

## EXPLORING THE THEME OF SUFFERING IN SOREN KIERKEGAARD'S PHILOSOPHY

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### **Abstract**

*The problem of suffering which is connected with the problem of theodicy, has to do with why a good God would permit humans to undergo physical, mental and spiritual afflictions. Human suffering, which is an indisputable fact of human existence that raises many questions, remains a mystery. Why is there suffering and what is the purpose of suffering? What should be the attitude of man to suffering? Kierkegaard sees suffering as essential in the life of man in order for him to actualize his potential. His treatment of suffering is of great importance in understanding the role of suffering in human existence. This essay attempts to approach suffering from the Kierkegaardian perspective. Kierkegaard, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and existentialist thinker, sees suffering as the essential expression of the existential pathos which the religious individual understands as something essential. Suffering, which is a dying to immediacy, is an essential expression of the relationship to the Absolute. The religious person is one who is reflected inward and understands suffering as essential and is ready to confront it in all its ramifications. This approach to suffering has the capacity of encouraging an individual to face all of life's dangers, to embark joyfully*

*upon the necessary challenges of life and to cultivate a positive attitude to suffering.*

**Keywords:** Suffering, Immediacy, Essential, Absolute, Existential, Pathos.

### **Introduction**

Suffering is an unavoidable mystery of human existence. It is seen by some as something evil that comes to those who have 'bad luck' or to bad people. It is natural that human beings should shy away from suffering and from anything that will cause pain. However, it is an undisputable fact that suffering is a part and parcel of human existence. But the question is: why is there suffering? What is its purpose? What should be the attitude of humans to suffering?

A proper and adequate knowledge of what suffering is and its role has the capacity of encouraging an individual to face all of life's dangers, to embark joyfully upon the necessary challenges of life and to derive benefits from a positive approach to suffering. To this end, Kierkegaard's treatment of suffering is of great importance in understanding the role of suffering in our lives.

This essay, therefore, attempts to expose Kierkegaard's view on suffering as the essential expression for existential pathos; as an expression of a religious view of life in contradistinction to fortune and misfortune as the expression of an aesthetic view of life. To achieve this, this essay would have an overview of suffering. Then, Kierkegaard's view on existence and the stages of life after which his treatment on suffering would follow and the bulk of what Kierkegaard says on suffering would be taken from his work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

### **An overview of suffering**

The term *suffering* is sometimes used in the narrow sense of physical pain, but more often it refers to mental or emotional pain, or more to pain in the broad sense, that is, to any unpleasant feeling, emotion or sensation. The term *pain* usually refers to physical pain, but it is also a common synonym of *suffering*. The terms *pain* and *suffering* are

sometimes used together in different ways. For instance, they may either be used as interchangeable synonyms or they may be used in contradistinction to one another as in "pain is physical, suffering is mental", or "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional". Sometimes, they are used to define each other, as in "pain is physical suffering", or "suffering is severe physical or mental pain"<sup>1</sup>

Suffering occurs commonly in the lives of sentient beings in diverse manners. It is the presence of pain, displeasure, and other forms of anguish: physical or spiritual, in a given person or sentient being.<sup>2</sup> One thing is clear and that is the fact that it is the subject – the human person – who suffers. Of course, the lower animals do undergo suffering (physical pain) but what differentiates the human person from lower animals is on the level of consciousness. Only the suffering human being knows that he<sup>3</sup> is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a humanly speaking still deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer.<sup>4</sup> It has been said that the high-level capacities of memory, anticipation, and conscience, which gives rise to the human experience of suffering as distinct from the experience of physical pain, is lacking in lower animals, which live wholly in the present.<sup>5</sup>

The field of human suffering is much wider, more varied, and multi-dimensional. Man suffers in a variety of ways not always considered by medicine, not even in its most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is still wider than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself.<sup>6</sup> In day-to-day human experience, we are faced with various types of suffering and evil. Pantaleon Iroegbu makes a

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<sup>1</sup>“Suffering”, in [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffering](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffering), 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Kpim of Predicaments*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2004, 31.

<sup>3</sup>The terms ‘man’, ‘he’, ‘him’ and so on is used here occasionally in a generic sense to avoid making the work cumbersome. It does not, in any way, denote disrespect or disregard for the female gender.

<sup>4</sup>John Paul II, *The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)*, Apostolic Letter), 11<sup>th</sup> February, 1984. no. 9.

<sup>5</sup>J. Bukovsky, “Suffering”, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, ed. Rev. W. J. McDonald et al, Washington: The Catholic University, 1967, 775.

