The Concept of Suffering in Children of Heaven: Analyzing The Differences and Similarities Between Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s Theodicy

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ABSTRACT:
This article discusses the theodicy of Augustine and Ibn Arabi. Although these two theologians come from different traditions and backgrounds, they articulate that the realm of suffering in the human world can help us sharpen our faith in God. I use the movie Children of Heaven (by Majid Majidi) to parse the similarities and differences in their theologies. The symbols found in the movie show that the two theologies are related. This article explores the themes of human suffering in the movie and goes beyond a simple review.

The Concept of Suffering in Children of Heaven
Analyzing The Differences and Similarities Between Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s Theodicy

by Paulinus Daeli, OSC

INTRODUCTION
In the course of daily living, individuals are inevitably confronted with circumstances that may be positive or negative and cannot avoid their experiential impact. Freud, the father of modern psychotherapy, asserts that evil does not permanently harm or threaten the ego but can also be something the ego desires.
and enjoys. This means that suffering and pleasure are intrinsic aspects of the human experience and are inextricably intertwined. This reality finds expression in *Children of Heaven*. By using an in-depth storytelling style, Majid Majidi presents the reality of the world, which is full of riddles of suffering and pleasure in *Children of Heaven*. Majidi not only depicts the simple conflict of how a low-income family anticipates their suffering but also shows how vital kindness, innocence, and fortitude are in fighting the problems caused by the existence of suffering. In other words, *Children of Heaven* describes a tale that showcases the abundance of compassion and purity in children’s hearts while also portraying the restrictive impact of poverty. This film tells how complex and complicated human suffering is and human life is meaningless without struggle. For instance, by echoing the importance of a father’s responsibilities in his family, Majidi presents Ali’s father (Mohammad Amir Naji), who cries while working to make tea for the congregation in a mosque. With this, Majidi wants to say that Ali’s father’s crying reflects more misery than pleasure. This scene can be interpreted as an event that everyone finds when suffering outweighs pleasure. It can be: why am I not destined to be in a fortunate realm? Why does suffering exist upon me? Moreover, this question raises other fundamental questions: does God create suffering? Why does God permit us to experience suffering? Why does God permit us to experience suffering?

*Children of Heaven* is unique in addressing the fundamental question of suffering. Besides the story reflecting poverty, *Children of Heaven* shows the audience that people who obey God often suffer. Ali’s family life is worth questioning, and why suffering weighs so heavily on them. This article will consider and explore those fundamental questions regarding human suffering. The initial segment of the text comprises a brief overview of the film’s plot about the theological concept under scrutiny. Then, the subsequent section delves into a discussion on the portrayal of suffering in the film and draws connections to the theodicy perspectives of Augustine, a notable figure in Christian theology, and Ibn Arabi, a

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prominent representative of Muslim philosophy. The selection of these figures is predicated upon their respective discernment of divine justice, human agency, and the phenomenon of evil, notwithstanding their distinct religious affiliations. In other words, their similar approaches to theodicy help analyze the core of *Children of Heaven*. By comparing and contrasting Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s theodicy, this project shows that the meaninglessness of suffering has meaning. Also, in this section, the author presents some specific observations on how the film emphasizes the reality of suffering from the point of view of the analysis of the film editing process. Finally, the author posits that comprehending Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s theodicies regarding the nature of God and suffering offers significant insights into human perceptions of the surrounding world. In a more precise manner, the author intends to provide a spiritual reflection highlighting the communal aspect of faith, emphasizing that it extends beyond an individual belief system. In this sense, the presence of suffering and evil allows believers to manifest the kingdom of God within the realm of humanity.

**SYMBOLISM AND SYNOPSIS OF THE FILM**

Four objects attract attention and ground the scenes of the film *Children of Heaven* (1997): shoes, well, garden, and tears. First, we are shown shoes. As a film director, Majid Majidi uses the story of losing shoes as a starting point that relates to other events. The film shows that Ali (Amir Farrokh Hashemian) accidentally loses the only pair of shoes belonging to his younger sister, Zahra (Bahare Seddiqi). This happens when Ali’s parents request that Ali take his sister’s damaged shoes to a cobbler for repair. Unfortunately, Ali’s negligence leads to the loss of the shoes, which were taken by a scavenger. Zahra, who only had a pair of torn and ugly shoes, feels terrible about this situation. Zahra innocently tries to hide the bad news from their father (Mohammad Amir Naji) and mother (Fereshte Sarabandi). Both Ali and Zahra know and realize that their parents cannot afford to buy them a pair of shoes due to their low income. In this situation, Ali feels guilty and tries to correct his mistakes by lending his only pair of shoes to Zahra to wear to school. Throughout the film, they consequently have to take turns wearing the shoes.
The well symbolizes a recurring theme in the film. Ali and Zahra meet and play near the well. Zahra regularly washes dishes or clothes nearby, utilizing water drawn from the well. In one scene, Ali discusses Zahra’s lost shoes with Zahra near the well. In addition, Ali tells Zahra about an upcoming race while standing by the well. Later, the movie shows that whenever Ali returns home from school or elsewhere, he stops by the well to drink its water. Another more interesting scene is after winning the race, Ali arrives home and dips his blistered feet into the well. The fish in the well give Ali’s feet a mysterious kiss. Symbolically, the well became a place for Ali to quench his thirst and restore his energy.

