated deeper faith, selflessness, and an elevated feeling of sympathy.

Underneath the converting characteristic of this possibility lies a much broader and justified element. It is based on this empirical research evidence of peoples' growth after suffering that people realise they are capable of and develop psychologically. The positiveness of change manifests as more resilience, says Lohr (2018), expanded empathetic capacities, according to Chan et al. (2022), and a greater understanding of self and the almighty. However, the optimistic view that all transformations are affected must be controlled by a specific context; hence, the severity and the kind of pain, personal differences, and love do the rest. Therefore, while acknowledging the positive outcome in growth potential, addressing the more significant predominant systemic issues amplifying suffering and supporting those in distress is essential.

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