<sup>6</sup>John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris . . .*, no. 5.

difference between evil and suffering. He says that evil is generally a lack of being or acting that should be there in a being while suffering involves some anguish, pain or displeasure on the part of the victim. While all suffering is evil, not all evil is suffering in the strict sense of the presence of pain, anguish or displeasure. In other words, there are various types of evil some of which may entail suffering and others not.<sup>7</sup>

According to Etienne Borne, suffering is not 'immediately given' in human consciousness. It does not have the simple character of sensation or pleasure. It raises questions as soon as it is present in the one suffering and feeds that self-reflection peculiar to the human mind. He says that there is a distinction between the different forms of suffering. The first kind of suffering could be called work or labour (suffering in work). This is when pain is the means to a worthwhile end, that is, it has meaning beyond it. It creates a kind of division or alienation within the human person. This is the most fundamental dimension of interiority and it is at the origin of technical activity and properly human actions. In "suffering in work", suffering assumes a mediating role; it can be seen in the light of a comforting truth. Here the pain of the road is incurable and is part of the journeying. But its justification lies in the destination and in the happiness of arriving.<sup>8</sup>

There is also suffering of anguish, which occurs in the meeting point with absolute misfortune when one must bear the unbearable. For example, the death of a loved one, the triumphant persecution of the innocent etc. In this type of suffering, which natural reason cannot give a 'means-end' explanation, we are inflicted with 'obtuse evidence' of their meaninglessness. Suffering, which comes from our own faults, has two faces. At one time, a moral and intelligent action may mediatize the suffering, that is, the evil, which makes one evil, is changed by the person into repentance, which purifies. At other times, the evil is irreparable and the remorse, which turns into anguish, is unconquerable by heroism and wisdom natural

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<sup>7</sup>Iroegbu, op.cit., p. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup>Etienne Borne, "The Meaning and Meaninglessness of Suffering", *Philosophy Today*, vol. 1, (June, 1957), no. 2/4, 100.

to man.<sup>9</sup>

Relative suffering, in which the search for meaning is rewarded, and absolute suffering, whose meaning escapes us, influence one another with the latter infecting the former. There is an undefined area between the two where the hope of finding meaning is always mingled with fear of meaninglessness. There is an obtuseness, the filling of shadows even when it is evident that pain is necessary for humans and can serve a good purpose. It would seem that suffering of any kind destroys something of goodness and truth such that it becomes subject to reason by 'constraint and violence'. In suffering, there seems to be a sure sign of death and both seem impossible to mediatize, that is, it seem impossible to find meaning in both.<sup>10</sup>

In whatever form it takes, suffering is indeed a passion for humans. It is “an ordeal, imposed by fate or circumstances, which neither will nor reason can completely dominate and conquer” and it brings to the heart of an individual “a mixture of exaltation and blindness and baffling light.”<sup>11</sup>

A question that comes to mind is: if God is both willing and able to prevent evil, then why is there evil and suffering in the world? The problem of suffering is connected with the problem of theodicy, or why the just God allows evil in the world. Why would a good God permit man to undergo physical, mental and spiritual afflictions? This constitutes on one hand, the objection to God's existence by atheists like David Hume, who gives positive reasons for rejecting a theistic deity, and on the other hand, a challenge to the believer whose faith in God is severely tested by trials.<sup>12</sup>

At a deep human level, human suffering is a mystery before which scientific and most philosophical systems are either silent or without adequate answers. The mystery of suffering lies not in its existence which is obvious, nor in the fact that it can be painful and that we seek to avoid it nor does it lie in the fact that it can be

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Bukovsky, “Suffering”, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 . . . , 775.

necessary and even redemptive for our experience may show this to be true. Our persistent which shows that we are staring at a mystery.<sup>13</sup> According to Pope John Paul II:

“Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises the question: Why? It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning. Not only does it accompany human suffering, but it seems even to determine its human content, what makes suffering precisely human suffering.”<sup>14</sup>

In considering suffering, it would be discovered that it reveals the polarity existing between the exterior and interior self, the puzzled way in which one is stretched between the world of nature and spirit. Substantial unity becomes so difficult to understand that one can only call it a mystery.<sup>15</sup>

Suffering is an enigmatic fact which challenges every world view. No suffering is a simple physical reality. There is always that resistance, the effort to ignore or scape, to discover its causes. Man tries as much as possible to seek solutions to human suffering or find ways of doing away with it. But it ends up being a futile exercise. This is not to discredit those who seek ways to reduce human suffering or to say that we should not seek solutions to human problems. But as Pope John Paul II says:

“Seeking new and effective ways to alleviate suffering is a valid quest, but *suffering* nevertheless remains a fundamental fact of human life. In a way, it is as deep as man himself and touches upon his very essence. Medical

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<sup>13</sup>H. C. Bradley, *The Mystery of Suffering*, [http://www.Sju.edu/campus\\_ministry/Newsletter/CNL033003.htm](http://www.Sju.edu/campus_ministry/Newsletter/CNL033003.htm).

<sup>14</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* . . . , no. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Borne, art.cit., 100.

research and treatment neither wholly explains nor fully overcomes suffering. In its depth and its so many forms it needs to be considered from a perspective, which transcends the merely physical.”<sup>16</sup>

Suffering as suffering is obviously an evil. Suffering for the sake of suffering is an antithesis of goodness and to that extent it is existentially a hollow in the order of reality.<sup>17</sup> But what is the source of evil? If there is evil, then something is missing that ought to be there, in God or in the world and that is perfection. Why would a perfect God make an imperfect world - a world in which there is suffering and death? It is at this point that we now turn to Kierkegaard whose view on suffering would be understood in the light of his idea on existence and the stages of life.