The garden plays a unique role in the movie, especially in relation to Ali and his father. Ali and his father go to the city to work as gardeners. Each time they present themselves to potential clients, the homeowners refuse. This keeps happening until they accidentally find a house that needs their services. When Ali and his father decide to find a shelter to rest, Ali accidentally befriends Alireza through a conversation. Ali and Alireza’s friendship leads his father to become a gardener in a luxurious house, which is Alireza’s parents’ house. While his father works in the garden, spraying the trees, plowing the garden and pruning the branches, Ali and Alireza play together. The movie shows that Ali and Alireza’s play is very satisfying and makes Alireza happy. When Ali’s father finishes his work, he calls Ali to come back to their house. In return for his work as a gardener, Ali’s father is paid by the owner of the house. In fact, the movie shows that the owner of the house guarantees that Ali’s father will be able to return to work in the house as a gardener in the future.

Tears are an important motif throughout the film. Majidi, the director, points out that almost all the scenes in the film show Ali’s family members shedding tears as evidence of their suffering. Although the film does not explicitly show Ali’s mother shedding tears, the events of her suffering are very clearly described: the debt collectors being rude to her, Ali’s father scolding her one night for washing many heavy carpets, and so on. Then the movie shows Ali’s father weeping over his poor fate while preparing tea for the congregation at the mosque. Then Ali’s youngest sister, who was still a baby, cries because she cannot sleep, has a fever, and
so on. Then, no doubt, many scenes show Ali and Zahra crying because they are facing difficulties; one is when Ali tells Zahra that her shoes are missing. Their tears show that they are in a difficult situation and their feelings are expressed only through tears.

Through the four motifs above, the movie demonstrates the inevitability of suffering. Ali’s story of losing Zahra’s shoes leads to successive problems for him and his sister. In the midst of a simple conflict, the director slowly explains the struggles of Ali’s family. Although Ali does not win third place in the race, the director brings happiness at the end of the film, which is implied by a scene of Ali’s father carrying two pairs of shoes behind his old bicycle. The movie does not explicitly show the children’s reaction to this gift, but rather leaves room for the audience’s imagination. The strength of the film lies in the simplicity of this theme that binds the narrative together.

THEOLOGICAL IDEA: AUGUSTINE’S AND IBN ARABI’S THEODICY

An analysis of Children of Heaven reflects the notion that suffering is a universal and unavoidable reality worthy of discussion. The individual then asks, “When will this suffering end? Why should it exist in human life? Has God allowed it to remain? These kinds of questions are discussed in theodicy. Theodicy is etymologically derived from the Greek words theos (God) and dike (justice). Theodicy, as posited by John Hick, aims to provide a justification for the justice and righteousness of God in response to the undeniable existence of evil: “the defense of the justice and righteousness of God in the face of the fact of evil.”3 Hick notes that the problems of theodicy arise when human standards confront the existence of God with problems caused by suffering and evil. The main issues that are often raised are epidemics, suffering, and poverty that plague humanity and lead people to question whether God is all-loving or all-powerful. That is, if God loves His human creation, then no suffering will affect human happiness.

In this context, the theoretical construct of theodicy, as viewed by Augustine and Ibn Arabi, is of notable significance. Both believe that we must acknowledge the reality of inescapable suffering and evil. One of the tasks of theodicy is to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering in the world with the belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God. As a result, individuals can understand and make sense of the concept of suffering. In other words, the approaches of Augustine and Ibn Arabi provide a way for people to understand the existence of suffering from the perspective of faith.

According to Augustine, evil and suffering in the world are the result of human original sin, namely the actions of Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God’s command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil. This original sin is passed down to humanity from generation to generation, which can cause mankind to lose its original virtues and become susceptible to corruption. The consequence of losing original virtues is that mankind experiences suffering, sickness, anguish, and

4 Augustine is a Roman North African theologian and philosopher who lived in the 4th to 5th centuries. He is known as one of the most excellent church fathers in the history of Christianity and is considered a very influential figure in developing church doctrines. His best-known works include “Confessions” and “The City of God,” which deal with concepts such as sin, grace, and free will. Augustine died in 430 in the town of Hippo Regius, which is now Annaba, Algeria. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 39.

