

The Good God and The Pains of Man: Addressing Existential Reality from Pastoral Care Perspective

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Abstract

The coexistence of a good God and human pain is a philosophical and theological study known as the problem of evil. Theodicy shows that God is absolutely good and all powerful even though bad things happen. In a rapidly changing world characterized by pandemics, economic instability, environmental crises and personal losses, many individuals experience a profound sense of emptiness and disorientation. This suggests that existential pain is real and deeply tied to human quest for meaning and solution. The article discusses several factors that contribute to the emergence of existential pains in contemporary society. One major cause is traumatic experience, including loss of loved ones, natural disasters, violence and displacement. It also posits that finding meaning and solution to human existential pains cannot be adequately addressed through purely clinical or material interventions therefore explaining the potency of spiritual/religious space in addressing existential distress through effective application of pastoral care. This article uniquely positioned pastoral care as a means to respond to existential pains by integrating spiritual resources with psychological insight. This article is basically theoretical, standing on various scholarly materials. The article concludes that the contemporary developments in pastoral theology reveal a shift toward addressing deeper existential concerns by providing empathetic understanding, ministry of presence and balanced theological interpretation that affirms human suffering as well as grace of God while pointing toward hope and transcendence, meaning and meaninglessness, faith and disbelieve, and love for God in crisis situations.

Keywords: God, Existential Pain, Pastoral, Care

Introduction

God is good, all the time;
All the time, God is good.

The above statement is a common catchphrase in the contemporary Christianity, a saying or slogan of call and response that emphasize the timeless good nature of God and to remind us of the absolute truth about God's goodness to humanity. The statement presents the true nature of God as a good God whose mercy, favor, compassion, generosity, and blessings endures forever (Psalms 103:1-10; 106: 1; 107: 1; 118:1). Amidst this absolute nature of God, human beings place their pains and unpleasant experiences side by side with the absolutely good nature of God, asking so many questions such as: "Why will a good God allows bad things to happen to his people?"

“Where is God in my terrible situation?” “Why is God silent in a time like this?” and other questions that argues the righteousness of God in the midst of human predicaments.

The coexistence of the good God and human pain is explained under theodicy, which is the philosophical and theological study of the goodness of God and the problem of evil. Theodicy presents God as an absolutely good and all powerful being, even though bad things happen. The thinkers and theologians use several main ideas to explain this. The Bible presents pain as a reality of human existence, an inseparable part of mortal human experience, but it is not viewed as an original design. Pain is viewed primarily as a consequence of humanity’s separation from God. Human existence is inherently marked by tension, uncertainty, and a persistent search for meaning. Across philosophical, theological, and psychological traditions, scholars have grappled with what may be termed existential pains, those deep, often intangible struggles associated with human consciousness, freedom, finitude, and identity. Unlike physical suffering, existential pain is rooted in the awareness of one’s existence and the accompanying burdens of choice, responsibility, isolation, and mortality. These pains are not merely pathological; rather, they are constitutive of human existence itself. The struggle for meaning, success and other good things and human existential realities call for a more balanced theology that will see God as who he is and accept human existential realities as valid human experience. To achieve this, this article addresses the concept of theodicy, and explains coping strategies for Christians who struggle with meaning, existence, and God, using pastoral care functions of healing, guiding, educating, sustaining, and reconciling as tools to achieve the goal.

Concept of Theodicy

Theodicy is a theological and philosophical attempt to vindicate God’s goodness and omnipotence in the face of the existence of evil and suffering. It is literally translated from the Greek words “*theos*” (God) and “*dike*” (justice) to mean “Justifying God.” The concept addresses the classic problem of evil (if God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good, why does evil exist)? (Sherry, <https://www.britanica.com>). The problem of suffering is acknowledged to be a difficult aspect of human quest; however, God’s goodness remains the only anchor amid suffering.

Theodicy is one of the most difficult questions to answer, people always ask how a perfectly good God can exist in the painful and distressful world? The difficulty lies in man’s finite mind trying to grasp an infinite concept. In the writer’s view, it is like trying to love someone who has never experienced it. Some realities transcend human explanation. Hansel (2026) outlines three common but flawed responses: denying God’s supreme goodness or power; claiming evil is necessary to highlight God’s goodness; or suggesting God is good only sometimes. He emphasized that the Bible is clear and true; God’s goodness endures forever. The biblical response is very clear that God is good, and that gives hope to all that truly believe. To Hansel, “because suffering affects real people, why it happens is not a question based on abstract theology but must be grounded in scripture’s testimony of a God who is both powerful and good.” The Bible does not minimize pain, but it does affirm that God’s character is not in question because of human’s pains and sufferings. Evil exists because of humanity’s misuse of free will. True love requires freedom, not coercion. It is to be noted that human experience does not determine the nature of God. Whether life is good or bad, God remains good. The experience on man has nothing to do with the absolute nature of God. God is good, all the time, and that is his nature! In the view of Ayankeye (2014), “There are questions of “Why Me” circulating in the world today, which many people ask when evil things happen to them.” He references the Biblical Job as an example on the issue of why the righteous suffer. He further explains that it not only the righteous that do suffer, the wicked also do, but