### **The Concept of Existence in Kierkegaard's Philosophy**

The term *existence* constitutes the foundational structure of Kierkegaard's philosophy. His career was a self-conscious revolt against abstract thought which Hegel's system was noted for. For Kierkegaard, existence, which is a specifically human category, can have two senses. He made a distinction between the spectator and the actor. He says that the spectator can be said to exist in the sense of inert or inactive things. But the term existence does not apply properly to these whether they are spectators or stones. It is only the actor that is involved in existence. The act of existing, which is a striving, is both *pathetic* and *comic*. Existence, for Kierkegaard, is the “child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a constant striving.”<sup>18</sup> According to Kierkegaard,

The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude

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<sup>16</sup>Pope John Paul II, *The Christian Response to Suffering* (Message of the Holy Father for the World Day of the Sick for the Year 2002), cf., <http://www.wf-f.org/02-1-Christian-Suffering.html>. *Emphasis is mine.*

<sup>17</sup>Iroegbu, op.cit., 43.

<sup>18</sup>Soren, Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, 84.

and finitude, which relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, a task which can be performed only by means of a relationship to God. But to become oneself is to become concrete. But to become concrete means neither to become finite nor infinite, for that which is to become concrete is a synthesis.<sup>19</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the search for truth may be pursued either in an objective or in a subjective manner. Objective reflection consists in an abstraction from the subject and his subjective interest such that truth becomes subjectively indifferent. While in subjective reflection, the task is to interpenetrate the subjectivity of the inquirer with thought that the inwardness thus developed may be a truth that is relevant to existing human beings. The highest task that is proposed to every human being is the task of becoming subjective just as the highest reward, which is an eternal happiness, exists only for those who are subjective or rather, comes into being for the individual who becomes subjective. The subjective thinker is a dialectician dealing with the existential and he has the passion of thought requisite for holding fast to the qualitative disjunction for the existential dialectic, which moves within three spheres of life: aesthetic, ethical and religious, is a movement in the direction of decisive choice and fullness of life and is relevant to an individual who confronts the future as an active participant in life.<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard makes a distinction between what man now is, that is, his existential condition and what he ought to be, that is, his essential condition. He says that there is a movement in the life of man from his essential to existential condition; a movement from essence to existence. According to Kierkegaard, man's anxiety over his finitude is the cause of his estrangement from his essential being.

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<sup>19</sup>Soren, Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, 162-163.

<sup>20</sup>D. F. Swenson, *Something About Kierkegaard*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1941, 117-119.

Man's essential nature entails his relation to God, the Infinite Being. His existential condition is a consequence of his alienation from God. And a person's alienation and despair is further compounded if his actions drive him further from God. There is in man a dynamic drive, which this alienation creates, to recover his essential self. And it is in describing this dynamic movement that Kierkegaard speaks of the stages on life's way.<sup>21</sup>

Kierkegaard builds his theory of the stages, which he believes “embraces all possibilities of human existence,” on the fact that man is a synthesis of the finite and infinite, the eternal and the temporal. He used the concept of a stage either because he holds that each higher stage is constituted not by abolishing the lower but by subordinating it. He posited three stages: the Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious. The *aesthetic* stage can be exemplified in the poet who transmutes the world into an imaginary realm and in the romantic. The essential features of this stage are the absence of fixed universal moral standards and of determinate religious faith as well as the presence of a desire to enjoy the whole range of emotive and sense experience. An individual can exist inasmuch as he chooses to be an aesthetic man. Although existence can be achieved at this level, Kierkegaard injects the element of *quality* into the matter of existence. Ultimately, “authentic existence” cannot be achieved at this level.<sup>22</sup>

The *ethical* stage constitutes the sphere of duty, of universal rules, of unconscious demands and tasks. Like Socrates, whom Kierkegaard considers to be the best and famous example of the ethical mode of existence, the ethical man, through the act of choosing, learns to know himself by turning towards the inwardness of his own self and thus reaches a decision to live a life that has meaning. The act of choosing is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical.<sup>23</sup> Inasmuch as the ethical stage is an improvement on the aesthetic stage, it is nevertheless still

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<sup>21</sup>S. Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems* (4<sup>th</sup> ed), New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1971, 113-114.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. 481.

<sup>23</sup>Robert, Bretall, ed. *Either/Or in a Kierkegaard Anthology*, New York: The Modern Library, 1946, 105.

incomplete. The individual realizes that he is incapable of fulfilling the moral law, and becomes conscious of his guilt through deliberately going against the law. This guilt or the sense of sin becomes the dialectic element, the anti-thesis, which is that of estrangement or alienation from God which he belongs and from whom he must derive strength.<sup>24</sup> With sorrow in his heart, the ethical man asks divine forgiveness and it is at this point that he moves onto the religious stage.