5 Ibn Arabi is a philosopher, theologian, and writer from Andalusia, Spain, who lived in the 12th to 13th centuries. He is one of the significant figures in the Islamic mystic tradition and is considered the “Sheikh al-Akbar” or “The Greatest Teacher” in the Sufi tradition. His well-known works include “Fusus al-Hikam” and “Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyah,” combining philosophical and theological thought with Islamic mysticism and spirituality views. Ibn Arabi died in 1240 in Damascus, Syria. Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn-’Arabi* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999), 34-35.

6 Augustine quotes “For we all were in that one man (Adam), since we all were that one man, who fell into sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin. For not yet was the particular form created and distributed to us, in which we as individuals were to live, but already the seminal nature was there from which we were to be propagated; and this being vitiated by sin, and bound by the chain of death, and justly condemned, man could not be born of man in any other state. And thus, from the bad use of free will (by Adam), there originated the whole train of evil, which, with its concatenation of miseries, convoys the human race from its depraved origin, as from a corrupt root, on to the destruction of the second death, which has no end, those only being excepted who are freed by the grace of God.” (The City of God, book 13, chapter 14). “The City of God (Book XIII),” CHURCH FATHERS: City of God, Book XIII (St. Augustine), accessed June 16, 2023, [https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120113.htm](https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120113.htm).
death. Augustine believes that goodness is closely connected to God and contends that all goodness originates from God. He thinks that true goodness comes from God, and people should live in accordance with divine guidance to attain it. When people reject God and go against the natural order, evil emerges. In other words, a person who misuses their free will gives the opportunity for evil to exist, which causes suffering. In addition, according to Augustine, God can use evil and suffering for good and noble purposes such as purifying the human soul and showing His infinite greatness. In this view, although God never intended or designed evil and suffering, He may permit evil to achieve a greater good. Thus, suffering invites humans to understand God’s greater plan. By sending His only Son into the world, God took the initiative to save humanity from sin and provide eternal salvation: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). It is important to note that Augustine’s theodicy greatly influences the development of Christian theology and is still one of the most influential theological views in Christian history. For example, when Thomas Aquinas explains the mystery of God’s incarnation, he said God permits negative occurrences, intending to use them toward a positive outcome. In essence, Augustine’s theodicy impacts the double-effect principle in Christian ethics, offering a guideline for making ethical decisions when good intentions may unintentionally result in adverse outcomes.

However, Augustine’s theodicy is also criticized by more recent theologians. The critics claim that Augustine’s theodicy cannot adequately explain the existence of evil and suffering in the world of good and wisdom. Charles Journet and Stanley Kane, for instance, argue that the existence of persons with disabilities or the occurrence of natural disasters cannot be the result of original sin. Even though Augustine’s concept

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7 Hick, 59.
8 Hick, 88.
10 Hick, 376.
of theodicy provides a basis for believers to understand the source of suffering, this concept still requires other thinkers’ views. It allows several contemporary Christian theologians to reflect more on suffering in the light of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, in his doctrine of creation, Ibn Arabi stresses that God creates the world in “a continuous theophany (tajjalin).”11 This means the world is connected to God, but it is not exactly God, only His attributes. Because of this, there is no such thing as real ugliness or imperfection. To this notion, according to Ibn Arabi’s theodicy, evil and suffering in the world are part of God’s bigger plan. The existence of evil and suffering can contribute to the attainment of perfection in creation. In this view, evil and suffering are not seen as negative or bad but as part of a larger cosmic order.12 In addition, Ibn Arabi views that evil and suffering can be a way to achieve perfection and salvation. In this view, humans can learn from the evil and suffering they experience to develop greater wisdom, patience, and virtue. Evil and suffering can direct people to seek and obtain God’s greater grace. However, Ibn Arabi also emphasizes that humans must acquire proper knowledge and understanding of God and the universe to understand how evil and suffering function within God’s greater plan. This understanding involves deep research, reflection on Sufi,13 philosophical texts, and a profoundly spiritual experience. The question is, how does Ibn Arabi see God’s justice? Can all people, whether doing evil or good, reach the salvation of God’s mercy? Ibn

