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## Ancient Greeks and suffering

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## Ancient Greeks and Suffering

**Abstract:** Suffering is one of the most important and permanent phenomena in culture. Professor Józef Sieroń has written the book entitled *The Problem of Suffering in the Literature and Philosophy of Ancient Greece: Selected Issues*. The book does a very good job at showing how the understanding of suffering changed in the eponymous culture. The author avoids, however, to draw clear conclusions on this subject. Suffering beginning from rationalizing suffering as a component of the world, or will of the gods, by attempting to rationally remove it by encouraging one to become numb to it through the way of reason, and then by the irrational.

**Key words:** Historians, tragedians, philosophers, suffering, New Testament

Suffering belongs to the most important and permanent occurrences not only in human life (let us do not forget animals) but also in culture. A reflection on suffering is after all an inherent element of culture. It constitutes an integral part of every religion, many philosophical systems, scientific theories as well as works of art. It would be difficult to find a community that did not take up this subject. As a universally salient subject, the ways in which it was reflected on in different cultures should be examined. Indeed, in order to understand European culture from which the modern civilization stems, it is an essential thing to understand one of its sources, namely the Greek culture. Professor Józef Sieroń,<sup>1</sup> a scholar of classical philology and history of philosophy from the Department of Classics at the University of Silesia, wrote the book entitled *The Problem of Suffering in the Literature and Philosophy of Ancient Greece:*

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<sup>1</sup> See: T. Aleksandrowicz: “*Nosce te ipsum*. W 40-lecie pracy dydaktycznej i naukowej Profesora Józefa Sieronia”. In: *Scripta Classica*. Vol. 7. Ed. T. Sapota. Katowice 2010, pp. 9–13.

*Selected Issues.*<sup>2</sup> The aim of the author was popularization and partial contribution to the understanding of the issues (the author emphasizes that the book was not meant to be a scholarly monograph on the subject). His point was not to analyse the problem strictly from a philological and philosophical point of view, but rather to bring the subject to a broader audience. The author raises a couple of selected issues pertaining to the subject of suffering. He discusses namely the presence of the issue of suffering among the Greek tragedians and historians: Herodotus and Thucydides, in Greek philosophy, as well as writings comprising the composition of the New Testament.

Certainly, it is a good thing that the author undertook this particular subject. Up until then, no one had undertaken a comprehensive attempt at looking at this issue. The problem seems interesting and important. Certainly it is not a coincidence that classical philology and philosophy were competently combined in this undertaking. This type of book could not have been written neither by someone fluent only in the area of classical philology nor philosophy, because the issue of suffering is equally present in both philosophy and beautiful Greek literature. Besides the fact that this is only a selection of certain issues and not a scholarly monograph on the subject, it is still an important composition for the understanding of the issue. One has to confess that the large portion of classical Greek literature demonstrates the various perspectives and deserves praise. The book comprises a series of careful studies of Greek literary and philosophical fragments dealing with the issue of suffering. Later we will look at them more closely. One must confess though, that the discussed work evokes rather ambivalent feelings. Just as the strong side of the book is its analysis of literature and philosophy, its weak side lies in the synthesis, which is unfortunately lacking. We will not find in the book an explicit attempt made to understand the specific problem of suffering in Greek literature. The author did not succeed in making a more serious synthesis of the problem; rather few are the fragments discussing the issue even in more general terms. The work breaks up into bits and pieces of analysis of various fragments of literature and philosophy and does not conclude with any comprehensive system, not only in addressing all Greek literature and philosophy, which would be a very ambitious and difficult task. It is not a task for a book the author of which never made any promises to come up with such a system, but even in relation to the question at hand, which the book addressed, elements of synthesis that do appear are, unfortunately, not justified.

It is difficult, for instance, to figure out what connects the problems with one another. The author avoids any type of comparison or connection between the stated issues. For example, the problem of the Persian wars is present in the works of both Herodotus and Aeschylus, but these accounts are never connected to each other

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<sup>2</sup> J. Sieroń: *Problem cierpienia w literaturze i filozofii starożytnej Grecji. Zagadnienia wybrane*. Katowice 2007.

by the author. A similar issue of the Peloponnesian wars comes up in the works of Thucydides and those of Euripides, as well as in the biographies of a couple of philosophers who influenced their thought (for example Socrates and the sophists). But here also the author does not try to make any type of connection between the views of that same account found in the historical records of the tragedians, historians, or the philosophers. It would be also useful to look at the changes in the understanding of suffering throughout the classical Greek history. For example, how was the understanding of this issue different in archaic Greece, in the times of the Persian wars, during Peloponnesian wars, and in the Hellenistic time and during the Roman Empire? The book is also lacking an attempt at identifying the specific understanding of suffering of tragedians in general, historians, philosophers, or authors of the New Testament. It rather cuts to the concrete and detailed forms of analysis.

The author did not connect the chapter of the book devoted to the New Testament firmly enough. Despite the language in which it was written, the New Testament was rather an occurrence of Hebrew culture (Hellenized to a certain extent). But it remained on the sidelines of ancient culture, with the remainder of the book dealing with classical Greek literature and philosophy. In the text we do not find a fully justified conviction that the message of the New Testament<sup>3</sup> is the best answer to the problem of suffering. This type of reasoning would have required courage, but would have also enriched the book. It would have been more interesting to confront the understanding of suffering in Greek culture to that of Christian culture, or trace the mutual penetration of the Hebrew and Greek traditions drawing from examples of philosophy and Jewish Greek literary sources. It would have been about the literature during the times of Hellenism, the New Testament, and Christian thinking during the time of the patristics. Without this, the chapter on the New Testament makes the impression that it really does not fit with the rest of the book. Of course it is only the author's own conviction. An important negative aspect of the book is the organization of the chapters. It is not clear why the author writes about all of the great three Greek tragedians in one chapter, or why he summarizes all the Greek philosophy in one chapter starting with the seven sages after the Neo-Platonists of the 4th and 5th century. Or why he writes about the whole New Testament in only one chapter, but at the same time devotes two separate chapters to the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, despite the fact that he devotes less time to them than to the rest of other issues? More than anything else he spends time writing about Euripides.<sup>4</sup> In this case, it is also strange to see the author creating two small separate chapters