when the reverse comes people ask why me? In the same way, when the wicked prospers people complain, however, it is not only the wicked that do prosper, the righteous also do. It means that the question of theodicy comes out of human mind whenever their experiences are not agreeing with their expectations.

Conceptual Clarification of Existential Pain

Existential pain refers to deep inner suffering arising from questions about existence, purpose, and destiny. It includes feelings such as emptiness, fear of death, guilt, hopelessness, and loss of meaning. According to Yalom and Yalom, this pain is connected to four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom & Yalom, 2019, 67). Existential therapy views this pain as a normal part of human existence. Basically, existential distress arising from fundamental questions about existence, such as: *What am I living for? What is the meaning of life? What happens after death? Where am I going after death?* and other likely questions affects the psychological strength and spiritual viewpoints especially when those questions are not properly answered or make sense. Unlike clinical forms of suffering, existential pain is not necessarily a disorder but a response to the human condition itself. Viktor Frankl describes this as the “existential vacuum,” a state of meaninglessness that leads to inner emptiness and despair (Frankl, 2006, 105). Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard conceptualizes existential pain as *despair*, a condition rooted in the misrelation of the self to itself and to God (Kierkegaard, 1980, 43). For Kierkegaard, despair is not merely emotional but ontological, it reflects a failure to realize one’s true identity. Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, interprets existential anxiety (*Angst*) as a fundamental mood that reveals the nothingness underlying existence and compels individuals toward authentic being (Heidegger, 1962, 186). These perspectives converge on the idea that existential pain is inseparable from self-awareness. The more deeply individuals reflect on their existence, the more they confront the uncertainties and limitations inherent in being human. Van-Deurzen (2020) explains that individuals must confront life’s realities, including uncertainty and limitation, which often lead to existential anxiety. As true as the above positions could appear, biblically, existential pain is seen as valid human realities rooted in a broken world and met with divine presence. In the Bible the experiences of Job and the Psalmists, who expressed deep anguish and questioned suffering do not present existential pains as sin, rather as reality of life, controlled by the sovereignty of God (Job 3; Psalm 42). This shows that existential struggles are universal and part of human experience.

Dimensions of Human Existential Pains

There are several dimensions of human existential distress, some of which shall be explained here.

The Pain of Meaninglessness

One of the most profound forms of existential pain is the experience of meaninglessness. In a world where traditional structures of meaning, religion, community, and cultural narratives, are increasingly questioned, individuals often struggle to find purpose. Frankl argues that the loss of meaning leads to what he calls *noogenic neurosis*, a condition rooted not in psychological dysfunction but in existential frustration (Frankl, 2006, 110). This pain manifests in feelings of emptiness, boredom, and apathy. Individuals may pursue material success or pleasure as substitutes for meaning, yet these often fail to provide lasting fulfilment. The absence of meaning can lead to despair, as life appears arbitrary and devoid of significance.

The Pain of Freedom and Responsibility

Existential thinkers emphasize that human beings are radically free. Jean-Paul Sartre famously asserts that humans are “condemned to be free,” meaning they must choose their actions without relying on predetermined essences (Sartre, 2007, 29). While freedom is often celebrated, it also brings an immense burden. The pain of freedom lies in the responsibility that accompanies choice. Every decision carry consequence, and individuals must bear the weight of their actions. This can lead to *existential guilt*, a recognition of one’s failure to live authentically or to fulfil one’s potential. The anxiety associated with freedom often drives individuals to escape into conformity or denial, thereby avoiding the responsibility of self-determination.

The Pain of Isolation

Despite living in social contexts, human beings experience a fundamental sense of isolation. Existential isolation refers to the unbridgeable gap between individuals, no one can fully understand another’s inner world. Irvin Yalom identifies this as one of the core existential concerns, alongside death, freedom, and meaninglessness (Yalom 2020, 8). This isolation is not merely social but ontological. Even in intimate relationships, individuals remain ultimately alone in their experiences. This realization can produce loneliness, alienation, and a sense of disconnection. However, it can also motivate individuals to seek deeper, more authentic relationships.