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13 Sufi originates from the Islam mystical tradition, known as Sufism (tasawwuf). The origin of the term is likely from the Arabic word for wool (ṣūf), as the early Islamic ascetics (Ṣūfīs) were known to wear rough woolen clothing to represent their renunciation of the world. Sufism, which originated in the eighth century, is a branch of Islam known for its emphasis on mystical and contemplative practices. Sufis devote themselves to internally seeking a deeper comprehension of Islam, forging a stronger connection with God, and achieving spiritual proximity or unity with the divine. Love for God and all of His creation is a key focus in Sufism for the followers. Sufis frequently communicate their reverence through the art of poetry, music, and dance. The spiritual profundity and aesthetic appeal of the renowned Sufi poets, including Hasan al-Basrii and Rabiah al-Adawayah, are greatly admired in the world of poetry. Peter J. Awn, “Sufism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, 8809-8825. Vol. 13.
Arabi says that God is angry with people who do evil. The state of hell is their eternal abode. The vital point that Ibn Arabi emphasizes here is that God’s divine mercy is beyond His wrath. To this, Ibn Arabi points out: “God says, ‘My mercy embraces everything’ [7: 156], and His wrath is a thing. Hence, God’s mercy embraces God’s wrath, confines it, and rules over it. Therefore, wrath disposes itself only through mercy’s ruling property. Mercy sends out wrath as it will.” In particular, Ibn Arabi emphasizes that good is more important to God than evil. In other words, although some people may be punished in hell indefinitely, they will not forever be in a state of punishment. A merciful God will deliver them from hell by removing the chastisement “from their inwardness, and they will achieve ease in their abode.”

Ibn Arabi’s view of theodicy seems complex and abstract. Although his concept of theodicy has influenced many Islamic thinkers and writers over the centuries, it has not escaped some critics. For example, Michael Peterson observes that Ibn Arabi’s theodicy presents a hyperbolic expansion of the concept of God’s justice and displays a pronounced inclination towards straying from authentic Islamic teachings. To this end, Ibn Taymiyya says that the images of “unity of being” and “appearance of God in various beings” adopted by Ibn Arabi are considered to deviate from Islamic teachings. It should, however, be underlined that this critique cannot serve as a standard indicating the inadequacy of Ibn Arabi’s theodicy. For example, Said Nursi admits that God’s justice in the world cannot only be the responsibility of human reason because it is beyond human capacity to comprehend the ultimate realities with the same degree of precision as they are known by the divine. Humans must understand the concept of God’s justice in mystical and spiritual experiences, which are obtained through deep intimacy with God.

15 Ibn Arabi, 142.
17 Jon Hoover,110-25.
The concept of theodicy offered by Augustine and Ibn Arabi provides an understanding that suffering itself is closely related to humans as God’s creation. This means that the starting point when discussing human suffering cannot be separated from the omnipotence of God, who created humans. However, Augustine and Ibn Arabi have some differences and similarities. The following section aims to explain the similarities and differences in their concepts of the problem of evil.

Both figures acknowledge the existence of God as a force that creates and influences the world and humans. Augustine and Ibn Arabi explain that God is the creator of the universe, and He is the source of goodness and truth. However, they understand the statement of the disclosure of God’s existence differently. For Augustine, God, as the source of goodness and truth, reveals himself in Jesus Christ, who came to earth. God sent His only begotten Son to atone for human sins. Christ, thus, becomes a true mediator between God and men. However, for Ibn Arabi, God is an existence whose attributes cannot be definitively known by humans. Ibn Arabi sees God as a pure and universal existence that transcends human notions of existence. Therefore, the 99 names or attributes of God in the Qur’an cannot be used as a binding limitation for God. Ibn Arabi emphasizes that although God’s attributes and names can be known, they are only a small representation of His greatness and glory. That is why they are significantly different when explaining the source of human suffering. For Augustine, human suffering and evil were the results of original sin and human depravity, while for Ibn Arabi, suffering and evil were part of the trials of life that humans had to live through. In this case, Ibn Arabi considers human suffering part of God’s plan to test human loyalty.

Both Augustine and Ibn Arabi admit that God’s will influences human existence. They both claim that God always accompanies humans to arrive at God’s eternal salvation. In other words, it is postulated that the divine embodies a desire for the well-being of humankind during their tenure on earth rather than subjecting them to a path of suffering. However, they have different emphases when explaining the role of

humans in achieving their goals. Augustine considers that humans play an active role in achieving their ends after receiving Jesus’ redemption. This means God has empowered a human to glorify His name and achieve salvation in the afterlife. Meanwhile, Ibn Arabi considers that because God has already determined human destiny, humans’ responsibilities to achieve their goals are to understand the existence of God and break away from their egos.

The theodicies of Augustine and Ibn Arabi claim that the reality of human suffering in this world must be accepted as a part of our existence. In other words, they do not deny that suffering, crime, and plague torment human beings. However, they differ when they talk about the concept of human freedom. Augustine sees human freedom as a moral choice to act according to God’s will or not. Meanwhile, Ibn Arabi views human freedom as the ability to choose and direct themselves to the truth and a deeper understanding of the existence of God.