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<sup>3</sup> T. Aleksandrowicz: "*Nosce te ipsum...*", p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> The author discusses in successive chapters: "Reflections on suffering in the *Histories* by Herodotus", pp. 55–68 (14 pages); "The testimony of Thucydides about different aspects of suffering", pp. 69–80 (11 pages); 25 pages in total. "The function of suffering in the works of the three great Greek tragedians", pp. 17–54 (37 pages), including 20 pages on Euripides; and "The concept of pain and suffering in the works of the Greek philosophers", pp. 81–132 (52 pages).

devoted to two historians and one large chapter devoted to the views of suffering among Greek philosophers.

As we said, the strong side of the book is the fact that it deals with the topic of suffering and analyses many fragments on this topic present in classical Greek philosophy and literature. It would be good to take a closer look and try to put together a synthesis based upon the accumulated material that the author has gathered, or to make a comparison of the few syntheses that the author himself juxtaposed with one another.

## A Reflection of a General Nature (Introduction and the Substitute for a Conclusions)

The book begins and ends with reflections of a general nature. It seems contradictory to the accusation made earlier that the book lacks synthesis. Unfortunately, the fragments are not an attempt to synthesize the book. In the beginning we have a couple of pages dealing with the argument concerning the nature of suffering. They are, however, rather vague. Is the text trying to analyse the problem of suffering from a psychological or maybe a medical point of view, or is it rather an attempt to fully analyse the problem philosophically or theologically? In the footnotes, the author, besides referring to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (why this exactly?), which he sometimes quotes, and at some others he just refers to it without quoting, as well as mentions generally only two other books: C. May *Addiction and Grace* and T. Keating *Invitation to Love*.<sup>5</sup> In a popular book a strictly scholarly format may not be required, but one is left not knowing exactly how to treat this segment, is it the result of the author's own reflections or rather a report on the state of psychological knowledge. It contains a reflection about suffering which asserts that it is some type of loss of balance. He does not go any deeper into the concept, nor does he connect it to the rest of the book. His theory is not used as a way of analysing the discussed fragments and he never returns to this theory later in the book. Whatever is the reason he brings up the theory to begin with or how exactly is it connected to the problem of suffering in classical Greece. One gets the impression that he just came up with this idea and decided to place it in the book. If anything should be located at the end of the book it is the conclusion that the Christian concept of suffering gives some sense to it.

The second part of the introduction analyses the problem of suffering found in the works of Herodotus and Hesiod<sup>6</sup> and in this way the author smoothly moves

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<sup>5</sup> J. Sieroń: *Problem cierpienia...*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14.

into the historical part of the book. Yet, it remains unknown why he does it in the introduction. The author simply points where in their texts the issue of suffering appears. It is also unclear what kind of role this information plays in relation to the work as a whole.

As we said, a weakness of the book is the lack of synthesis. The author himself spends the conscious effort to avoid making them. He writes:

Areas are presented in separate chapters in which the concepts of pain and suffering are developed. They are so varied that it would be difficult to treat them as a coherent whole and to look within them for common characteristics, which is why I desire to focus attention on a few of the most important ideas, in my opinion, in the final sentences of the book.

This is characteristic of the subject of the whole work.<sup>7</sup> This statement initiates the final segment of the work entitled “The Substitute for an Ending”. One could respond a little mockingly: “If there are no common characteristics between the discussed areas, then the question arises: Why are they found in one book at all?” Besides that, an analysis does not have to rely on shared characteristics. One could also rely on the differences found within each of the areas. The author could, for example, classify the various possible approaches to suffering, define its different aspects, or describe more generally what differentiates them from one another. For instance, the understanding of suffering found among philosophers from that of historians or tragedians. Instead, the author provides us with yet another brief argument about the nature of suffering. It is too short to treat it seriously as a philosophical argument. By his brevity, the author gives the impression of making a Christian theodicy as if referring to the philosophy of Heraclitus.<sup>8</sup> After that the author moves on to an even shorter section regarding the Christian concept of suffering, emphasizing the importance of its meaning, thus continuing on with his argument trying to justify suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Next, we in fact get a small attempt at trying to come to some conclusions. The author introduces the possible ways of understanding suffering. These are, first of all, the Orphistic-Pythagorean-Platonistic view, and secondly, the Epicurean-stoical<sup>10</sup> view, then he skips over to the rest. Then again we have a short example of a reflection concerning philosophy and theology. Finally, the author acknowledges agreeing with the Christian understanding of suffering, but his rationale for doing so is not convincing. Neither does he justify why he concludes “If in practice we have to judge what the right concept is, then one

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, pp. 163–164: “If in our present life, we were in a constant state of joy and never experienced suffering, we would not be able to appreciate the value of happiness.”

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 164.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, pp. 164–165.

should take into account the ultimate good that we can achieve when we adopt certain principles which will steer our behaviour.” Nor does he when he states: “Only the Christian concept leads us to that kind of good.”<sup>11</sup> He also does not say how is it related to the problem of suffering in classical Greece. Our criticism certainly does not refer only to statements of that kind, which may be true, but rather the lack of clear justification as well as a connection with the general argument of the book. These fragments are nothing more than the author’s private convictions, but devoid of any attempt at a fuller justification that would refer to knowledge of the issue of suffering in Greek literature or as a justification of a philosophical kind.

