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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS
 Asian American Voices
 No. 4, 2022

This issue of *Asian American Voices* marks the journal's fourth year of publication. Within the following pages, we highlight the diversity of Asian American Pacific Islander heritages at LaGuardia Community College and beyond. Students of Asian origin comprise the second largest group at LaGuardia, and *Asian American Voices* aims to celebrate and create a space to engage the concerns of these students and their communities, particularly in New York City. Moreover, we also recognize Asian American Studies as an interdisciplinary academic field and welcome submissions from LaGuardia students of all ethnic backgrounds. Through the journal's mission and practices, we uphold and promote the college's mission to build an inclusive community.

The art, recipe, critical essays, and reflections are linked to locations such as Bangladesh, China, India, Philippines, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, and Asian diasporic communities in South Africa, U.S. and England. They explore themes such as diaspora, dual and complex identities, oppression of Rohingya Muslims, literature, religion, suffering, food culture, and more. The cover image, by LaGuardia student Abigail Guzman speaks to our ongoing struggle, resistance, and need for connection in this third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that the image conveys sentiments of healing, community, and care.

This issue also features a special section on the *Connecting Threads: Fashioning Identity in a Global World*, a virtual exhibition resulting from a partnership between LaGuardia Community College and Bard Graduate Center. Two honors courses, Professor Filip Stabrowski's Fall 2020 Cultural Anthropology class and Professor Liena Vayzman's Spring 2021 Urban Study: Art and Society class, selected and studied objects of clothing and fashion to which they felt connected. A virtual exhibit was also curated. In the Connected Threads section, we are publishing unedited students' work to respect students' own presentation of their research and to preserve their voice.

We begin with a profile of Dr. Payal Doctor, Professor of Philosophy, to recognize her commitment to students and her leadership as current mentor and former Contact Advisor of the Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) Honor Society, and former Chair of the Humanities Department and the Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Committee. We express deep gratitude to professors Lili Chin, Alice Rosenblitt-Lacey, Meghan Fox, Filip Stabrowski, and Liena Vayzman for encouraging their students to submit their work. Students have worked hard to produce the pieces published and instructors and faculty editors have worked closely with students to revise them. We recognize and acknowledge the difficulties in this process as we are still dealing with the stress and conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic including issues with health and the economy, returning back to in-person classes, and juggling the complexities of mixed modalities (hybrid and online classes), as well as the effects of global war. We hope you enjoy reading and viewing these pieces created by our talented LaGuardia students!

Sincerely,

The Editors

Long Island City, New York
 May, 2022

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Will and Desire: Suffering in Buddhism and Augustinian Christianity

Phone Myint Maung (Huzaiyah Islam-Khan)

Editor's Note: Trigger warning: This piece discusses the topic of violence in relation to suffering.

In the August of 2017, the Burmese military committed genocide against the ethnic Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State, located on the western coast of Myanmar (Burma). Having grown up in Burma and being part-Rohingya myself, this event shook me deeply. It made me question how humans could be capable of such evil and eventually led me to believe that all evil and suffering are caused by humans themselves. However, this notion was challenged with the occurrence of the COVID 19 pandemic, which claimed the lives of millions globally and caused an immense amount of suffering. It has, for better or for worse - changed how we as a society interact with each other. It made me reassess my stance on the existence and causes of suffering. *If humans are not the sole cause of suffering, as illustrated by the pandemic, what causes suffering? Are there multiple causes of suffering? Why do we suffer?* All these questions, together with many others, led me to the investigation presented in this paper.

It does not come to me by surprise that I am not the first person to pose and be troubled by the existence of evil and suffering. It is, in fact, a recurring theme throughout human history in our constant struggle against this phenomenon. It changes and affects us deeply, both on an individual and a societal level. It is part of our very existence that we have never really understood and have constantly grappled with, so much so that every major world religion directly addresses this phenomenon.

For instance, in Buddhism, the Buddha taught suffering as arising from human desire. While in the Christian tradition, Saint Augustine believed it to be a direct result of human free will. In both cases, the respective sages sought to answer the existence of suffering and evil and the best way to grapple with it. Interestingly enough, both of them also link this phenomenon directly to us humans, whether it is our ability to have a desire, or will freely - or both! Based on this view, I argue in this essay that both Buddhism and Christianity (at least as espoused by St. Augustine) link evil to us humans; and as a consequence of our actions. I argue this by analyzing the doctrines presented by these two religions in their understanding of suffering and, based on these doctrines, the best way to come to terms with it. In conducting this analysis, I pay special attention to how these two faith traditions understand suffering differently; and how this affects the way they deal with it.

This paper is divided into two sections. In the first section, I present the Buddhist and Augustinian response to the existence of evil. In doing so, I explain how the law of *karma* and the existence of free will in the two respective traditions affect their conception of suffering; and how it helps them justify its existence. Then in the second section, I provide the limitations of both of these responses. In doing so, I discuss how the presupposition of free will does not logically operate within the *karmic* conception of existence and the moral implications of subscribing to it. I also highlight how St. Augustine's Free Will theodicy could not sufficiently warrant the existence of evil in light of the existence of a benevolent God. Finally, I conclude the essay by reflecting on how these respective responses may help its followers but overall not be able to address the existence of suffering in its entirety.