Both theodicies hold that human beings were created for a clear purpose. For Augustine, humans were created to glorify God and achieve salvation in the afterlife. Suffering, then, is not a barrier for humans to be what they ought to be. To this, Augustine agrees that evil enters only when humans renounce their proper role in the divine scheme and cease to be what they are meant to be.20 Meanwhile, for Ibn Arabi, the purpose of human creation is to understand God’s existence and become closer to Him. With this understanding, suffering can be used to build an intimate relationship with God. Nonetheless, disparities arise concerning elucidating the final objective of human existence. For Augustine, an afterlife is a place humans will reach after death to live and unite with God in eternal happiness. Thus, the mystery of suffering will be revealed when death arrives. In this context, Augustine is not presenting the principle of Gnosticism21 but is emphasizing that God is the ultimate goal

20 Hick, 47.
21 Gnosticism teaches that the material world is temporary and insignificant. Gnostics believe that an evil entity created the material world and that humans have always been trapped in the material world which is full of sin and suffering. They believe the only way to escape from the material world is to attain spiritual knowledge or “gnosis.” In Gnosticism, the spiritual world was seen as a pure and eternal world where humans could attain true salvation and happiness. McGuckin, 147-48.
of human life. In contrast, Ibn Arabi regards the afterlife as a condition in which individuals can gain a deeper understanding of God’s presence and remain in closer proximity to Him. The afterlife, according to Ibn Arabi, thus, cannot be claimed as a tangible location where one could reside indefinitely. By recognizing this inherent truth, individuals will realize that “they are the meaning of the whole of phenomenal existence.” This notion notes that heaven can be experienced on earth by getting close to God, even when we face tough times and bad things.

The similarities and differences between Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s theodicies want to reiterate that suffering is an inseparable part of the reality of human life. Although it is possible to encounter God’s magnificent love through the experience of suffering, it is essential to note that this does not necessarily imply that God intentionally desires humans to undergo such hardship. Augustine asserts that God’s love became full when Christ came into the world. In addition, Ibn Arabi emphasizes that the existence of suffering experienced by humans cannot be reduced to doubts about the existence of God. In other words, human suffering needs mystic and spiritual experience from humans. To this, the cooperation of reason and faith is obviously necessary. Although reason can understand God’s characteristics concerning human suffering, human reason needs a guide from faith, which can reveal the mystery of suffering.

THEODICY IN MAJIDI’S FILM

The film *Children of Heaven* highlights how suffering can help people understand what it means to be human. The questions that arise when contemplating how suffering can affect human spiritual experience are topics to be unpacked in this section concerning the theological ideas in the film. Before discussing the theological concept portrayed in the film, it behooves us to acknowledge that the experience of suffering is an essential facet of the human condition. Hence, it is necessary to recognize the significance of the film’s suffering on various components in each sequence. Therefore, the concept of suffering in *Children of Heaven* is not only shown by the theological idea in the film but also revealed in

22 Stephen Hirtenstein, 120.
how the filmmaker shoots the video and how the editor combines sound with dialogue. These observations can be seen in the following two components.

The concept of cinematography in the film plays a significant role in the movie. Two factors are often highlighted in *Children of Heaven*: low-angle and high-camera shots. A low-angle shot shows the character’s high position or special social status.\(^{23}\) This kind of cinematography tends to make something powerful appear more powerful. In *Children of Heaven*, this aspect can be seen in the scene when Ali is caught showing up late for school. It shows that the school doorman looks bigger\(^ {24}\) because the camera is placed at a lower position than the eye level of the subject. This method creates a visual effect that makes the characters look stronger and tougher, even though they are facing difficult situations. In addition, low-angle shots in the scene where Ali and his father go to the city to become gardeners. The videographer shows tall buildings and luxurious buildings using the low-angle shot method.\(^ {25}\) This method gives the impression that living in a city has a higher position than living in a village, like the Ali family. Next, if a low camera angle shows the dominant side of a character, a high-angle shot manipulates the film’s audience to see that the subject matter has been diminished or made puny.\(^ {26}\) It means that a high-camera angle usually symbolizes psychological character, such as weakness, pity, and powerlessness. In *Children of Heaven*, this type of cinematography is shown in the highway scene when Ali and his father go to town by bicycle\(^ {27}\) and the scene on the way home when Ali and his father are being transported in a truck.\(^ {28}\) In this scene, the camera is placed higher than their eye level, providing a wider view and conveying how small the characters are in this harsh and uncontrollable world. In addition, the use of high-angle shots can be found in the scene when Ali


\(^{24}\) *Children of Heaven*, scene 42:31 to 42:54.


\(^{27}\) *Children of Heaven*, scene 48:50 to 49:06.