## Greek Tragedians on Suffering

The author should be praised for his diligence in finding so many various sources dealing with suffering among the works of the Greek tragedians. This is the best chapter in the book, although it is not without some weaknesses. It also contains some attempts at defining the specifics of the approaches used by certain Greek tragedians on the issue of suffering. After reading the chapter, the reader is able to answer the question what differentiates the various tragedians from one another when it comes to the issue of suffering. Thus one learns that:

Cited in the dramas of Aeschylus, the archaic state of human consciousness finds in his poetry a particularly clear reflection. It seems that suffering was for him one of the main ingredients of the tragedy story line, which allowed him to create this type of drama that Aeschylus called pathetic tragedy. The concept behind the works of the Athenian tragedians links suffering with guilt and punishment and this is what gives his works a unique character. [...] Aeschylus was convinced that the source of suffering was a feeling of guilt and an increasingly clearer perception of the conditions of human nature, more exactly defining its characteristics, and also the limits of human freedom and the duties of the world of the gods. At the forefront of those duties emerges the subordination of people to the hero and his activities to powers of a higher order.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the second of the three Athenian tragedians, Sophocles, one can read that:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 18–19.

In his works the element of deity plays a secondary role. Above all else the poet brings one's attention to the situation of the human being, and that different factors impact his shape and final size. For example: the relationship of a person with the gods, the relationship that ties an individual to the city and with other people, and also the state of the human conscience. The suffering of the heroes in the plays of Sophocles does not have at their base moral guilt: the guilt of a person is treated, generally speaking, as a mistake, and not as rebellion against the will of the gods. The poet interprets it as an intellectual category rather than as a moral one.<sup>13</sup>

The introduction of the section on Euripides may strike us as too emotional. The author writes:

What is the meaning of suffering, what are its causes, who is responsible for human misery, and in what form will it manifest itself. These are the elementary questions which certainly confront everyone who ponders over such unexplored phenomena, accompanying the life of a person either in the form of various inconveniences, or in a physical form, or in psychological pain.<sup>14</sup>

But he is suggesting that an important controversial view of suffering in the tragedies of Euripides leaves a contrast between the views of the problem in Aeschylus and Euripides. The nature of suffering becomes even less clear and rational.

On the basis of this chapter, one could come to the conclusion that suffering taken from the point of view characteristic of the tragedians, namely, the connection between ethical decisions and individual fate which gradually loses meaning and justification. In the work of Aeschylus, it leads to wisdom; it is divine judgment aimed at human pride. In principle, it is not questioning the meaning of suffering. In the works of Sophocles, suffering is simply the result of a person's choices. The divine element plays its role later. In the works of Euripides, suffering becomes dubious, divine judgments are unethical, and the meaning of suffering is unattainable. As Sieroń writes:

In his dramas, Euripides stresses much more opposition than both of his predecessors towards all of the powers responsible for the pain and suffering that his heroes experience. The poet's courage, not seen among other tragedians, is to criticize above all else the mythical gods. Not feeling the necessity of having to punish those who have caused injustice to others, and even sometimes harming innocent people themselves. The Athenian tragedian realized that expecting justice in the conduct of the gods is a waste of time, because the gods do not support anything that is praise worthy, noble, or worthy of admiration, indeed, they often act shamefully and criminally, obviously from

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.



the perspective of human beings. Euripides does not want to declare as just the punishment imposed by the gods on humanity, since they themselves harm others and commit heinous acts.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the author stated at the beginning of this chapter while introducing the issue of suffering in the works of Aeschylus that

the subject of human suffering was not an issue to be reflected upon or analysed. Humankind did not ponder upon its source, meaning or nature. At that time suffering had an irrational character. A certain idea connected to suffering began to appear with the first skirmishes and rivalries between people. [...] No doubt war led humanity to reflect on suffering. In the archaic epochs and in the first years of the classical period, suffering appeared as a fact that did not allow humanity to forget about its limitations and dependence upon the will of the gods. Very early on, as history and society developed the dominant conviction was that the gods are not only more powerful than people, but also impose severe penalties upon humanity for transgressing set limitations.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of suffering developed from something that was irrational to being gradually rationalized based upon divine punishment. In the light of the later development of the Greek tragedy, suffering returned to being something increasingly less understood, increasingly less linked to ethics and by this more nagging. It becomes more difficult for humanity to deal with, the sentences of fate are less understandable, and thus, acceptance is met with rebellion. The reason no doubt is a departure from religious tradition, but also due to the fact that tragedy started in Athens. Aeschylus lived in the period of the victorious Persian wars, which brought about suffering, but ended in victory for the combined armies of Athens and Sparta over the overrun of Persia. Sophocles lived and wrote during the splendor of the Athenian democracy, the years until he reached the age of 65, when there was neither spectacular victories nor defeats. Euripides, who was 16 years younger, lived when the Peloponnesian wars broke out, which ended in the defeat of Athens by Sparta only after a long and bloody war. He was 49 years old at the time and experienced the human inclination for evil. Of course, these are only speculations. In any event, however, this trend is apparent in the book, it is only implicit in the analysis of the concept of suffering in individual tragedians. The author does not form any outright claims to the existence of such a trend. That is really unfortunate as the issue is interesting and worthy of further investigation. But there is too much of meticulous enumeration of suffering in the writings of the tragedians, especially in Euripides, but what lacks is any general conclusions.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 17–18.

## Greek Historians and Suffering

Let us skip the unclear decision of the author concerning writing two separate chapters for each of the individual classical Greek historians (they could have been written as two subsections in the same chapter), whilst discussing the concept of suffering among the classical Greek historians. One section could have been dedicated to the war as a main cause of suffering in the writings of Herodotus. Instead warfare only takes up half of the content.<sup>17</sup> The chapters are nevertheless interesting.

The perspective of the historians is broader and more practical than that of the tragedians. They seem to be more interested in societal-scale suffering as opposed to individual one meaning a more varied form of suffering. They are more interested than the tragedians in practical ways of preventing it. The causes of suffering are also perceived in wider and more mundane terms. But, here too one can notice a trend. For the overall archaic worldview of Herodotus, suffering is more or less a deserved divine punishment but, at the same time, the gods can be appeased.

