

SUFFERING AND HUMAN EXISTENCES: BEYOND NATIONAL BOUNDARY

Amadi Chibuiké.E , Tosin Adeate and Olajide Olufunmilayo. A

¹Dept. of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Ede. Osun State, Nigeria

²Dept. of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

³Dept. of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Ede. Osun State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT: *This paper submits that the problem of suffering is a perennial one. It cuts across every nation, race and people of the world. Different arguments from the different worldviews such as Buddhist, existentialist and the African thought system were examined to analyze the problem that bothers on the existence of man in the world. Beyond that, emphasis was laid on the notion of ignorance as the basis for human suffering. This paper also suggests ways through which people can alleviate or stop their suffering especially in the face of man inflicted suffering on others.*

KEYWORDS: Suffering, Human Existences, National Boundary

INTRODUCTION

The idea of suffering is a perennial problem in the discourse of philosophy of religion, especially. Beyond that, it has hitherto generated a lot of debate across different intellectual movements, religion and liturgies because of how it affects and defines human life. Suffering can be referred to as an unpleasant experience of life. It is anything that is painful, injurious, calamitous, hurtful, or morally bad. It is anything that impedes or disrupts one's goal, happiness, wellbeing, or an absence of good. It is in living below the standard of comfort desirable by human. This can be termed as experience of recession using an economic term. In this paper we will attempt a comparative analysis of the idea of suffering among thought systems such as Buddhism, Existentialism, and African traditional thought; their contributions and their suggestive model on combating it. In furtherance to the above, this paper tends to argue whether suffering is indeed an existing force in the world or an illusion occasioned by ignorance

A Conceptual Clarification

The problem of suffering is not a scientific problem that can be solved through continuous observations and test in the laboratory but a logical problem of clarifying a number of beliefs and reconciling a number of thought systems. Most of the explanations we have on it are theological ones. Most philosophies rest on scriptural reference in discussing the reason for suffering especially as it relates with the idea of God's existence.

Roger Walsh's paper, "The Problem of Suffering: Existential and Transpersonal Perspectives", explored four topics that are centrally related to the issue of suffering. He asserts that 1. The idea that our usual human condition is in some way deficient, lacking and imbued with suffering. 2. These diction of conventionality (the herd or the consensus trance). 3. The claim that our usual ways of living are somehow inauthentic or somnambulistic. 4. Strategies and responses for authenticity or awakening."¹

The idea of suffering is one of many problems that had challenged the belief in a sole creator in of the world. Whether such if there is any can fit into the qualities of an omnipresence and omnipotent as some believed. That he is omnipotent and morally perfect. That he is omnipotent means that he can do anything. Provided his doing it doesn't involve an intrinsic impossibility. Being morally perfect and good shows that he can take away suffering from the world; from his creations whom he claimed he loved. Just as William J. Wainwright argued “So if there were an omnipotent, morally perfect being who knew about these evils—well, they wouldn't have arisen in the first place, for he'd have prevented their occurrence. Or if, for some reason, he didn't do that, he'd certainly remove them the instant they began to exist. But we observe evils, and very long-lasting ones. So we must conclude that God does not exist”²

If suffering is an unpleasant situation, why did God allow humans experience an unpleasant situation? Donald Abel argued that suffering is bound to be in the world and it is necessary to have the opposite of things in existence. Hence, suffering is necessary to be an opposite of comfort, and good. He raised an illustration from musical work to support this claim. According to him, “in a musical work, for example, there may occur discords which somehow add to the beauty of the work as a whole.”³

Different parts of the world, different philosophies and religions gave different explanations on what they call ‘suffering’. While poverty is named suffering in places like sub-Saharan Africa, what is called suffering in the West or East differs. What we call suffering, to some person, it is the kind of life they have chosen to live for religious reasons. This implies that suffering is relative and the term is best explained by experience.

The Nature and Elimination of Suffering in Buddhist Thought System

“The subject of the four noble truths, whose root meaning refers to an off center wheel hub, ‘*dukkha*’ captures the fact that life never quite live up to an expectation, hopes, dreams, and plans, usually translated as ‘suffering.’ It includes the broaden psychological ideas of dissatisfaction, lack of contentment, discontent, pain, misery, frustration, and feeling ill at ease”⁴

According to Karyn L. Lai, a core element of Buddhist thought concerns the nature of suffering and its elimination. The fourfold noble truth a core doctrine of Buddhism sets out the nature of suffering; 1.all life inevitably sorrowful .2. sorrow is due to craving; 3.Sorrow can only be stopped by the stopping of cravings. 4. This can be done by a course of carefully disciplined conduct, culminating in the life of concentration and meditation led by Buddhist Monk⁵