\(^{28}\) *Children of Heaven*, scene 59:39 to 59:50.
is passing through the field where his friends are playing soccer.\footnote{Children of Heaven, scene 8:29 to 8:37.} This gives the impression that the character feels lonely and isolated from the world around him. Therefore, through observation in the aspect of cinematography, the meaning of suffering becomes clearer. The way the video is shot the film \textit{Children of Heaven} wants to explore the human inner turmoil of the characters when they face suffering. The portrait of old buildings with fragile high walls and narrow village alleys helps Majid Majidi portray the story of poverty.

The meaning of suffering is often shown in how the editor arranges and combines sound and dialogue in films. According to Matthews, the auditory elements employed in the cinematic production may evoke distinctive emotions and sensations within a given character depicted therein.\footnote{Josh Matthews, “Understanding Movies 101 -- Sound in Movies: Some Basics,” accessed December 16, 2019. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1MjUmdnts}.} It means the sound gives the impact and energy to the visuals. Matthews then explains that filmmakers usually use two types of sound: diegetic sound and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound is a type of sound that emanates from the internal environment of a film, specifically from characters or objects within a particular setting. For example, when Ali or Zahra run down the alleys of a building to take turns wearing the same shoes,\footnote{Children of Heaven, scene 19:20 to 19:52, 1:06:09 to 1:06:34.} the diegetic sound is obvious. Their loud and hurried footsteps convey their anxiety and restlessness. In addition, when Ali is in the bakery, the repetitive sounds of the machine\footnote{Children of Heaven, scene 02:08 to 02:26.} describe how difficult the job is and bring a sense of fatigue and hopelessness to Ali’s character. Meanwhile, non-diegetic sound is sound that does not originate from the world in the film itself but is added in the production stage to strengthen the emotion or message to be conveyed in the scene. One example of the use of non-diegetic sounds is the melancholy and sad musical instruments, which can be heard when Ali’s father is on his way home.\footnote{Children of Heaven, scene 59:27 to 59:48.} This type of sound adds to the image of the exhaustion and happiness that Ali and his father are currently experiencing. This adds a sense of tension and drama to the scene. It can be said that the process of
composing sound in *Children of Heaven* gives the power to the audience’s imagination: that the situation being expressed is the reality of suffering.

Returning to our question, how does the film connect the concept of suffering to the theological idea? Or how does the film explain the comparative theodicy between Augustine and Ibn Arabi? The synopsis states four important symbols in *Children of Heaven* are central in explaining suffering: shoes, well, garden, and tears. The aspects mentioned above offer insight into the direction that human beings are propelled towards in their pursuit of life goals as a result of experiencing suffering. In this context, it is essential to examine how the concepts underlying the theodicies of Augustine and Ibn Arabi can be integrated within the framework of the four significant dimensions that comprise the construct of suffering.

The first aspect is the loss of Zahra’s shoes. The lost shoes symbolize the difficulties of life that Ali’s family faces as a low-income family living in a slum area. The missing shoes made Ali and his sister, Zahra, face various challenges, including difficulties getting to school. In addition, the shoes in *Children of Heaven* can represent wealth and luxury that the family of Ali and Zahra does not have. Ali is aware that if he informs his parents about misplacing Zahra’s shoes, they will be burdened because they are financially unable to purchase new ones. The theological idea that can be found in the symbol of the shoes in *Children of Heaven* shows the tests or trials that Ali and his family must face. In this context, Ibn Arabi’s theodicy becomes applicable, that the tests faced by the Ali family become a means of achieving life goals and getting to know God better. The incident of losing his sister’s shoes taught Ali about honesty, fidelity, responsibility, purity of heart, and deep understanding. However, Augustine’s concept of theodicy sees the notion that Ali lost Zahra’s shoe differently. Augustine writes that one neglect that went unaddressed was the effect of the original sin: the loss of the special grace from God that guides people to the truth. That is why Augustine says the results of original sin subjected humans to “the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice.”

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34 Hick, 118.
Ali accidentally loses Zahra’s shoes, in Augustine’s perspective, Ali is still considered guilty: Ali was negligent in carrying out his responsibilities. This negligence is an effect of original sin, the tendency of humans to sin. That is, Ali’s negligence was the result of losing the original virtue, which was erased because of the original sin.

The second aspect is the well in front of Ali’s house. The symbol of the well in front of Ali’s house represents the existence of the all-powerful and all-merciful God. This well is a water source for Ali’s family and nearby residents. Therefore, this well illustrates God’s presence in human life, like water as a source of energy. When associated with the theodicy of Augustine and Ibn Arabi, the well represents God’s grace and blessings. God’s grace always sustains and strengthens humans in living in the world, including when facing suffering. This understanding proves that God does not want a man to suffer – God always gives man what is best. In this sense, Augustine states everything under God’s hand is absolute goodness. That is why the condition of suffering for Augustine is described as *privation boni*, which means “the absence of goodness that prevails when anything has defected from the mode of being that is proper to it in God’s creative intention.”[^35] In addition, Ibn Arabi says that evil and imperfection are the lack of goodness and wholeness that comes from God alone. They can still cause problems and go against God’s laws and human purposes. However, their existence is “necessary in order to afford God the possibility to manifest the infinite diversity, the great plenitude, of His names.”[^36] It means God’s power is over all human suffering and evil.