The gods reserve for themselves that which exceeds human standards and punish all mortals who do not follow the set limits. In the ancient world, this belief was widespread and included rulers and kings. [...] The historian emphasizes that Xerxes knew all too well about the intervention of the gods into people's lives, despite this he dared to commit the sin of pride, when he gave the command to dig up the mountain of Atos and make a channel for ships to sail in, although they could have been transported by land. [...] The context shows that in Herodotus' view that only the gods could overstep the bounds established by the laws of nature, or by the gods themselves.<sup>18</sup>

It is only necessary to find the right way in which to appease the gods in order to avert suffering. "People, in order to protect themselves from the wrath of gods, should praise them and offer sacrifices. Mostly they wanted to fulfill their obligations but did not know how to do it. Often the underlying problem was the way sacrifices were offered. People did not always correctly decipher the will or wishes of gods, as was communicated to them by the oracles."<sup>19</sup> Suffering is essentially comprehensible and rational. It is the result of mistakes committed by people. Gods punish people who behave badly. Various human faults bring about the intervention of the gods: "People become just as hateful as the gods in lust after revenge. They bring suffering upon themselves, because the gods punish them for lack of self control over their lusts."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The subsection is on pp. 62–68, and on war is on pp. 62–64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

For Thucydides, who was under the influence of a more Euripidean worldview, suffering is not so easy to understand. It simply exists and it does not have a lot to do with the gods. It is rather caused by the combination of many causes, primarily being social, political, or natural, rather than the consequences of the wrath of gods. War is the cause of much of the suffering. The cruelty of people during the Peloponnesian wars leads to many tragedies and much suffering of individuals, social groups and political parties.

That's why Thucydides is convinced that it would be best to make a lasting peace, and if this is not possible, then at least a long-term defense. Following his advice, they would safeguard the freedom of their country by justly repaying for rendered services or for suffered grievances. Otherwise we will never be able to take revenge on our enemies.<sup>21</sup>

He sees the absurdity of it; on the one hand, he offers a few suggestions, and on the other, he admits to the complexity that is necessary in order to maintain peace. He suggests then to minimize suffering and injustice during times of war. War is not the only cause of suffering.

Thucydides discerns other sources of suffering. He points out earthquakes and other natural disasters, or great draughts, caused by these tragedies and famine. A particular cause of suffering and human tragedy was plague, which to a great extent destroyed Hellas.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it loses its important meaning since neither does it serve as a way of disciplining people nor as a punishment from the gods. For Greeks then, suffering becomes less and less intelligible. Perhaps even more so than subsequent losses of independence, the Peloponnesian wars teach the Greeks not to analyse suffering or to look at it as divine judgment. Suffering had lost its meaning, it became incomprehensible, deprived of its sublime glamour, became quite simply the consequence of the brutality of the law of nature and in this the nature of mankind. Thucydides may not put it in these terms, he simply does not see suffering as divine judgment or reassign meaning to it. In the book, this trend was visible, not so clearly by the author, but one can clearly see it just by comparing the two chapters on Herodotus and Thucydides. The author suggests certain rational attempts at overcoming suffering. It is quite possible that there is much in his work that renders the evil in quite a cold terms, when he acknowledged it as the way reality is.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

## Philosophers and Suffering

For not very clear reasons, Sieroń decided to discuss almost all of the Greek philosophers. He summarizes their views briefly, sometimes appearing rather far from the problem of suffering. He writes about it point-blank: “The theme of suffering in philosophical thought has been clearly seen in only a few thinkers, but with many others it constitutes an eminent feature adopted by their ontological assumptions and their consequences.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, one makes an extrapolation or deduction from general philosophical assumptions and draws from them conclusions about the subject of suffering. Some results may be debatable, but one can fundamentally agree with the results that are put forth. But here too, however, the book lacks synthesis that could emerge from the plethora of discussed concepts. Following Sieroń’s text and thus referring to the only conclusions he arrived at, we shall try to attain slightly higher level of the analysis. We shall first try to describe the main idea characteristic of the Greek understanding regarding the notion of suffering as taken from the analysis of the author in his book.

Therefore, the philosophers introduce, as Sieroń demonstrates implicitly (because he does not try to define a specific philosophical view on suffering), a different perspective on suffering than that of the historians and tragedians. The Greek philosophers’ reflections focus on two issues. The first is the place of suffering in the general structure of reality and that of mankind. The reflection is not offered from theological or ethical perspective, as in the case the tragedians or from social or political perspective, as in the case the historians, but rather from ontological and anthropological aspect. The ethical perspective is also present and this is the second issue addressed. Instead, philosophers tried to teach on the subject of how to cope with it, giving practical advice on how to handle the suffering which life brings. Philosophers, unlike the historians and tragedians, discard the questions of guilt, as it pertains to suffering, but rather try to see what place it holds in the nature of things, how one is to deal with it. They do not see it in terms of guilt and punishment but rather as the result of the way things are in the world and based upon having a knowledge of suffering. They wish to see it based upon the category of wisdom. The problem is therefore recognized less in terms of personal and moral categories and more upon impersonal and objective analysis of reality and human nature. This difference is analogous to that of the anthropomorphic concept of deity as seen by poets and as abstractions by philosophers. If we know where suffering comes from, then we can deal with it in various ways as defined by wisdom. The philosophical view is the more rational one and it does not refer much to deities, as in the case of spiritualist or theistic tendencies. It is a view

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

having more to do with the possibilities of the human mind that tries to solve the problem of suffering, thereby making life happier. Philosophers also seem less likely to be in a position of helplessness when confronted with suffering, as opposed to the such tragedians as Euripides and Thucydides. They have an inherent trust in being able to find an effective remedy for suffering by wisdom. Thus, the problem of suffering is ultimately dealt with in terms of practicality and functional guidance, at least this is the picture that Sieroń renders, and he is probably right. The Greek philosophers have little respect for the mystic side of suffering, unlike the tragedians and historians. They treat it as a problem that can be solved rationally by gaining appropriate knowledge and understanding instead of treating it as some sort of mystical or sensational episode experienced by a person. The tragedians thus seem to be more sensitive and differ slightly from the more mundane and practically-minded historians.