The Pain of Mortality

The awareness of death is perhaps the most universal source of existential pain. Heidegger argues that being-toward-death is a defining characteristic of human existence, as individuals are constantly oriented toward their own finitude (Heidegger, 1962, 294). This awareness can generate anxiety, fear, and a sense of urgency. Death challenges the meaning of life itself. If existence is finite, what significance do human actions hold? This question has been central to both philosophical and theological discourse. While some respond with nihilism, others find in mortality a motivation to live more authentically and purposefully.

The Pain of Identity and Authenticity

Human beings continually struggle with questions of identity: *Who am I? What defines me?* Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development highlight’s identity formation as a central task, particularly during adolescence (Erikson, 1968, 128). Failure to achieve a coherent sense of self results in confusion and instability. Existential pain arises when individuals live in-authentically, conforming to societal expectations rather than embracing their true selves. Sartre describes this as *bad faith*, a denial of one’s freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 2007, 47). Authenticity, though difficult, involves confronting one’s limitations and making choices aligned with one’s values.

Existential Pain in Contemporary Society

In contemporary society, existential pains are intensified by rapid social change, technological advancement, and cultural fragmentation. The erosion of traditional values and communal structures leaves individuals navigating a complex and often disorienting world. The phenomenon of youth disengagement and migration, particularly in contexts like Nigeria, reflects underlying existential concerns. Many young people seek opportunities abroad not only for economic reasons but also in search of identity, purpose, and belonging. This highlights the interplay between existential pain and socio-cultural dynamics. Moreover, the rise of mental health challenges, such

as depression and anxiety, can often be traced to existential issues. While these conditions have biological and psychological components, they are also linked to deeper questions of meaning and identity. Addressing existential pain, therefore, requires a holistic approach that integrates psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. The effects of existential pains are multifaceted, impacting individuals psychologically, spiritually and socially. Psychologically, existential distress often manifests as anxiety, depression, hopelessness and identity confusion. Individuals may struggle with feelings of worthlessness or question the value of their existence. Spiritually, existential pain can lead to doubt, loss of faith or a sense of divine abandonment. Hanes (2023) observes that individuals experiencing existential suffering frequently wrestle with questions about God's presence and goodness, especially in the face of injustice and suffering (Hanes, 2023, 6). This spiritual struggle may either weaken faith or, in some cases, deepen it through honest engagement with doubt and lament. Socially, existential pains can result in withdrawal from relationships and community life. Individuals may feel misunderstood or disconnected from others who do not share or validate their inner struggles. This can further intensify feelings of isolation and despair. However, suffering can serve as a catalyst for personal growth, resilience and the reconstruction of meaning (Wong, 2021, 5). In this sense, existential pains can become a pathway to deeper self-awareness, spiritual maturity and renewed purpose. Understanding the causes and effects of existential pains is essential for developing effective pastoral care responses that address the whole person in their suffering.

Transformative Potential of Existential Pain

While existential pain is often perceived negatively, it also holds transformative potential. Kierkegaard suggests that despair can lead to faith, as individuals recognize their dependence on God (Kierkegaard, 1980, 67). Similarly, Frankl argues that suffering can be meaningful when it is approached with the right attitude (Frankl, 2006, 113). Existential pain compels individuals to confront reality, make authentic choices, and seek deeper understanding. It disrupts complacency and challenges superficial living. In this sense, existential pain is not merely a problem to be solved but a condition to be engaged. Educational and pastoral contexts can play a significant role in helping individuals navigate existential pain.

Pastoral Care Response to Existential Pains

Pastoral care offers a holistic and theologically grounded response to existential pains by addressing the spiritual, emotional and relational dimensions of human suffering. Unlike purely clinical approaches, pastoral care engages the deeper questions of meaning, purpose and transcendence that characterize existential distress. At its core, pastoral care emphasizes presence, compassion and the ministry of accompaniment. According to Louw (2022), pastoral care must be understood as a "theology of presence," where the caregiver embodies God's compassion by being fully present with those who suffer (Louw, 2022, 58). This presence is not merely physical but involves attentive listening, empathy and the willingness to enter into the existential struggles of the individual without offering premature solutions. Some specific pastoral care functions to address existential pains are:

Guiding Function: A central pastoral response to existential pains is the facilitation of meaning-making through guidance. Drawing from the insights of Frankl (2019), pastoral caregivers help individuals reinterpret their suffering within a broader framework of purpose and hope (Frankl, 2019, 113). This does not imply imposing meaning but guiding individuals toward discovering

meaning within their own narratives and faith experiences. Narrative pastoral care, as emphasized by Doebling (2019), allows individuals to reconstruct their life stories in ways that integrate suffering into a meaningful whole (Doebling, 2019, 92). Through storytelling, reflection and theological engagement, individuals are guided and empowered to see their pain not as meaningless but as part of a transformative journey. From a pastoral care perspective, existential pain is both emotional and spiritual. Pastoral caregivers provide guidance, counseling, and support, helping individuals understand their suffering and develop hope. Biblically, Jesus addresses existential pain by offering rest and assurance: “Come to me, all who are weary... and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Thus, pastoral care goes beyond psychological approaches by directing individuals to God as the ultimate source of meaning and healing.