Buddha’s first noble *truth* is *dukkha* (suffering) which is the realization that everything revolves around suffering. Our being born, ageing, getting married involves *dukkha*. We come into the world in a way that produces *dukkha* for our mothers, fathers, and even for ourselves. According to Stephen J. Laumakis, “we go through the process of growth and maturation and the experience of *Dukkha* are initiated⁶ and enhanced. We continue to age, and life becomes increasingly difficult as we encounter the debilitating consequences of physical, mental, and emotional sickness. And finally inevitably we die”

The second noble truth that involves the origin of *Dukkha* is *Tanha*, which is selfish wanting. The second noble truth teaches that man’s unnecessary desires, want and possessiveness fuels the fire of *dukkha* (suffering). Our senses teach us to develop habitual lust to fulfill our

unquenchable thirst for more pleasure. “we seek to preserve our ‘selves’ by trying to be some fixed things or imagine our ‘selves’ as becoming some fixed things; and third, we also simultaneously experience the thirst to remove and overcome the obstacle to our satisfaction, including our ‘selves’ if necessary”⁷. When people pursue this so called fixed things, they think they are pursuing a perfect and permanent things, not knowing that nothing is permanent and everything is in a constant state of flux.

In a fast growing technological world, where inventions emerge every time, it becomes difficult to pursue things. An individual that has a Camry car 2014 model that is anticipating of getting a 2017 model might get it and thereafter be thinking of when the 2020 model we be out. Before one knows it, he/she will begin to take the steps that he/she thinks are necessary to satisfy his desire and help him/her be what he/she wants to be and before they know it the karmic consequence of his actions and intentions catch up with them and leads to agony and suffering. Meanwhile, the only way out of this predicament and suffering is the third noble truth in Buddhism.

The third noble truth according to Buddha is the cessation of *Dukkha* and to stop its source which is *Tanha*. According to Buddha, “if you want to avoid the fruit of an action and an intention, avoid the action or intention. Put in another way, if you want to remove an effect, remove its cause. So the Buddha says the cessation of suffering depends on the complete cessation of the craving that causes and conditions it. One must release himself from *Tanha* and completely detach himself from lustful desires in other to attain complete enlightenment, which is *Nihhana*.

The fourth noble truth offers the practical/moral advice necessary to remove both *Tanha* and *Dukkha* and achieve the ultimate goal which is *Nihhana*. One must first accept the Buddha, his teaching and be committed to them. One must accept taking responsibility for ones actions and intentions, with a belief in *Karma*, *Samsara* and rebirth. In addition, one must accept and follows the midway between extreme sensuous pleasure and aggravating want. One must learn how to be kind just like Buddha himself. We must also make money in a way that would not be harmful and bring suffering to others. It is when all these teachings are adhered to and practice that one can claim to have leave *samsara* and attain *Nihhana*, which is enlightenment.

There are eight attitudes or pathway we must follow to find freedom from suffering. These are “the right or correct things to do in life. There are “right view; right intentions; right speech; right actions; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration.”⁸ This is the necessary approach to attain *Nihhana* a life of enlightenment devoid of suffering.

Existentialist Worldview about suffering

Existentialism is a school of thought that believes in addressing the issues that matters in people’s lives. “It is commonly acknowledged that existentialism is a philosophy about the concrete individual. This is both its glory and its shame.” Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. While some (Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Unamuno, Marcel) of them hold that God exists, others (Sartre and Camus) held that there is no God or any other transcendent force. Beginning with Kierkegaard to Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, and others, existentialist philosophers seek to place man on proper rational ground to evaluate his

quality of life and manner of living. The analysis of their themes is a response to the challenge of human existence. This reason is not different in Camus' works. Although not initially labeled an existentialist, Camus's two major philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, are philosophical commentaries on what it is to be human and how to realize the human essence in a world labeled absurd by him.

It is against this backdrop that we examine the existential doctrines of Albert Camus and Nietzsche. The paper starts with a cursory look at the thematic explanations of Camus existentialist philosophy. The origin of the absurd world and the role of man in it were espoused. Unlike Sartre that posits that there is meaning in the world, Camus' views as regards the meaninglessness of the world would be examined and the arguments for his philosophy of revolt would be succinctly analyzed. The paper in its final analysis examines the ethical issues that arose from Camus existential themes and how it can be resolved.