Of course, it looks different when one looks in detail. The differences, at least to some extent, are analogous to those between the tragedians and historians. The author examines a longer period of philosophy (from the 7th-century beginning with the Seven Sages until the end of the Western Roman Empire) than he does when examining the tragedians and the historians. Suffering during the time of the Seven Sages was often treated in practical categories. Wisdom was the common-sense way of avoiding suffering, which would come about as the result of foolish decisions or bad emotions. Philosophy had here already a practical sense; its analysis was though limited to aphorisms and proverbs and in this did not go beyond the wisdom of any of its surrounding neighbours.

In the archaic period, when philosophy focused on problems of cosmology and the search for the origins of all things, it treated suffering as an integral part of reality. For Heraclitus, suffering always has meaning and serves some purpose, although not necessarily for a particular individual. It was something to be examined in a broader sense. Without suffering the good and evil would have not existed.

Suffering is not something fixed and absolute, it is not to be found in isolation, but coexists with other an element of reality, it is a varied phenomenon, and therefore mankind hoped for positive change. Being an individual phenomenon, suffering is at the same time subject to universal law, says Heraclitus enigmatically. Suffering cannot exist without its opposite – happiness. [...] Similarly, disease makes health pleasant and good, as hunger – satiety and weariness – rest.<sup>24</sup>

For the Pythagoreans, suffering is a necessary step in the purification of soul; it leads to a higher good.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 85.

Human life has meaning only when all of its activities are subordinated to the good of the soul, when it serves to purify it, in other words, to break the bonds linking the soul with the body. The process of the soul's purification must be very difficult and unpleasant.<sup>25</sup>

Empedocles perspective was similar to that of Heraclitus, namely that suffering was a certain element of the cosmic order as well as a certain step towards purification.

This step is the soul's purification and the detachment from that which is material and sensual, from that which enslaves the soul. All of these efforts and treatments are designed to cure the sick soul. The disease is attached to bodily pleasures. As long as the disease is present, one will be able to speak about human suffering.<sup>26</sup>

It is set in the structure of an objective world, it fulfills a certain function, but that function will come to an end one day.

What is essential to the problem of suffering is the power of the Greek term 'neikos'. [...] This period of cyclical development of the world, when feuding dominated, it reminds one of the law of clashes and the battle of opposites in the philosophy of Heraclitus. [...] The period of the domination of hate is not permanent, but in time will end and the victorious march of 'love' will gradually come into world history, which will determine the harmonious coexistence of the individual elements of the universe.<sup>27</sup>

Suffering is only a certain stage in the development of the universe, it constitutes a necessary part, but will someday come to an end. If performs a certain function, but when it is fulfilled, there will follow the era of love. One can see similar views on suffering between the archaic philosophers and Aeschylus and Herodotus. They are alike to such an extent that the language of mythology seems to be replaced by the language of ontology. Just as suffering came from the gods and served as a way to improve the individual and the society in the tragedians and historians, in the worldview of philosophers it is part of the universe and also pertains to the purification of the soul. These perspectives are slightly different, but they are both rational and theological. In archaic times, the Greeks believed that all that happens in the universe has its aim, reality is rational in itself, it is not the product of some blind power, but rather everything in it makes sense and has a meaning. The existence of suffering in this kind of fundamental order and rational world is not destructive, but aims to strengthen.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

In the period of the Athenian enlightenment, this viewpoint somewhat changed. If we were to study Sieroń's account of suffering held by the philosophers of the Athenian enlightenment more deeply, it is clear that the issue becomes problematic for the rational mind. The rational being knows how to avoid suffering and how to solve it as a theoretical as well as a practical problem. Of course it can mean many different and even contradictory things, but the key is found, for this period, in the skillful mind. Suffering here is the effect of the mind's malfunctioning; it is the consequence of error. Of course this does not happen to everyone and every time, but it is the reason that decides which suffering is important and which is not. Depending on the type of philosophical assumptions, one can come to a different conclusion, but fundamentally one looks at the issue of suffering from either a moralistic, anthropocentric, optimistic, or rationalistic point of view. Suffering can be avoided if one knows how to do it and how to live according to reason. For the Sophists or Cyrenaics it means rather to avoid physical or social suffering, for Democritus or Aristotle it means having self-control over one's emotions, for Socrates and Plato it means avoiding the suffering of the soul. But the principle is similar everywhere. Here one can discover a certain analogy to Sophocles, who also understood suffering in rational and moral categories rather than in cosmic or theological. What is clearly visible in the social dimension is the aspiration to build a rational society which would minimize unnecessary suffering by applying rational principles of life. Suffering is not only an individual problem, but to a greater degree a social one. Here, one does not find discussions pertaining to a deeper or cosmic meaning of suffering. It simply exists and one has to deal with it. The proper use of reason is in this case absolutely vital. Of course, a metaphysical component is present in the philosophy of Plato, but also for him the social aspect is the most important part of the problem. It was an optimistic and rational era similar to the previous one but with some differences. Previously, the optimism originated from a sense of understanding the meaning of suffering, with the thought that it is necessary for happiness and other good that it would one day end. Reason enabled humanity to be aware of this. Now optimism means knowing how to cope with suffering and reason is necessary to know how to accomplish this. However, this means that suffering in and of itself loses its meaning. Despite this, we do see more optimism in philosophy than with the tragedies of Euripides or in the works of Thucydides. Philosophers primarily stay in the sphere of social problems, but they concentrate on prescriptions for them as opposed to describing them. They also remain on an abstract level as opposed to a more worldly or historical one of facts which are by nature more annoying and difficult to define than are abstractions.