Healing Function: Another important dimension of pastoral care is the use of biblical and theological resources to address existential concerns. Scripture provides language for expressing pain, doubt and hope, particularly through lament traditions such as the Psalms and the story of Job. These texts validate human suffering and demonstrate that questioning and lament are legitimate aspects of faith. Pastoral caregivers should encourage individuals to engage honestly with God, rather than suppressing their doubts or fears (Hanes, 2023, 9). This approach heals the broken soul, fosters a mature faith that can withstand existential crises and find hope even in uncertainty. Pastoral care also emphasizes the role of community in healing and alleviating existential pain. The Christian community serves as a context for belonging, support and shared meaning. Isolation, which is a major component of existential suffering, can be mitigated through genuine relationships and communal practices such as worship, prayer and fellowship. According to Benner (2021), spiritual community provides a space where individuals can experience acceptance and rediscover their identity as persons created and loved by God (Benner, 2021, 141). In this sense, pastoral care extends beyond individual counseling to include the nurturing of supportive faith communities that embody care and compassion for wholistic healing.

In addition, pastoral caregivers address existential pain through spiritual practices that foster connection with God and inner healing. Practices such as prayer, meditation, confession and spiritual direction help individuals cultivate awareness of God’s presence in their suffering. Fitchett and Nolan (2021) argue that spiritual interventions are essential in addressing spiritual distress, particularly in healthcare settings where existential questions are often intensified (Fitchett and Nolan, 2021, 80). These practices provide not only comfort but also a framework for interpreting suffering within the context of divine grace and redemption. In conclusion, pastoral care responds to existential pain through presence, meaning-making, theological reflection, community support, spiritual practices and the nurturing of hope. By addressing the deepest questions of human existence, pastoral caregivers help individuals navigate their suffering and discover pathways toward healing and transformation.

Educating Function: Although existential pain is unavoidable, it can be managed through balance educational approaches. Education helps to seek the truth and thus help individuals engage in real meaning-making, finding purpose even in suffering (Frankl, 2019). Educating function of pastoral care exposes people to self-reflection and identity, helping individuals examine their values and life direction (Van-Deurzen, 2020, 46). Proper education fosters cordial relationship and relationship reduces isolation and promote connection, accepting responsibility and making good and lasting choices that nurtures growth (Cooper, 2016). Above all, faith in God provides ultimate answers to existential questions. In John 14:6, Jesus presents Himself as the way, the truth, and the

life, offering meaning and direction to human existence. Educating function helps to seek the true way to life. From the above itemized functions of pastoral care, it is evident that pastoral care, plays a crucial role in responding to existential pains by offering a compassionate, holistic and theologically grounded approach to healing. Through presence, empathetic listening, meaning-making and the use of biblical and spiritual resources, pastoral caregivers help individuals navigate their suffering and rediscover hope. The integration of community support and spiritual practices further strengthens this process, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and connection to God. Ultimately, pastoral care affirms that even in the midst of existential despair, life retains its meaning in relation to God, and suffering can become a pathway to deeper faith and transformation. This underscores the enduring relevance of pastoral theology in addressing the existential challenges of contemporary human life.

Conclusion

Having examined the concept of existential pains in the light of the good God, existential pains remain one of the most profound and complex forms of human suffering, touching the very core of identity, meaning and purpose. The article observed some rising points of human existential pains and the effects. The exploration of existential pains reveals that they are both a crisis and an opportunity – while they expose human vulnerability, they also open the possibility for transformation, growth and renewed meaning. It is also noted that philosophical, psychological, and theological perspectives on existential pains converge in recognizing the significance of existential pain. However, while secular approaches emphasize individual responsibility and meaning-making, theological frameworks offer a redemptive vision that situates existential pain within the broader narrative of divine purpose. In a rapidly changing world, the need to address existential pain is more urgent than ever. Individuals can move beyond despair toward a deeper understanding of themselves, others, and the ultimate meaning of existence by engaging these pains thoughtfully and constructively. Rather than avoiding existential pain, individuals are encouraged to confront it and discover meaning within it. From a Christian perspective, true meaning is found in God, who provides hope, purpose, and healing. When properly understood, existential pain can lead to spiritual growth, maturity, and a deeper relationship with God.

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