Kierkegaard believes that the religious sphere is an embodiment of a truly authentic existence. It is seen as the culminating point of existential dialectic for in it can be found and obtained the authentic approach to life that has been so desired by the individual in both the aesthetic and ethical spheres. This religious stage is by acknowledging God, openly confessing one's sinfulness, choosing oneself as guilty and hoping for divine forgiveness. In this stage, an individual makes a choice, a personal commitment, which involves a passionate, non-rational "leap of faith." Kierkegaard makes a distinction between two forms of the religious stage: *Religiousness A* and *Religiousness B*. The former, which is not specifically Christian religiousness, can exist in paganism and in Christianity; that is, it can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian, whether he be baptized or not. While the latter is precisely Christian religiousness, is discriminative, selective, polemical and is closely defined by sin consciousness, the possibility of offence and the smart of sympathy.<sup>25</sup>

### **Kierkegaardian Perspective on Suffering**

As a prelude to Kierkegaard's discourse on suffering, it would be necessary to point out that for Kierkegaard, the task of the individual consists in the simultaneous maintenance of an absolute relationship to the absolute *telos* and a relative relationship to relative ends. Kierkegaard says that in order for the individual to be able to relate

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<sup>24</sup>Stumpf, Op.Cit., 481, 482.

<sup>25</sup>F. J. Lescoe, *Existentialism: With or Without God*, New York: The Society of St. Paul, 1974, 4.

absolutely to the absolute *telos*, he must begin by exercising himself in the absolute relationship through renunciation. This renunciation involves freeing oneself from relative ends. And it is when the individual is able to free himself from relative ends that he can now begin to think of the ideal task, which is the simultaneous maintenance of an absolute relationship to the absolute and a relative relationship to the relative.<sup>26</sup>

Kierkegaard would say that even when the individual has brought his immediacy to subjection, he is still in existence, and is thereby prevented from expressing absolutely the absolute relationship to an absolute *telos*. Unlike aesthetic pathos, which keeps itself at a distance from existence, or is in existence in a state of illusion, existential pathos dedicates itself more and more profoundly to the task of existing. It is able to penetrate all illusions, through the consciousness of what existence is, thereby becoming more and more concrete through reconstructing existence in action.

### **Suffering as the Essential Expression for Existential Pathos**

Kierkegaard says that action may be seen as the precise opposite of suffering, which is the essential expression for existential pathos – the pathos of action. This is apparently the case as is evident from the fact that the positive is the index of the negative: “A revelation is signalized by mystery, happiness by suffering, the certainty of faith by uncertainty, the ease of the paradoxical – religious life by its difficulty, the truth by absurdity ...”.<sup>27</sup>

For Kierkegaard, the distinguishing mark of religious action, which is directed towards eternal happiness, is suffering. Action here does not mean outward activity for this does not transform the individual's own existence. Rather, it can transform existence in the sense of an emperor conquering the world and enslaving people. But Kierkegaard would say that such action is aesthetic pathos. The aesthetic individual transforms the world while he himself remains untransformed. This is because he has the dialectical outside of him

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<sup>26</sup>Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 386.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 387.

instead of within him. Kierkegaard says that suffering is the highest action in inwardness. This is because “essential existential pathos is essentially related to existence; and to exist essentially is inwardness, and action in inwardness is suffering.”<sup>28</sup>

Suffering, which is essentially the expression of existential pathos, is rooted in the fact that the individual is from his happiness. But this also signifies that he is in relationship to this happiness and consequently, to be without suffering is to be without religion.<sup>29</sup> It should be pointed out that Kierkegaard does not teach that all suffering is religious although all suffering may become religious by being incorporated into a God-relationship. If suffering ceases, the religious life is also abolished for all religious life involves suffering. Swenson says that this suffering is due to the necessity of a reformation of the individual for religious suffering is the sign of transformation in the personality of the individual by which it is in the process of becoming better. The individual needs the transforming discipline of suffering for its imperfection is at the bottom of guilt.<sup>30</sup> From what Swenson says, guilt lies at the bottom of our suffering. According to Garelick, the suffering of the subjective individual lies in the fact that “he carries with him at all times in his search for eternal happiness, the awareness of the disproportion he has created between his existence and the demands of subjectivity.” The individual suffers because he bears the burden of guilt consciousness as a consequence of his guilt consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard says that in transforming his entire existence, which is a dying away from immediacy, the religious individual would feel himself confined within the absolute conception of God; for the absolute conception of God consists in having it at every moment. The religious individual is so confined since absoluteness is not directly the element of a finite creature. Kierkegaard says that inasmuch as the conception of God is the absolute help, it is also the

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 388.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 406.

<sup>30</sup>Swenson, op.cit., 174.