Analysing the Athenian enlightenment understanding of suffering by philosophers and as presented by Sieroń, we observe an emphasis on the proper use of reason and its primarily social and practical application; that knowledge is related to the nature of suffering and its coping mechanisms. Therefore we learn that

Democritus primarily placed the main emphasis on disaster caused by disobedience or rebellion of the heart. The underlying root is in the heart, but the ‘wise man’ is able to control his heart and curb the ominous momentum of its movement. [...] For the philosopher of Abdera, it is an important belief that man is freed from envy and resentment not only when he understands that others are more unhappy than himself and knows that he could help them, but when he actually helps them. [...] Thus man should not only sympathize, but also, as much as possible, help those poorer than himself. [...] Democritus links suffering to acts of injustice that are incompatible with mind and conscience.<sup>28</sup>

Writing about Protagoras, he refers to Janina Gajda who claims “that Protagoras very aptly compares a sophist to a doctor. Both deal with human beings, but from different sides; a doctor changes the state of the body from worse to better while a sophist is a doctor of the soul. His role is to make a bad person better. One can see from this that Protagoras was looking out for the good of humanity; above all else he had in mind the benefits, both for individual citizens as well as for the whole of society in which they lived and for which they took up important activities for to benefit everyone.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, we have a philosophy which acts as a means of healing life and serves to benefit practically all.

Reason does not investigate the mysteries of the cosmos and does not consider suffering to be one of its elements, but rather it serves to give practical advice on how one is to deal with it. A similar understanding of philosophy can be seen in Socrates. He reveals the relationship of philosophy to the problem suffering in a discussion with his student Aristippus:

In his conversation with Socrates, he defends the position that every living being, human or animal, desires temporary pleasure and avoids temporary pain, unless he, she or it is crazy. Aristippus here is thinking about pain in general regardless of its results. Socrates [...] agrees with him that every living being fundamentally seeks pleasure, but precisely on account of it one often has to make a pain atonement for the pleasure which will only appear in the future. Thus Aristippus presents the relationship between pain and pleasure differently to that of Socrates. Socrates links pleasure with difficulty rather than with an easy life from beginning to an end.<sup>30</sup>

Pleasure or the avoidance of suffering is the goal, but depending on whether or not we emphasize the sensual or spiritual aspect of human nature will determine how we understand it. In any case, philosophy serves to maximize pleasure and to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, pp. 91–93.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, pp. 96–97.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 100.



remove suffering from an essential part of humanity. For Plato that essential part of humanity is the soul because,

Plato treated the human being as a whole composed of body and soul. A constant struggle takes place between the body and soul which is a hotbed of suffering. [...] Above all else he desired the health of the soul because it is the human being.<sup>31</sup>

Thinking about the philosophical assumptions of Aristotle, Sieroń states

that human suffering is closely linked to happiness, and happiness is linked with inherent good, meaning the realization of possible good by the human being and for the human being. According to the meaning of these statements, one must accept that everything that is an obstacle in the practice of such activity opposes human happiness and without a doubt is the source of suffering. [...] It is in humanity's own interest not to neglect the care of the intellectual element (ο διανοητικόν) which seems to be the essence of every human being.<sup>32</sup>

The next shift comes in the Hellenistic period. One can see here more pessimism in the understanding of reality and the nature of suffering. Philosophy encourages a certain kind of callousness towards suffering by controlling one's needs by the way of rational reflection.

The goal pursued by all of the three schools of the Hellenistic period was basically the same: they tried to teach a life of happiness, but happiness, in their thinking, had a rather negative character and depended upon limiting one's needs to a bare minimum, which out of necessity was linked to the problem of suffering. Not everyone agreed with this judgement of a way of achieving happiness and not everyone had the inner strength to achieve the desired goal.<sup>33</sup>

Evil and suffering are integral parts of the world and human life. Philosophers do not promise to remove it, their advice may rather enhance it. We see this same kind of pessimism and vulnerability to evil in Thucydides and Euripides. In the Hellenistic period, humankind does not feel confident; one does not control his or her own fate. Hellenistic philosophy, however, does not lead to helplessness, but teaches how to become resistant to suffering:

Pyrrho of Elis (365–270) who created the foundation of skepticism, tried to overcome uncertain fate by absolute indifference and total insensitivity.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

The stoics advocated apathy (*απαθεια*) and indifference towards all of the passions. [...] For the stoics, everything that exists is rational, but suffering here is not a part of cosmic harmony, rather it simply is a necessity of nature. The rational person is to understand this and be resistant to all emotions. The ethical ideal is rather apathy. Emotional coldness and indifference is preferred to the bitter exaltations of the cosmic harmony as seen in Heraclitus. With the skeptics we have a dismissal of any kind of truth, as well as the praise of indifference, although it is justified in other ways. Similarly, Epicureanism teaches resistance to suffering or how to deal with pain: In Epicurus' ethics, he also developed a method, which indicated how to free oneself from physical pain (*απνοια*) and any internal disorders. This also expressed well the Greek view of ataraxia (*αταραξια*), which was understood as a spiritual peace.<sup>34</sup>

He managed to limit the experience of physical pain by intellectual control of it. To a large extent, the social dimension of suffering disappears and philosophy becomes an individual matter, although this dimension is also present in Roman philosophy during the same period. Philosophy teaches to deal with suffering, not, however, by repairing the world, as was held in the previous era, but rather by becoming resistant to suffering and avoiding it. This means avoiding social issues as Sieroń writes:

With the goal of avoiding dangers, for example of the political kind, Epicurus advocated a peaceful life in the country and outside of the city; he praised a simple life in the bosom of nature and demanded a return to flawless nature. He demands outright: 'live in hiding' (*λαθε βιοσαζ*). It is worth noting that this catchphrase was a complete reversal of how people lived in the classical period, when citizens were primarily involved in what best served society and the state.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, wisdom serves to minimize it, but mainly by removing fear taken from ignorance: of the gods, death, etc. His philosophy of nature served to this end.