Albert Camus advanced radical arguments on recurring existential themes like the meaning of life, the nature of man and the notion of absurdity. He likened the world we live to one of absurdity and that humans are caged in this world with no chance of escape. This can be likened to a cont Camus in his philosophy tells us that there is still a way to be happy and fulfilled in this world through revolt. To achieve this happiness, man must revolt against the meaninglessness of our life and of our death by what he calls rebellion. This paper is an attempt to analyse Camus' existential philosophy with the aim of explicating the jigsaw complexities in Camus' Philosophy of revolt. Through critical evaluation rests on the conclusion, that Camus' philosophy of revolt is paradoxical and also laden with unpalatable ethical implications for human beings and the society.

The nature of suffering in the world had made the existentialist such as Albert Camus to affirm if life actually has meaning. He argued that "the fundamental subject of 'The Myth of Sisyphus' is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide"⁹

Camus has conceived life as suffering by his dramatic illustration of the life of Sisyphus who was punished by the gods. Sisyphus suffering never and cannot be ended. So also is the mystery and absurdity of life which is characterized as suffering. This according to his illustration makes life looks like a fruitless labour. The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. Sisyphus was accused of stolen the secret of the gods. This affirms why the existentialist, Camus and many others see life as mere suffering and death as a necessary solution to it. Camus reiterates concerning Sisyphus that "You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth."¹⁰ Therefore, the fact that there is suffering in the world and life is meaningless does not make one to commit suicide.

In Nietzsche's account, everyone's life involves suffering but not everyone experiences an existential concussion. No one is immune from the pain and suffering that are part of living. Suffering just is a part of life. Nietzsche makes the point clearly, "to live is to suffer, and to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering."¹¹ It all comes down to the meaning one makes of suffering.

Nietzsche is right that we can and do tolerate all sorts of suffering as long as we can make sense of it in some ways. Some of those ways of making meaning are positive and others terribly negative. The important thing is that meaning is still possible; this is what staves off an existential concussion. What a person cannot abide, Nietzsche claims, is when there is no “answer to his scream of the question: *to what end suffering?*” Meaningless suffering is intolerable and life destroying. This is the existential concussion.¹²

He argued that there are different forms of suffering. There are suffering that are inflicted by an externally influence such as a natural disaster. According to him, we have little or no control on such. In addition, we can also make choices that can reduce pain and suffering when we make some right decisions. Rational decision make shaped our life out of suffering. For instance, a smoker that refuse to heed the warning that ‘smokers are liable to die young’ will suffer cancer and lung problem. These are suffering that are individually inflicted and to Nietzsche they can be avoided.

We can also argue that the Sartrean *Thrownness* into the world and Heidegger’s being-unto-death are awareness of the meaninglessness and suffering man has come to face and accept in life. Walsh, asserts that,

For Heidegger we are "thrown" into a condition of ambiguity and alienation. There we confront boundary situations of aloneness, meaninglessness, responsibility and death. Consequently it is no surprise that existentialists claim that our underlying feeling tone is one of angst and that, as Nietzsche (1968, p. 269) put it as deeply as man sees into life, he also sees into suffering.

African Thought System on the idea of Suffering

African traditional thought conceive the debate of suffering (evil) from a unique perspective. The idea of suffering cannot be discussed in isolation without reference to the notion and existence of evilness. Reason being that an act of suffering is seen as a presence of evil in a person’s life. Using the Yoruba thought system as a foil; suffering is seen as a creation of *Olodumare* (God). It was created and to live together the same time with good to. There are deities that serve in the theocratic government of *olodumare* that are responsible for the creation of albinos and hunchback. Even the phenomena of accident is often caused as a punishment from *olodumare* and put it under the agency of *Esu* one of his arch divinities in charge of sacrifices and punishment. Quoting Oduwole in her paper titled “The Dialectics of Ire (Goodness) and *Ibi* (Evilness): An African Understanding of the Philosophical Problem of Evil”, she asserts that, the age-old philosophical problem of evil assumes a dialectical explanation in the Yoruba thought system. The Africans, as in the case of the Yoruba, affirms the co-existence of *ibi* (evilness) and *ire* (goodness) in the world without any contradictions.¹³

Man is a composite of good and evil. No wonder the Yorubas will say that *tibi tire ni eda nrin ni ile aye* (man lives with evil and goodness in the world. this shows that the idea of suffering and evil is a reality among the Yorubas. Therefore as maintained by Oduwole “we can go ahead to say that no wonder the Yoruba can live with the dialectics of *Ibi* (badness) and *ire* (goodness)¹⁴