<sup>31</sup>H. M. Garelick, *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965, 26.

only help, which is also capable of revealing to man his own helplessness. The religious man, who lies in the finite as a helpless child, desires to hold fast to the conception of God and it is this that annihilates him. He desires to do everything he can to express this religious absoluteness, but as it were, he is unable to make the “finite commensurable therefore.”<sup>32</sup>

Kierkegaard says that although there is this absolute difference between God and man, the principle of equality in love expresses itself by means of the absolute difference whose form is humility – the humility that frankly admits its human lowliness with humble cheerfulness before God, trusting that God knows all this better than himself. It is here that the profound suffering of true religiosity lies – the deepest and unthinkable, namely, to stand related to God in an absolutely decisive manner, and be unable to find any decisive expression for this. This inability is rooted in the necessary relativity of the most decisive expression, in its being too much because it involves a certain presumptuousness against other men and too little because it is a worldly expression.<sup>33</sup>

### **Suffering as Dying from Immediacy**

Kierkegaard says that immediacy is fortune; for there is no contradiction in the immediate consciousness. The view of life natural to immediacy is one based on fortune and as such, the immediate individual is essentially seen as a fortunate one. The contradiction comes from without and takes the form of misfortune. The immediate individual is unable to understand misfortune. This is because he never becomes dialectical in himself. Due to his inability to grasp misfortune, the individual may despair; for the immediate individual expects the difficulty to stop since it is a foreign element. Kierkegaard says that the despair of the individual, which comes because the difficulty does not cease, makes the transition to another understanding of misfortune possible for the individual's immediacy ceases as a result of despair. Unlike the immediate individual who

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<sup>32</sup>Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 431-432.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 439.

lacks the dialectical in himself, the inwardness that is the core of the ethical and ethico-religious individual understands suffering as something essential. For the aesthetic (immediate) individual “suffering must come from without, be visible, not having its origin and expression in the individual himself.”<sup>34</sup> But the religious individual has suffering constantly with him. Just as the immediate individual requires fortune, the religious individual requires suffering and has it even in the absence of external misfortune. It is not misfortune that the religious individual requires for that would mean that the relationship would be aesthetic and he would remain essentially undialectical in himself.

According to Kierkegaard, just as immediacy pins its faith to fortune, the religious man believes that it is precisely in suffering that life is to be found. Immediacy expires in suffering and it is in suffering that the religious man begins to breathe; the religious man comes to life in suffering. In other words, all men are sufferers. But the problem is to share fully in the suffering, and not to get away from misfortune. Sharing fully in suffering is not by plunging oneself into it but by discovering that it is there.<sup>35</sup> For Kierkegaard, religiosity is inwardness, which is the “relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself.” And it is from this that suffering derives, this being the ground of its essential pertinence to the religious life such that its absence means the absence of religiosity. This is why Kierkegaard approves of Pascal's statement which he says came out of Pascal's own experience as a Christian, that “Suffering is the natural state of the Christian just as health is that of the 'natural' man.”<sup>36</sup> And as such, religiosity is not to serve as a place of refuge from suffering.

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<sup>34</sup>Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), 413.

<sup>35</sup>Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 391.

<sup>36</sup>Kierkegaard, *Stages...*, 416.

### **Suffering as the Mark of the Relationship of the *Exister* to the Absolute *Telos***

Kierkegaard asks the question:

Is it possible for an existing individual, at the same that he expresses precisely by means of suffering his relationship to an eternal happiness as the absolute *telos*, is it possible for him at the same time, on the basis of his knowledge about this relationship, to place himself beyond the suffering?<sup>37</sup>

He says that in such a case, it is not suffering, which is the essential expression for the relationship, but the rejoicing, naturally not a direct joy, but a joy grounded in the consciousness that the suffering signifies the relationship.

In discussing which was the highest (that is, either suffering or joy as the essential expression for the relationship), Kierkegaard says that although there is no suffering in the eternal happiness itself, a relationship with the absolute *telos*, which is established by an existing individual, rightly expresses itself through suffering. If an individual were able to elevate himself above the suffering, knowing that it means the relationship, then he would also be able to transform his status from that of an existing individual to that of an eternal being, which for Kierkegaard, is impossible. Since it is impossible, the individual finds himself again in the situation of suffering, because the knowledge that suffering means the relationship with the absolute *telos* must be held fast in the medium of existence. The perfection of that individual's joy would fail of being complete and the pain of this circumstance is again the essential expression for the relationship.<sup>38</sup>

Kierkegaard points out that when an individual is secure in his God-relationship and suffers only outwardly, that it is not religious suffering; for such suffering is subject to an aesthetic

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<sup>37</sup>Kierkegaard, *Postscript...*, p. 404.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 405.

dialectic, like misfortune to the immediate consciousness. The fact that an individual is without misfortune does not mean that he is without suffering if he is religious. An individual who suffers, cannot in his joy over the significance of this suffering, as a mark of the relationship, transcend the suffering. This is because the suffering is rooted in the fact that he is separated from his happiness but also signifies that he has a relationship to this happiness. Hence, to be without suffering is to be without religion. The religious individual is reflected inward, is conscious of being existentially in the process of becoming and yet maintains a relationship to an eternal happiness. He says that if religious suffering ceased and the individual became secure, such that, he stands in relationship only to fortune and misfortune, then, he is an aesthetic person who has mistakenly strayed into the religious sphere.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Category of *Anfechtung***