Conceptions of Suffering

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do we suffer? Why does evil exist? These questions have perplexed humanity since the dawn of time, and people from all walks of life pose them. This ranges from a simple illiterate old man to the greatest philosopher in history. It is one of those questions and phenomena we as humans collectively experience and confront. And perhaps this is one of the primary roles of religion; to answer our most profound questions about the most troubling parts of our existence and guide us in making sense of it. For this very reason, both the Buddha and St. Augustine answered this question in light of their respective context and their metaphysical worldview. Buddhism is built on the premise of escaping suffering. For Buddhists, suffering (also known as *dukkha* in Pali) is part of the fabric of reality. The Buddha taught that existence is marked by three characteristics (also known as the doctrine of *the Three Marks of Existence*): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-selfhood (*anatta*).¹ According to this doctrine, everything is bound to perish as they are impermanent, and we - the agent - do not exist, to begin with. We only *think* we exist, and this *thinking*, or false belief, is the prime cause of our suffering. To think something exists only to realize it does not (or rather, that it will not last) is why we suffer and do not realize peace. The Buddha, based on this metaphysical view, espouses his central teaching, enshrined as the doctrine of *the Four Noble Truths*:²

- [1] Human existence is intrinsically characterized by dukkha [suffering].
- [2] Dukkha arises because of appetitive cravings and desires (negative and positive).
- [3] There can be a cessation of dukkha, known as Nirvana [state of sublime bliss].
- [4] Nirvana is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path.

So by realizing these Four Noble Truths and practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, one should be able to both make sense of and escape suffering. And this is the crux of the Buddhist view of reality and suffering. However, to fully appreciate this view, one has to take into account Buddhist metaphysics and cosmology. Buddhism shares its metaphysical worldview with those of other Dharmic faiths, that of *Samsara* and *Karma*. *Samsara*, also known as the wheel of existence, is “a suffering-laden cycle of life, death, and rebirth, without beginning or end,” to which all entities from the celestial gods to tiny insects are subjected to.³ According to the Buddha, this system is driven by the law of *karma*, or the law of moral causation, in which one's deeds (*karma*) determine one's existence

¹ Dhammapada 277-9

² Sue Hamilton, *Indian Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48.

³ Jeff Wilson, “Saṃsāra and Rebirth,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets*, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0141>.

and experience in the cycle of *samsara*. In effect, “one reaps the good and the bad consequences of one’s actions, either in this life or in another.”⁴ So, in Buddhism, all your current experiences (both positive and negative) are determined by your past deeds; and the way to end suffering is to end all experiences. This is done by detaching oneself from desires and so liberating oneself from the cycle of *samsara* and achieving *Nirvana* - the state of sublime bliss through the realization of non-existence.⁵

The Buddhist view presents a worldview and a perspective of suffering and evil without an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent God. Belief in such a God, prevalent within the Abrahamic traditions, brings another depth of complexity to the question of the ontological existence of suffering and evil. For this, we turn to Augustinian Christianity, a philosophical and theological framework that is based on the thought of Augustine of Hippo (more simply known as St. Augustine).⁶ He was a bishop, theologian, and philosopher and is one of the most influential Christian thinkers in history. For him and many other Christians, the question being posed is: *How could an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent entity allow evil and suffering to exist?* This problem is known as the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion. A response provided in answer to this question is known as a theodicy.

In his *City of God*, St. Augustine presents his well-known *Free Will Theodicy*. According to this theodicy, evil and suffering are a by-product of freedom, a necessary component of a moral universe. St. Augustine argues that in choosing not to abide by the commandments of God, mankind brought moral and natural evil into the universe and so are responsible for the suffering that they experience. It should be noted that evil, according to St. Augustine, “is not a thing or entity; it is a metaphysical deprivation, or lack, of the good.”⁷ This defense easily accounts for the existence of moral evil, or the “evil (or suffering) which results from a moral agent misusing his or her free will,” but how does it account for natural evil?⁸ Natural evil, on the other hand, is an “evil which results from natural phenomena and is not brought about by the free will of a moral agent.”⁹ So, for St. Augustine, natural evil (like the COVID 19 pandemic) is a form of punishment from the divine for the moral evil caused by men. So in effect, suffering in both its moral and natural form is attributed to the deeds of men’s free will. However, St. Augustine concludes that in the end, God will rectify evil when he judges the world and brings about ultimate justice and goodness.

Evaluation of Buddhist and Augustinian Conceptions of Suffering

In the responses to evil presented above, one is situated in the non-theistic Dharmic faith and the other within the Abrahamic tradition. However, both of these views take free will as a given, and in both cases, it is the root cause of why we suffer. In the Buddhist tradition, the agent’s free will is the cause of their *karma*, and consequently, this binds them to *samsara* and results in their perpetual suffering. Similarly, in the Augustinian tradition, men’s free will is the cause of moral and natural evil, the latter resulting from divine punishment for the former. In both of these traditions, free will and humans themselves are the very cause of both the ontological existence of suffering (as in the Augustinian tradition) and the experience of suffering. However, there are some implications in the linkage of free will to evil in both traditions that have not been absolved sufficiently.

