

## **Suffering: A Comparison Between Karmic, Christian, and Atheist Views**

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### **Karmic Views (Vedantic Hinduism, Buddhism): Individual Causation, Individual Redemption**

Suffering is the result of karma working out in each person's personal history. Karma is either a law of cause and effect, as in Buddhism or Jainism, or the will of a personal supreme God, as in Vedantic Hinduism, which says, 'God does not make one suffer for no reason nor does He make one happy for no reason. God is very fair and gives you exactly what you deserve.' Thus, either way, karma is the predominant explanation for the problem of human suffering. A soul reincarnates into an appropriate body, which is dependent on karma and this is said to explain why some persons never get to see the fruits of their actions in their life time and why some children die when they have committed no sin. Thus, a person has to reap the fruits of one's personal karma and may need to undergo multiple births from plants, animals to humans and such fruits of karma may be analogized to a bank (i.e, God) not letting a person be released from karma's effects until the bank account is settled. (see Wikipedia, *Karma in Hinduism*)

### **Christian View: Human Causation, Divine Redemption with Human Participation**

God designed humanity to be His partners in creation, to turn the wild, natural world into God's orderly garden (Genesis 1 – 2). However, humanity partially thrust God, the life-giver, out of the world. We aborted God's mission and even damaged our own human nature. Therefore, suffering is the result of humanity's attempt to dethrone God and cast Him out of the creation (Genesis 3 – 4; Romans 5:12 – 21; 8:18 – 25), which brought chaos and evil. An individual's personal suffering is the result of the disordered creation and human evil, both of which stem from the corruption in human nature. Suffering is not the result of God's 'justice,' still less divine arbitrariness. Instead, God is forgiving, healing, and transforming human nature through his truly human being, Jesus. Prior to Jesus, God developed and prepared a people, Israel, who would accept the diagnosis that human nature needs transformation. Then He came personally as Jesus of Nazareth to suffer with us and to transform human nature – first in the humanity of Jesus, and then by giving the Spirit of Jesus to us to transform us – so that humanity's honored place in creation would not be overthrown. Now, the people of Jesus often suffer for following Jesus (Colossians 1:24), just as God's people in the Old Testament suffered for following God (Job, Israel). Yet Jesus gives hope. At some point Jesus will personally return to bring God's presence fully back to earth to end all suffering (Revelation 21:4), as well as the underlying human evil that caused it.

### **Atheist View: Natural Causation, Questionable Redemption**

'But Nature, as we now know, regards ultimately only fitness and not our happiness...and does not scruple to use hate, fear, punishment and even war alongside affection in ordering social groups and selecting among them, just as she uses pain as well as pleasure to get us to feed, water and protect our bodies and also in forging our social bonds.' (Philosopher Leonard Katz, *Evolutionary Origins of Morality: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Devon: Imprint Academic. pp. xv) 'Claude-Adrien Helvetius (1715-1771) and Denis Diderot (1713-84) admitted that the consequences of a consistent atheism were depressing, and they sought comfort in ersatz forms of survival, such as species survival. Diderot, for example, affirmed that the individual perishes, but the species has no end. But many atheists – particularly those most preoccupied with the consequences of atheistic belief for individuals as opposed to societies – regarded appeals to such survival substitutes as ultimately a form of self-deception, and sought other solutions to the problem. Étienne de Senancour (1770-1846), for example, regarded the only solution to the problem of mortality in healing humans from the 'illness' of wishing for immortality. According to Senancour, one can only suppress this fear by applying all one's energy to the present life. De Sade took this idea of immersion in the immediacy of present life a step further. Dismissing the wish for immortality as a contemptible urge, he advocated complete absorption in sensuality, the repeated pleasure of sex, inflicting suffering and even death, as a means of extinguishing the fear of mortality through forgetfulness in the fullness of the senses. Nietzsche's affirmation of power and its exercise by the (by our standards) amoral superman creates meaning where it is not previously given. Similarly, existentialists such as Sartre in the twentieth century affirm that human beings find themselves in a meaningless ('absurd') world and need to create meaning and purpose in their lives in absolute freedom, since there is no pre-existent meaning or purpose to life.' (from [www.investigatingatheism.info/meaning.html](http://www.investigatingatheism.info/meaning.html))

## Questions

1. In what sense is human suffering a 'problem'?
2. If you were talking to someone who was abducted into sex slavery, what would someone from each of the above views say to that person?
3. Is there any hope or future redemption for people?
4. Is it important to philosophically justify suffering?

## Questions

1. In what sense is human suffering a 'problem'? Human suffering is only a 'problem' when human beings have worth, dignity, and value. In a worldview where human beings are nothing more than living tissue like animal and plant tissue, is human suffering a real 'problem'?
  - a. Note: The Christian has an *emotional* problem with suffering, but not a *philosophical* one. This is because suffering is a result of the larger issue of human evil and sin. The historical origin of human evil and sin is explained in the Bible as *human*, not *God*. The Bible never justifies evil as if God were bringing a greater good out of evil, or justifying the means by the end. God is always condemning human evil, and undoing it through Jesus. And the Christian God will defeat human evil, so suffering will be done away with (Revelation 21:4). Therefore, the emotional problem of suffering can exist within a framework of faith and hope in Jesus. And this is what we see within the Scriptures themselves: The ancient Jews cried out, 'How long, O Lord?' and Christians understand the 'groaning' of creation and ourselves (Romans 8:18 – 25) as part of this present life.
  - b. The atheist starts with an *emotional* problem, for human suffering first provokes emotional response that such things should not be. The atheist is then drawn into a *philosophical* problem, namely: In the atheist story, the human person and the human species are unusual but not particularly special. Therefore, all living matter is the same, and if the human species were wiped out, nature would probably produce another self-conscious life-form at some time. This produces the *philosophical* problem that human suffering has no particular meaning. The atheist then has another *emotional* problem, which is that s/he feels like human suffering should be a moral outrage, but since the atheist philosophical framework does not recognize it as such, the atheist has to struggle with her/his own belief system not supporting her/his own emotions.
  - c. The atheist therefore has 2 emotional problems and 1 philosophical problem. The Christian has only 1 emotional problem. How to choose? I would rather have one problem rather than three.
2. If you are talking to someone who was abducted into sex slavery, what would each of the above views say about that person's suffering?
3. Is there any hope or future redemption for people? This is important because suffering is certainly an emotional/experiential problem, not just a philosophical one.
4. Is it important to philosophically justify suffering? The implication is that there are just some things - like suffering, injustice, and evil - that have no rational *justification*. They are the result of irrational human choices. And that makes them aspects of our existence that God does not justify. God justifies *us*. He does not justify suffering, injustice, and evil.
  - a. Just because God can work redemption out of suffering and evil does not justify the suffering and evil itself. God did not *cause* suffering and evil in order to bring redemption out of it.