According to Kierkegaard, there lies within the sphere of religious suffering, a special type of religious conflict, which the Germans call *Anfechtung*. It is a type of temptation, which is within the sphere of the God-relationship. It ceases as soon as an individual fails to maintain a relationship with the absolute *telos*. He makes a distinction between temptation and *Anfechtung*. In temptation, it is the lower that tempts and allures while in *Anfechtung*, it is the higher that tempts and as if jealous of the individual, has to frighten him back. Temptation exists in the ethical sphere and constitutes the greatest danger when the ethical relationship to reality is at its maximum for the individual. *Anfechtung*, on the other hand, originates first in the essentially religious sphere and occurs there only in the final stage. As the intensity of the religiosity of the individual increases, *Anfechtung* increases in proportion too. This is because the individual has discovered the limit and *Anfechtung* expresses the reaction of the limit against the finite individual.<sup>40</sup> According to Swenson:

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 406.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 4

It is only when the individual has been developed ethically and religiously to the point where there can be some question of his submitting himself to the divine in order to be radically transformed by the discipline of the relationship that the paradoxical makes its appearance. In this conflict, the individual's strength consists in his weakness and his victory in his defeat.<sup>41</sup>

For Kierkegaard, *Anfechtung* becomes an expression for the limit which the individual discovers the moment he is able to relate himself to the absolute. In this type of temptation, the individual is innocent but the suffering is however fearful. It is only the religious man who will be exposed to *Anfechtung*, for it is “precisely the reaction to the absolute expression for the absolute relationship.” An individual is tempted in his weak moments, while *Anfechtung* is the nemesis upon the strong moment in the absolute relationship. “Temptation therefore stands in connection with the individual's ethical habitus, while *Anfechtung*, on the contrary, is without continuity, and is the opposition of the absolute itself.”<sup>42</sup>

Kierkegaard says that it is in this manner that religious suffering has its essential persistence and reality. Even in the most highly developed religious personality, who has succeeded in fighting his way through the suffering, which is involved in the dying away of immediacy, this suffering does not cease. And it is only a rare individual who succeeds in fighting his way through to the end, or in overcoming it for long, for this conflict is so persistent and relapse into it so frequent. That is why the religious individual must understand that he is nothing before God or to become wholly nothing and to exist before God. He requires and should constantly have this consciousness of impotence for if it were to cease, religiosity automatically ceases too.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Swenson, *op.cit.*, 184.

<sup>42</sup>Kierkegaard, *Postscript...*, 411.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 412.

### **Humor as an Incognito for Religiosity**

Kierkegaard says that there are two boundary zones that correspond to the three spheres of existence: irony constitutes the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical; humor, as the boundary that separates the ethical from the religious. When a religious individual, a knight of hidden inwardness, is set in the medium of existence, there emerges a contradiction in relating himself to the environment. This contradiction consists in the fact that with all this inwardness hidden within him, with his pregnancy of suffering and blessing in his soul, his appearance is exactly like that of other men. He looks like other men despite the fact that his inwardness is concealed. There is something comical here for where there is a contradiction there the comical is present. This comical aspect exists, not for others, but for the religious individual himself, when humor is his incognito, that is, he uses it as a disguise.<sup>44</sup>

The religious individual sets up a screen between himself and men, in order to safeguard and insure the inwardness of his suffering and his God-relationship, lest he be infected with worldliness. He does this because he feels compelled by the environment to do what the dialectical process of producing inwardness demands of him. For Kierkegaard, as long as conflict and suffering persist in his inwardness, the religious individual will not succeed in wholly concealing it. But he will not express himself directly and he will negatively prevent such a direct expression with the assistance of the humoristic. An observer who goes out to discover the religious individual would follow the rule of making everyone in whom he found humoristic, the object of his attention. But he may be deceived for a religious individual is only a humorist in outward appearance.<sup>45</sup>

Kierkegaard points out that a humorist presents the closest approximation to the religious individual and as such, he also has an essential conception of the suffering in which life is involved. He does not see existence as one thing, and fortune and misfortune as something happening to the existing individual, but exists so that

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 412.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 451.

suffering is for him relevant to existence. The humorist comprehends suffering as relevant to existence, but he does not comprehend the significance of suffering itself; he understands that it belongs to existence but does not understand its significance except through the principle that suffering belongs. It is at this point that the humorist differs from the religious individual. The humorist and the religious individual apprehend suffering in intimate conjunction with existence; but while the humorist revokes its essential significance for the existing individual, the religious individual sees suffering as essential for the pathetic relationship to an eternal happiness.<sup>46</sup>

The humorist constantly sets the God-idea into conjunction with other things and evokes the contradiction. But in terms of religious passion, he does not maintain a relationship to God. Instead, he transforms himself into a jesting and yet profound exchange-centre for all these transactions, but he does not himself stand related to God. The religious man, on the other hand, does the same as the humorist, that is, he places the God-idea side by side with everything and sees the contradiction, but he is related to God in his inmost consciousness. Religiosity with humor as its incognito is a synthesis of absolute religious passion – the inwardness being dialectically produced – with a maturity of spirit, which withdraws the religiosity away from all externality back into inwardness, where again it is absolute religious passion (Kierkegaard *Postscript* 452).<sup>47</sup>