Another exciting thing about the image of the well is the presence of several small fish in the well. The fish in the well in front of Ali’s house represents the life and natural beauty hidden in it. Ali and Zahra did not catch the fish to be used as toys, but they considered the fish a treasure from God: a gift from God that must be guarded and valued. Therefore, they try not to disturb or hurt the fish. In the context of the film, the fish symbol can be interpreted as a metaphor for human life. Despite the many sufferings that have occurred, human life, like the fish in the

[^35]: Hick, 48.
[^36]: Hoover, 178.
well, must be regarded as a gift from God that is guarded and valued. This metaphor invites us to appreciate the human body and soul created by God. The cessation of one’s life should not be considered a viable resolution solely to alleviate one’s afflictions. It is imperative to safeguard and sustain life despite the inevitable presence of pervasive suffering. Thus, human existence, regardless of circumstances, must be seen as the treasure in God’s garden that is precious, noble, and blessed. The symbol of the well in *Children of Heaven* offers us the understanding that suffering is not an obstacle for humans to get closer to God. In this context, Augustine adds that God’s grace is always a free gift for everyone and is always communal.37 Humans elevated by God’s grace are moved to love others. Therefore, the reflection of the symbol of the well in *Children of Heaven* is that the existence of suffering invites humans to realize how important charity and solidarity are in humankind. Just as people around the well help each other and work together to meet their needs, humans are called to lighten each other’s burdens.

Third, the symbol of the garden in *Children of Heaven* gives a unique taste to the audience. The existence of Ali playing with Alireza in the garden illustrates that in God’s paradise, God guarantees perfect freedom and joy. Thus, the garden represents God’s paradise, which is full of beauty, abundance, and freedom. This notion informs the viewer that uniting with God is the ultimate goal of human life. God, in His transcendental way, calls man to come to his eternal salvation, where suffering has no power. In our mortal lives, God invites us to become “His gardeners” who nurture and take care of the garden, much like Ali’s father. Being God’s gardener is being an individual who has “free and faithful obedience” to God.38 This view is in harmony with Augustine’s original concept that God’s gardener obeys God’s commands and avoids His prohibitions - not eating the fruit of the “tree of knowledge.” It can be said that the garden in *Children of Heaven* symbolizes “a heavenly or paradisal state”39 where God guarantees our salvation. Within the framework of the subject matter, it is evident that the symbolic use of the garden emblematically

37 McGuckin, 40.
38 Hick, 77.
39 Hick, 203.
represents the notion that divine intervention provides a means of reconciliation with the adversity currently experienced by humanity. The question is whether one can reflect God’s inexhaustible love in human suffering in a masochistic way? Later Christian scholars answered this question, including Karl Rahner. Rahner says that our understanding of suffering must appreciate “the range of opportunities” of our faith, hope, and love. Rahner adds that when we talk about human suffering, we must see it in the mystery of God’s freedom. In addition, in Ibn Arabi’s theodicy, God’s concept of salvation never invites humans to enjoy suffering and evil because He is al-Rahman: The One who is All-Compassionate. Particularly, Ibn Arabi explains that God’s compassion always brings bliss and ease; even those in hell can still feel it (though they will not be completely happy, just less miserable). Remarkably, God mitigates the “suffering” and imparts solace to all afflictions experienced by His creations.

Fourth, the film highlights the tears. Many scenes in *Children of Heaven* show the characters shedding tears, both generally and specifically. In general, this fact indicates that those who shed tears are suffering; Ali, Zahra, their youngest sister, and Ali’s parents. However, specifically, several scenes repeatedly show that the characters shed tears as a symbol of regret and a desire to correct mistakes. This can be seen specifically when Ali cried because he was afraid to admit to his parents that he lost Zahra’s shoes; Zahra cried because Ali lost her shoes, and because of this, Zahra had to use Ali’s shoes to go to school; Ali cried because he spilled fruit from his basket at a shop; Ali cried because he was late for school; Ali cried because he did not get the third position in the race; and so forth. The film shows that although Ali shed tears because of the difficulties that befell him, he was willing to make sacrifices to correct his mistakes. It can be said that these tears symbolize a form of heroism in achieving a goal. Ibn Arabi says that being a hero means being a person who is brave and willing to “venture into the unknown, standing firm in the face of adversity, and accepting whatever comes, good or ill, without