During the Roman Empire, Neo-Platonism returned once again to the idea of purification, but this time it comes in its own form of escapism from the world and understanding of the nature of evil. It creates a synthesis of previous findings on the subject of suffering.

Reality as a whole is perfect, beautiful, and happy. However, there are higher and lower levels in its structure, which explains how evil can also exist outside of good. Evil is the source of suffering and essentially is only a weak

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, pp. 111–115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

form of good. In comparison to good as a whole, evil is extremely small. In reality good has a great advantage over evil, and it should be emphasized that evil is subjective to good. At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that evil exists and influences human life. It occurs in a world of beings below the moon. Only they are born, suffer under the yoke of a sinister egoism, and die. At the core of egoism lies admittedly a desire for its own good, but in the essence of its own selfishness brings about evil and suffering. Plunging into the material of being, it becomes increasingly worse, weaker, and in the end loses its being. It is precisely this awareness that is to show humankind the way back to the absolute. If we fail to find it and remain bound to the world of the senses, we must bear the consequences of that choice, exposing ourselves to suffering.<sup>36</sup>

Thus here not only do we have a cosmic harmony of archaic philosophy, but also a means of identifying the sources of suffering and a way to repair the society of the classical philosophers. In the thought of Plotinus, Greek philosophy comes full circle and while developing into a rational relationship to reality, denies reason itself.

Suffering is first accepted as reasonable and sensible, and then becomes a rational art of how to deal with it, removing its causes and by changing society. Finally, by treating it rationally and sensibly and by being immune or insensitive to it, this then is understood as individual wisdom. Lastly, suffering is seen as a spiritual escape from this world to the absolute. Thus it ends in defeat, surrendering reason and entering into the area of experiential mysticism. This is obviously a trend similar to that which we observed with the tragedians and historians. Only that it was observed from a longer time frame and from a specific philosophical abstract perspective. One can also try to make a certain analogy to modern times: Christianity reigned in European culture and suffering was seen as an element of divine punishment and world governance. Later on when people believed in creating a world that was new, better, and more rational in the tradition of the Enlightenment, leftist thinking, and finally postmodern individualism. Combine all of this with the collapse of the belief in God and the utopian dreams of the revolutionaries on the one hand, and a yearning for a new mysticism inspired, among other things, by the East and various mystic traditions on the other.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

## Suffering in the New Testament

The author begins from the original sin as the ultimate cause for suffering

Calling man into existence, God gave him the possibility of life without pain, but he did not appreciate this gift, he sinned, turned away from his creator, and by having original sin he lost the offered gifts. From that time he must suffer and die, he must work hard to get the resources necessary for life, and at the same time he lost his chance for salvation, or in other words, the attainment of eternal happiness.<sup>37</sup>

He does not refer here to any New Testament texts but rather to general theological knowledge. The answer to sin is the sacrifice of Jesus:

Sin and its consequences are so terrible that man in his own strength would never be able to defend himself against them. God in his goodness gives man one more chance. The second person of God, the eternal Word, does not hesitate to put on a human body with all of its weaknesses; he even agrees to suffer a horrible death on the cross for the redemption and salvation of humankind.<sup>38</sup>

The act of sacrificing one's life for sinners is an incentive and example for us:

Dying on a cross for human sins shows how we should understand the commandment to love our enemies and how to obey it. After his resurrection, Christ explained to the disciples, that his death was essential in order to fulfill the scriptures, which proclaimed him as the Messiah (Lk 24, 25–27) and giving his life for the love of humankind. For the Christian a clear lesson comes from these words: on the one hand, a person should appreciate the infinite love of the Savior, on the other hand, one she should treat his/her own suffering as a possible means of being restored onto the way of happiness. For the Christian, suffering cannot be deprived of this highest goal.<sup>39</sup>

And here we come to the main point made by Sieroń's analysis in trying to understand suffering in the New Testament. Suffering should refer to the highest goal of humankind and only makes sense in this understanding. Similar conclusions are deduced from the life of the Apostle Paul (based upon Acts):

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<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, 133–134.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 143.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 146.

Paul's experience during the court hearings must have been very sad for him, because he was insulted, beaten, and evidence of innocence was demanded from him, despite the fact that his accusers could not prove any wickedness. Paul endured all of these pains and suffering patiently, like a true Christian, for Jesus and the strengthening of faith in his divine mission.<sup>40</sup>

We can find similar arguments made by Sieroń in his analysis of the epistles:

Suffering is grace, the Apostle writes to the Philippians. He speaks of his attachment to them, because they participate in the grace given to him, 'as is the carrying of chains and the defense and strengthening of the gospel.' In the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that he is pleased with the afflictions that the followers of Christ in the city of Colossi carry. Suffering, which he personally experienced, is a source of pride. One gets the impression that Paul is proud of his own sufferings [...]. In the letter to the Romans, Paul argues that suffering is nothing in comparison to the glory that awaits us in the afterlife. 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' God surprises the wise despite their cunning. And in another place 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise and knows that they are without value.' [...] The cross representing suffering, cannot be compared with the glory of eternal life. The words of St. Paul indicate that for the followers of Christ, suffering has a profound meaning, because it gives them strength to persevere in the pursuit of good and even God himself. This kind of pursuit is above all a concern for spiritual values. Having the hope to achieve these values, a Christian is ready to voluntarily accept that type of meaningful suffering. In this context, the acceptance of suffering in order to obtain eternal goods makes St. Paul's word's 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them' somewhat paradoxical. The power and size of the one's suffering, contrary to the general belief, lies in one's weakness. The Lord gave this idea to the apostles when Paul asked him for help with his troubles. God said to him that 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'<sup>41</sup>