### **Relevance of Kierkegaard's Positive Idea of Suffering**

This essay has attempted to present the basic issues on suffering by Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, suffering is the essential expression of the existential pathos which is essentially related to existence; and to exist essentially is inwardness, and action in inwardness is suffering which a religious individual understands as something essential. This suffering is rooted in the fact that the religious individual is separated from his happiness and is confined within the absolute conception of God. He also says that suffering is a dying

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 396, 404.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 452.

away from immediacy in which the religious individual, who is reflected inward and is conscious of being existentially in the process of becoming, sustains a relationship to an eternal happiness, and the sign of this relationship is suffering, which is its essential expression. Kierkegaard also points out that there is a higher sphere of suffering called *Anfechtung*, which is precisely the reaction to the absolute relationship and that the religious individual uses humor as his incognito in order to safeguard and insure the inwardness of his suffering and his God-relationship.

Kierkegaard, in his thoughts, has certainly pointed out the consequence of trying to exist authentically and what suffering should be not only to the Christian but any person who wants to live religiously. However, there are some inconsistencies in his thoughts. Firstly, for Kierkegaard, the humorist, who lies in the boundary between the ethical and religious sphere, apprehends suffering as something essential, and belonging to existence but does not understand its significance. Although, the suffering Kierkegaard talks about is essentially inner suffering, which the religious man always has with him whether he suffers from without or not, he seems to refer to suffering from without (fortune and misfortune) when discussing about the humorist who presents the closest approximation to the religious. He does not seem to be consistent between suffering that belongs to inwardness and external suffering even though he claims to refer to the suffering that comes with inwardness. It is important to note that Kierkegaard does not deny the fact that the religious individual could suffer from without. But for him, the suffering that comes with inwardness is more important for it is a sign of the God-relationship.

The main problem in Kierkegaard's view on suffering is his over-emphasis on subjectivity to the detriment of interpersonal relations. For Kierkegaard, subjectivity is suffering. But the problem with subjectivity is that when taken to its logical conclusion, it denies objectivity. If subjectivity is suffering, then, suffering is reduced to a personal level – to the 'I', such that neither suffering in others nor the fact that humanity suffers is acknowledged. According to Garelick, “subjectivity cannot allow a fraternity of subjectivists to gain

inspiration from shared experiences.” Brotherhood may be a sign of lack of subjectivity for in subjectivity, a man has to do with himself.<sup>48</sup> Macquarrie says that this is the substance of Martin Buber's critique of Kierkegaard. Buber (and some Christian theologians) disagree with Kierkegaard saying whether we relate to God by turning from the other person or do we relate to God precisely by turning toward the other and finding the 'eternal Thou' through the finite? As Macquarrie points out, a fruitful way to God is through the relation to other persons and through involvement in the life of the human community.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of this limitation, Kierkegaard's view on suffering is of great importance to man and particularly, in our contemporary society where mediocrity reigns and suffering abounds; where the religious attitude (especially the Christian attitude) to suffering is obviously disowned and vigorously denied by the world in which pleasure and comfort is absolutised. It is important to point out that apart from the pain and suffering caused by diseases, earthquakes, flood, drought and natural disasters which built into the structure of the world itself, much of human suffering is traceable to human wrong doing – man's inhumanity to man. All humans to a certain extent endure agonies of loneliness, frustration and emotional and spiritual starvation. These pains are somehow connected to failures in love. The essential sadness of pain is such that it not only magnetizes the focus of our attention, but it also preoccupies us with ourselves and consequently, such self-preoccupation is an absolute obstacle to a life of love and inwardness. People then turn to religion as they try to find meaning in their lives in the midst of so much suffering and as a way of fleeing from their pains believing that through religion, their sufferings will cease. The numerous prayer houses and churches are testimonies to this. Obviously, what obtains today is an external type of religiosity.

Kierkegaard's thoughts are relevant in our situation in making us understand that religion is not to serve as an escape from suffering.

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<sup>48</sup>Garelick, op.cit., 24.

<sup>49</sup>Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1972, 83-84.

We would approach it from three perspectives: *suffering from within*, which is essentially Kierkegaard's position, accepting *suffering from beyond* and *suffering with others*, which is part of the critique against Kierkegaard. As Aquinas is said to have baptized Aristotle's philosophy in the sense that Aristotle didn't know the Christian God, so we would do to Kierkegaard's view on suffering by extending inward suffering to suffering with others.