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41 Hirtenstein, 227-28.
pride in achievement or sorrow in failure.” Tears convey the importance of a struggle in suffering. Thus, Ibn Arabi emphasizes that sacrificing oneself means a person becomes holy and affirms their deep intimacy with God. It is especially essential to recognize that enduring suffering does not entail surrendering to it completely but rather enabling the inner radiance of God to persist within us. It can be said that the film *Children of Heaven* employs the symbol of tears to elucidate that the presence of evil and suffering alters individuals to embrace their humanity. That is why Ibn Arabi explains that evil and suffering give us opportunities for transformation. By drawing this understanding into the movie *Children of Heaven*, the agony Ali feels while running as fast as he can to his school, prepares him to win a long-distance running competition. It can be said that suffering and evil present a unique prospect for personal growth and change. To echo God’s power over all the suffering, Augustine stresses that we complain about suffering because it is too much for humans to handle. However, Augustine invites us to realize that the world has inherent value in the eyes of God, regardless of whether or not it is conducive to human habitation. To this, Augustine says, “a positive divine valuation of the world independently of its fitness as an environment for human life.”

The elucidations mentioned above seek to impart that the experience of suffering is an inherent component of human life that facilitates an avenue for fortifying one’s belief system and fostering a close relationship with a divine entity. According to Ibn Arabi, suffering can be seen as God’s way of teaching people about His attributes and helping them to attain spiritual perfection. In other words, suffering can help people to obtain a deeper understanding of God and can increase people’s faith and piety. In this regard, Augustine sees that it is in suffering that God’s divine plan becomes revealed. God planned to save humanity

42 Hirtenstein, 248.
43 Sean Innerst affirms that God does not deny the importance of question of suffering. By mention Augustine’s works, Innerst asserts that “the thing about which you complain is bigger, that is, deeper, than you are” (cf. St. Augustine, City of God, XX, 2). Sean Innerst. “Suffering in Christian Life” in Our Sunday Visitor’s Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine ed. Russel Shaw. (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1997), 653.
44 As quoted in Hick, 240.
from original sin and restore harmony between man and God. This plan was disclosed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the atonement for human sins. Both figures agree that suffering can help humans escape attachment to the material world and prepare themselves for a better life in the afterlife. Thus, it can be postulated that the experience of human suffering presents a potential avenue for individuals to enhance their faith in God and facilitate their pursuit of divine holiness and perfection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, suffering is an inescapable reality that necessitates acceptance as an inherent aspect of human existence. Augustine and Ibn Arabi explain that the concept of suffering is always related to reflection on what it is to be a human being who has faith in God. Both figures agree that God is not abandoning humans to face their suffering because God loves the humans He created. Because God is the ultimate goal of humans, then it is worth it that God loves humans. Although there are some similarities between Augustine’s and Ibn Arabi’s theodicy, there are also significant differences in their views of God and His role in human life. The significance of their different opinions does not mean that they contradict each other but contribute to one another. The appropriate question for Augustine’s theodicy is “Does God allow humankind to suffer?” while for Ibn Arabi’s theodicy it is, “Why does God allow us to suffer?”. Therefore, an analysis of the theodicies of both Augustine and Ibn Arabi contributes to understanding what it means to suffer in the context of the film Children of Heaven.

The explication of suffering in this paper prompts the author to engage in introspection, leading to the realization that God represents the origin of verity and well-being. God’s existence holds significance on an individual level and the potential for communal acknowledgment. The comprehension of the importance of religion as a collective of believers elucidates its consequentiality in the context of a community. Our communal actions as believers reflect that the garden of God’s kingdom is truly present in the world, and we are its gardeners. In Augustine’s view, suffering teaches us that awareness of God’s existence
brings peace and hope to the human soul. Through this understanding, religion gives meaning to human life and provides a broader perspective on dealing with suffering. In addition, the concept of suffering in Ibn Arabi’s view helps humans understand the importance of having a deeper understanding of God and His divine kingdom to achieve a clearer understanding of the world. In this sense, for Ibn Arabi, religion is the best means to gain knowledge about the nature of God’s existence. Through this understanding, religion gives humanity moral strength, contains social and ethical demands that can overcome social problems and suffering, and brings incomparable happiness to those who practice it. Therefore, religion is not an anesthetic for humans to endure their suffering but a tool that brings solid moral strength and strengthens the human spirit to carry out acts of solidarity. With its emotional and social support, religion makes people aware that humans can achieve peace, not in the material world, but by knowing directly and fulfilling the nature of their existence. Thus, religion helps bring people back to their sources and gives humans a purpose and meaning in life. This is what then makes humans stronger, to overcome suffering and find true peace within themselves.
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