⁴ Chad Meister, “Philosophy of Religion,” Internet encyclopedia of philosophy, accessed December 14, 2021, <https://iep.utm.edu/>

⁵ See note 2 above

⁶ “Augustinianism,” Encyclopedia.com (Encyclopedia.com, December 14, 2021), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/augustinianism>.

⁷ Chad Meister, *Introducing Philosophy of Religion* (London, UK: Routledge, 2010), 140.

⁸ Meister, 129.

⁹ See note 8 above.

In the Buddhist tradition, free will is presupposed. This explains the existence of *karma* and why we suffer. However, in closely analyzing the law of *karma* and the cycle of *samsara*, there are serious issues to be resolved. The first problem is that within the law of *karma*, the victim is culpable for the suffering they experience. In this sense, a child who is killed is killed because they deserved it. This is seriously disconcerting to affirm morally, especially when it could be used as a part of victim-blaming. The second issue with presupposing freedom within the law of *karma* is that freedom does not logically seem to operate within the framework. Chad Meister, a professor of philosophy and theology, points to this problem and gives an example. In the example presented below, although originally proposed by Meister, I have taken the liberty to change the details to cater to the sensibility of the public audience.

Consider the example of a short-tempered man who constantly murders another person who causes him to be angry. Suppose he has done so before, and has thus far not been caught. And on one occasion, he got into a fight with another man that made him angry. If he decides to kill the man and does so, then on the karmic account the man who was killed was not completely innocent after all; he is paying the price for his former evil actions. In that case, the murderer is not truly free to act as he does, for he is simply following mechanistically the effects of karmic justice. He is merely the instrumental means for meting out the justice requisite for this victim's previous moral failings. If, however, the victim does not deserve such moral recompense, then karmic justice will ensure that he does not receive it. In that case, the murderer will be unable to engage in the attack.¹⁰

So by the logic of this example, the murder was always meant to kill the victim. Similarly, the victim, too, was *meant* to be killed due to his past deeds. And so, neither the murderer nor the victim was ever really free. In essence, this is deterministic, so it seems inconsistent with the law of *karma*. Hence, if this thought was applied to understand the genocide of the Rohingya, the perpetrators are not free to do otherwise, and the victims deserved what was inflicted on them. As raised in the previous point, this is morally very disconcerting to affirm.

Another major issue within the Buddhist tradition has to do with the ontological existence of suffering and, in extension, *samsara*. What is the reason that causes entities to exist within the cycle of *samsara*, to begin with, since their existence within *samsara* is what causes them to suffer? According to the law of *karma*, entities that do not exist cannot generate karma, so in effect, they cannot be born and so will not suffer. So what caused these entities (including us humans) to exist in the first place, especially because Buddhism does not believe in a creator God? In responding to this question, the Buddha insisted that the beginning of *samsara* is, in fact, unthinkable and so beyond intellectual explanations. He says, "O bhikkhus [monks], this cycle of continuity (*samsara*) is without a visible end, and the first beginning of beings wandering and running round, enveloped in ignorance (*avijja*) and bound down by the fetters of thirst (desire, *tanha*) is not to be perceived."¹¹ And on another occasion, he states, "The first beginning of ignorance (*avijja*) is not to be perceived in such a way as to postulate that there was no ignorance beyond a certain point."¹² Hence, there is no intellectual or philosophical answer to the existence of *samsara* and, extension, suffering since it is beyond the ability of the intellect to understand, and hence, this issue is left unexplained.

On the other hand, *the Free Will theodicy* of St. Augustine faces no similar objection of this kind, for it does not presuppose free will and explains it as a necessary component of a moral universe as created by God. However, this raises a serious theological question as to God's omnipotence. If

¹⁰ Based on Chad Meister, "Philosophy of Religion"

¹¹ Rāhula Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught (Revised Edition)* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1974), 27.

¹² See note 11 above.

God is indeed all-powerful, why can't he create a moral universe that contains humans who, by nature, would always choose to do good? This remains a serious theological issue to be addressed. Another problem concerns the issue of natural evil. According to St. Augustine, natural evil is a result of divine punishment for the moral evil men commit. However, this belief can hardly be justified considering natural evil has caused many innocent people to be killed. An innocent child who died due to COVID surely couldn't have done anything so evil that God would punish them by killing them in such a horrible manner! This remains a serious theological problem to be resolved.

Conclusion

My argument in this paper should provide ample reasons as to the fact that despite Buddhism and Christianity being located in two different traditions, both of them, in their understanding of suffering and evil, attribute it to the actions of humans to will freely. In doing so, they justify the reason as to why we suffer and how we could confront it. I believe that people of faith in these two respective religions will find meaning in their respective understandings, and this will bring them some peace to the suffering and loss they face in their personal lives, as such caused by COVID 19. However, this is not without its challenges. As I have pointed out, both entail serious logical and theological implications within their own respective framework. Although these understandings might be helpful on some level, they are not overall sufficient to address the existence of evil and suffering in its entirety.

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