From the perspective of *suffering from within*, the religious individual understands suffering as something essential for it is the highest action in inwardness, which is the relationship of the individual to himself before God who is his reflection into himself. Therefore, complete inwardness, which is the mark of the religious stage, has suffering as its criterion. The going into oneself is marked by suffering for interiorization is a struggle, an interrupted becoming which is marked by qualitative leaps and crises.<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, not many people are willing to face the struggle of the interior life and undergo the pain of inwardness through which a person realizes himself. The greatest fear of people is not something external but themselves. People are afraid of going down deep into themselves, not only because of the suffering and struggle involved, but because of what they will find there. That is why John Powell says that “the longest journey is the journey inward” and not many people are willing to undertake this long journey of inwardness. This accounts for the increasing mediocrity in life, depression, emotional imbalance and so on because people lack the courage and will to embark joyfully upon the challenges of life of which journeying into oneself is one.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the Socratic maxim: *the unreflected life is not worth living*. Maintaining an in-depth relationship with the Absolute necessarily involves purgation and it is only when a person realizes himself through this interior struggle that he/she begins to live a true life which involves active acceptance of the human condition with its demands for creative perfection.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Regis, Jolivet, *Introduction to Kierkegaard*, New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1963, 118.

<sup>51</sup>Ignace, Lepp, *The Challenges of Life*, New York: Society of St. Paul, 1969, 11.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 9.

Active acceptance of the human condition means accepting suffering with a conscious intentionality from the perspective of *suffering from beyond*. Living a true life means actively accepting pain and suffering. Bernard Lonergan distinguishes between the different levels of consciousness and intentionality. There is the empirical level in which we sense, perceive, feel; the intellectual level in which we inquire to understand, express what we have understood and workout presuppositions and implications of our expression; rational level in which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgement on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability of a statement; and responsible level on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations,, goals and so deliberate on possible courses of action, evaluate them and put our decisions into actions. According to Lonergan, inasmuch as operations on these four levels are intentional and conscious, intentionality and consciousness differ from level to level. What is conscious can be intended and it is a fourfold matter to apply the operations as intentional to the operations of the conscious: one has to experience one's experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding; one has to understand the unity and relations of one's experienced experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding; one has to affirm the reality of one's experienced and understood experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding; and one decides to operate in accord with the norms immanent in the spontaneous relatedness of one's experienced, understood, affirmed experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding.<sup>53</sup>

In applying this to suffering and pain, there is first the experience of one's suffering. One seeks to understand the cause of his suffering and the meaning though it may be beyond his understanding. One affirms in reality that he/she is passing through suffering rather than deny it. And one responsibly accepts his suffering. In applying the operations as intentional to these operations as conscious, one experiences one's experiencing, understanding, judging and decision on suffering; one tries to understand the unity and relations of one's experienced experiencing,

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<sup>53</sup>Bernard, Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, 9.

understanding, judging and decision on suffering; one affirms the reality of one's experienced and understood experiencing, understanding, judging and decision on suffering; and one decides to operate in accord with the norms immanent in the spontaneous relatedness of one's experienced, understood, affirmed experiencing, understanding, judging and decision on suffering. This constitutes an active acceptance of the human condition (our limitations, failures, pains and sufferings). It is in this active acceptance of the human condition that one begins to live a true life. But this is not possible without inwardness, which understands suffering as essential. For it is only a person who has achieved interiority that can fully face the exigencies of human existence.

From the perspective of *suffering with others*, it is only a person who has not only journeyed inward and discovered himself, but has experienced pain and suffering, that can reach out to others in their pain. The discovery of our limitations and helplessness enables us to understand the limitations and helplessness of others – it pushes us out of our comfort zones to truly share with others in their pain. It is this sharing of experiences that leads to growth. A truly religious person dedicated himself to the task before him/her without seeking to avoid the inevitable struggle and such acceptance of “existential risk forces man to emerge from his egotistic and narcissistic absorption in his own private world.”<sup>54</sup> Such a person who has experienced the pain of long-suffering understands others in similar positions, is sensitive to their problems and doubts that come from experiencing suffering. Such attitude and disposition is necessary in our society of today that is plagued by 'man's inhumanity to man'.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, suffering is part of human existence and is an essential expression of the religious state, that is, a truly religious individual sees suffering as something essential.

Kierkegaard has made an invaluable contribution to the problem of suffering. His view is of great importance in our world

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<sup>54</sup>Lepp, op.cit., 44.

where the religious attitude, especially the Christian attitude is disowned and vigorously denied by the world we live in. his view is also of practical value to various religions especially the Christian religion that maintaining a relationship with the Absolute requires whole and undivided attention and such a relationship necessarily entails suffering. The religious person is one who is reflected inward and such a person understands suffering as essential and is thus ready to confront it in all its ramifications.

Suffering is an essential part of human existence such that it could be said that to be human is to suffer. Suffering is the means through which the highest nature of man is to be disciplined and developed. The works of the greatest of men had been done amidst suffering, trial and difficulty. That character, in its highest forms, is disciplined by trial and “made perfect through suffering” is something that cannot be denied.<sup>55</sup> A wholesome attitude is thus necessary to confront pain and suffering and according to Kierkegaard, it is the religious attitude, in which a man is reflected inward, and relates absolutely with the absolute and sees suffering as essential, that is needed to face the pain of human existence and to embark joyfully upon the challenges of life.

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<sup>55</sup>S., Smiles, *Character*, (Mumbai: The Bombay Saint Paul Society, 1987), 157 & 159.