Suffering has a different character in *Revelations*: "All this suffering is the result of people's shameful acts. They benefited from evil in their freedom and turned away from God, that which is good, and could not critically evaluate their actions."<sup>42</sup> They are the result of evil perpetrated by them. Thus suffering serves as a means and has a meaning because it gives them strength as they persevere to do good, or it is the consequence of their sin. Yet, we also have a similar understanding of suffering as seen in the writings of Aeschylus and others in the archaic period. Interpreting the New Testament in this way would be to return to the way

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, pp. 155–156.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 161.

of archaic thinking, and would be contrary to the development of thought as seen in the analysis on suffering in this book, although only implicitly. Greek thought, however, tried to remove the problem of suffering, permanently making us numb to it, and finally trying to avoid it in mystical ecstasy. The New Testament seen in this light would be to revert to previous findings and to the emphasis that suffering has meaning and serves to restore life and to perfect it. Thus the meaning of suffering would be similar to that of the archaic authors: Aeschylus, Herodotus, Heraclitus, Pythagoreans and Empedocles. The eternal aspect that Sieroñ mentions is also nothing new, but can be seen in Socrates and Plato.

The cross, however, means revolution, a new way of life, something much more than the acceptance of suffering which happens in life as Sieroñ sees it. And even if we can accept this interpretation, then it is only by disregarding time and replacing it with eternity. These are completely different ways of understanding suffering, either in terms of knowledge and reason or in terms of relationship to God and faith in which God himself suffers, in which this new life, given by the suffering on the cross, ushers into a new way of life both for the individual as well as for society. It would be good, for example, to single out Greek and Christian thought presented in Lev Shestov's work *Athens and Jerusalem*. The author does not make any references to this type of thought. The Christian church was new, a completely new form of social life, in which widows, orphans, slaves, and women were taken care of. It undermined the ancient understanding of law and order. This opposition is rather vaguely presented in the book. In essence they are radically different concepts. From the perspective of the New Testament, Greek wisdom was foolishness and vice versa. In this context, for example, attitudes of both Tertullian and Marcus Aurelius are understandable. Despite the otherwise similar worldviews, Tertullian sharply criticizes non-Christians and Marcus Aurelius despises Christians for their inclination towards martyrdom, which resulted from their concept of suffering. And they are both consistent in their attitudes. One can either be an advocate of the Christian or the Greek understanding of suffering, but they are not complementary.

For classical authors, suffering is punishment which serves to purify. In the New Testament, God himself suffers because of people who do wrong. Not only does he suffer, but also dies (and then raises from the dead), so that people would suffer and die (in a spiritual sense and also in a physical sense as much as Christians are encouraged to martyrdom). In both instances one can see that suffering serves some goal, but the New Testament does not treat suffering as simply the consequence of sin of one or another person, but rather it is a way to a new life, a way for everyone initiated by God himself. For the classical authors like Aeschylus and Herodotus, the world order itself is rational and its disruption results in punishment and must lead to purification after which everything returns to normal. The New Testament is a complete reversal of order. The Son of God, who is guiltless, suffers and dies for those who are guilty so that they too could die with

him and receive a completely new life in a completely new order of heaven and earth.

For classical authors, suffering can be removed by reason; here suffering must be accepted despite reason, for which message of the cross is foolishness. Wisdom comes later. We do not find the way in ourselves but in Christ who comes to us and completely changes us. For later authors, Euripides and Thucydides, suffering becomes difficult to explain so as to retain its meaning. Hellenistic philosophers encourage becoming numb to suffering. Actions of Jesus are categorically opposed to the three Hellenistic schools. He participates in public life, exposing himself to much suffering and death. This was completely against the thought of Epicurus. Jesus submitted himself to various intense emotions: sadness, joy, fear, hatred contrary to the advice given by the Stoics. Christ told Pilate, "I came into the world to testify to the truth"; yet this statement is in contrast to the Skeptics who believed that only by repudiating any kind of truth can one find the way to happiness. Neo-Platonists, in their experiential mysticism, returned to their true nature (the soul is an emanation of the absolute) and fled from the suffering of this world. For the Christian, experiential mysticism is a departure from one's nature and an acceptance of suffering. To quote St. Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."<sup>43</sup> For the Greeks though, suffering remains a part of the cosmos, it is a problem to be solved by reason, which remains in the cosmos. The idea is to keep the world and man as it is and to return to its real nature by way of reason. The paths may be different, because of various understanding of the place of suffering in the rational structure of the world. Suffering can also be seen as punishment for bad deeds and be a part of the harmony of the universe. Suffering can be understood as something that one becomes numb to by mastering one's passions by the way of reason (Hellenistic period) or super reason (Neo-Platonism). For the New Testament, the world requires a total transformation, which is done in opposition to reason and topples over the ruling order in it. That is the difference between the cosmocentric and theocentric understanding of reality.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusions

The author made a great effort in tracing the topic of suffering in Greek literature and philosophy. The book elaborately shows how the understanding of suffer-

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<sup>43</sup> Galations 2: 20 [New International Version].

<sup>44</sup> The difference between Greek cosmocentrism and theocentrism in Judaism, Christianity, but theocentrism can also be found in Neo-Platonism, see: G. Mitrowski: *Kosmos, Bóg, czas*. Katowice 1993.

ing changed in this culture. Sieroń avoids, however, to come to clear conclusions on this subject. Whether or not this is an advantage or disadvantage will not be estimated here. To be frank about saying certain things is not always appropriate. The material gathered by the author is certainly very interesting. It encourages a reader to draw conclusions of what type of article has been presented, although indirectly one could say that a certain kind of evolution on the understanding of suffering has been presented. Beginning from rationalizing suffering as a component of the world, or will of the gods, by attempting to rationally remove it by advising one to become numb to it through the way of reason, and then irrationally. Including an analysis of the New Testament in this volume may have been an occasion to confronting the attitudes of the Greeks towards suffering with that of the Christians, but the author showed the differences between them not distinctively enough.