Most often than not, what people call suffering is a punishment accrue to their neglect of duties. In the Yoruba thought system people often, blame *esu*, for inflicting them with diseases and punishing them unduly with drought, famine, and what have you, especially when they offer him what is forbidden. In the view of Olubayo Adekola, “most deities in the Yoruba religion have some kinds of offering and food that they like while others are taboo to them. The taste of *esu* in this case is for fowl and palm oil, while palm kernel oil (*Adi*) is a taboo to him, if anyone offers *Esu* palm kernel oil, *Esu* will deal with him as an enemy, and give him a blow, or stir him to some actions that will bring upon him calamitous consequence”¹⁵

The Complementarity and Non-Complementarity in the Existentialist, Buddhism and Africa Thought Systems on Suffering

It is lucid from the teachings of Buddha that the tenet of Buddhism and its goal is the recognition of suffering in the world and the elimination of the same. The cessation of suffering connotes that Buddhism do not see suffering as part of what should be with man, unlike the Africa thought system where suffering is part of man’s existence. Hence, the Buddhist designed a way to avoid suffering.

The existentialist believed especially Camus that suffering is real and it is a necessary part of life. Just as painted in the life of Sisyphus. Sisyphus sees his task and punishment as his fate. He later embraced it with pleasure in order to overcome absurdity. This is in line with the position of the Africa thought system that suffering and comfort are part of the ontology of man from creation. Hence, they are meant to exist together.

Therefore, in spite of the differences between Buddhism, Existentialist philosophy and African thought system, there are certain things common to them. In other words, they have certain things in common. They all discussed the problem of suffering. The fundamental moral principles are the same all over the world. They are suffering everywhere in the world. The whole world is complaining economic downturn and people are paying for it. Economic recession has moved to retrogression and depression. This is the same in virtually all Nations of the world.

The above suffering caused by economic recession can be likened to be a man-made suffering. In a situation where funds meant to build industries and repair infrastructures is been siphoned by an individual. Such an act will definitely leave many to live in poverty. In addition, on the part of the masses, there is a need for people to employ rationality in deciding their budget. Undue desire for what man cannot afford is a big problem, and makes man desperate.

What Buddha is advocating for is a non-attachment to things. When the rich and the wealthy come to the realization that they are going to leave their wealth behind after death, they would seek less. One may want to interrogate Buddha in the sense that if being giving birth to, growing and ageing is a form of suffering, that means suffering is natural. Since suffering is natural, *Tahna* becomes necessary. In addition, how then, is it possible to overcome suffering through enlightenment?

Meanwhile going by the submission of the economist that human wants are insatiable, it follows logically that man cannot stop pursuing things. This is also applicable to the pursuant of knowledge. The only time man can stop to pursue knowledge is only in the grave, and if enlightenment, which is the solution to suffering is a product of acquisition of knowledge, then man must continue to desire it. The continuous attachment to knowledge can also breed

suffering, because knowledge according to the preacher in Ecclesiastes wearies.¹⁶ Meanwhile we should also state that enlightenment as taught by Buddha because ignorance in itself is a form of evil.

We can also say that most of the issues we face in Africa are product of ignorance of the meaning of our experiences. Ignorance is the absence of information. If we have information of the nature of existence and how *Olodumare* just like in the account of the Yoruba, has designed the world we would not be bothered about things that comes our way. J. A. I Bewaji reacting to this problem raised that “ignorance means a lack of knowledge, being poorly educated, to be lacking in awareness or understanding, or being poorly bred and uncultured.”¹⁷

It is easier to query God on the event of our suffering, but tedious to accept when suffering is being inflicted by a fellow man to man like in a case of the leaders to the masses. The society is designed in a classed form where the few rich didn't just enjoy the riches created by all but in doing that inflicts undue pain on the poor masses. Following the enlightenment orientation suggested by Buddha, there is a need by the poor masses to revolt against suffering inflicted by their leader. This, they can achieved by denying them their vote at the poll and rejection of poor representation by their legislator. This in our opinion is one of the viable means of alleviating economic suffering.

CONCLUSION

We have seen from the analyses in this paper that understanding and enlightenment is key. Enlightenment out of ignorance will show to us that what we call suffering is not a force in itself. The Buddhist claimed that it can be eliminated by enlightenment. The Yoruba thought system opined that our understanding of the dual and opposite nature of things will make us to appreciate every experience that comes our way. In addition, from Camus' account of Sisyphus we could see that our understanding of fate will make us take our day to day experience with pleasure no matter how hard they seem to appear. This position of O'Connor buttressed this point, when she defined existential concussion as “a cause and consequence of acute suffering characterized by a lack of meaning. A non-exhaustive list of symptoms includes: Profound disorientation in the world such that a person does not know who she is, where she belongs, or how she fits in the world”

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