

# **The Problem of Evil as the Problem of Pain**

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## ABSTRACT

The problem of evil arises from the argument that the existence of suffering is incompatible with (or else renders improbable) the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God (and that, since the former surely exists, the latter must not). Philosophers working on the problem, however, rarely make profitable use of the distinction between *mental* and *physical suffering*. Accordingly, in this thesis I develop a version of the problem that focuses specifically on the phenomenal experience of physical pain. After providing (in the first chapter) a detailed analysis of (i) both logical and evidential (or probabilistic) formulations of the problem, and (ii) the usefulness of this logical/evidential distinction, I discuss some of the most promising theistic responses to the problem, and conclude that these theistic responses fail. In the second chapter I lay out my argument, and I attempt to show that there is no plausible way for the theist to respond when the problem is formulated in this manner. I conclude the chapter by arguing that my argument demonstrates the incompatibility of theism with both epiphenomenalism and zombies-informed dualism. In the third chapter I begin with a discussion of mental supervenience in order to defend a commonsense modal intuition necessary for the success of my argument. I then proceed to address possible objections, including most notably the effort to cast doubt on the reliability of the inference from conceivability to possibility. Finally, I consider empirical findings that substantiate my argument's most contentious premise.

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<sup>1</sup> While we're on the topic of acknowledgments: for this locution, I owe a debt to Anselm.

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## Introduction

During the twentieth century analytic philosophers made considerable progress on the problem of evil, with many subtle and important distinctions emerging. But an important aspect of the problem has been underemphasized. That aspect centers on the phenomenal experience of pain and its relevance to a revised formulation of the problem; my principal aim in this thesis is to construct and defend an argument from evil that takes such phenomena as its data. It is my belief that when the problem of evil is formulated in this manner, the theist simply cannot respond in any adequate way.

In the first chapter I examine various logical and evidential (or probabilistic/inductive) formulations of the problem of evil, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of those traditional arguments. I then develop a critique of the logical/evidential distinction itself, and I suggest that—while perhaps not altogether specious—the distinction nonetheless tends to generate more confusion than it resolves, and that it is ultimately an unhelpful artifact of the last fifty years’ often-muddled thinking about the problem. Then I discuss the extent to which some of the most promising theistic responses succeed in meeting the challenge posed by the problem; in short, I will argue that they fail. This discussion is carried out with an eye toward getting clear on the concepts that matter most in the debate, e.g., the notion of a morally sufficient reason (or *MSR*). In particular, I take up two closely related topics in the literature, viz. the challenge posed by “skeptical theism” and the question whether an MSR need merely be possible or whether, on the other hand, an MSR must actually be *specified*. I argue that there are overwhelming reasons in favor of requiring that the theist specify an MSR if she has one; similarly, I ultimately reject the strategy proposed by skeptical theism. Finally, I briefly discuss John Hick’s soul-making theodicy. Although, to my way of thinking, its virtues far outnumber those of other theodicies, it

can, I think, be shown that even Hick's defense is no match for our argument from pain. This, accordingly, is one of my objectives in the second part of this thesis.

In the second chapter I begin by defending a particular conception of omnipotence and subsequently inquire as to the nature of pain. Having done so, I am then able to develop a version of the problem of evil that focuses specifically on the phenomenal experience of physical pain and which relies on common modal intuitions in conjunction with empirical research on the subject (though this latter element doesn't come in until the final section of the *third* chapter). In the process of doing so, I devote space to the discussion of two more or less tangential conclusions we can draw from our particular formulation of the problem: first, that the theist cannot consistently endorse epiphenomenalism about mind; and, second, that the theist cannot consistently accept a zombie argument for dualism such as the one developed by David Chalmers. While these results need not, in themselves, be destructive to theism (since the theist can reject epiphenomenalism and—if she is a dualist—she can rely upon arguments *other* than Chalmers' in defense of her dualism), they are nonetheless two interesting and significant consequences of our formulation of the problem that should be of particular interest to those working in the philosophy of mind.

In the third chapter I aim to show that when the problem of evil is formulated in this manner (given especially issues arising from our consideration of mental supervenience), it is not clear that there is any plausible way in which the theist can adequately respond. I do, however, consider possible attempts to do so (which include, most notably, the effort to cast doubt on the inference from conceivability to possibility), and I reply in turn to these hypothetical responses. Finally, I offer empirical support for my argument's most controversial claim; given (i) the

availability of such support and (ii) the uncontroversial nature of my argument's *other* claims, I conclude that my argument succeeds where others have failed.

## Chapter 1: The Problem Defined: Logical and Evidential Formulations of the Problem

### §1.1 The Logical Version

The existence of evil (or, on some renderings, not its mere existence but rather its sheer abundance) is often thought to pose at least a *prima facie* problem for theism. The ways in which this alleged difficulty may be brought out are many, but any formulation of the problem must make some appeal to a tension between the fact of evil on the one hand, and the attributes traditionally assigned to God by theism<sup>1</sup> on the other. Historically, the most common way of formulating the problem has been to argue that the set of statements containing 1-3 below is a logically inconsistent set<sup>2</sup>:

(1) God is omnipotent<sup>3</sup>

(2) God is omnibenevolent

(3) Evil exists

The proponent of the logical version of the problem maintains that 1-3 constitute an antilogism (or inconsistent triad): any two of the three statements could be simultaneously true, but all three cannot be true at once. Because all parties to the debate agree that there are instances of evil, either (1) or (2) must be given up—but that *just is* to deny theism.

Because this is a claim of logical inconsistency, the proponent of this argument needs to establish that a contradiction can be deduced from 1-3. A very early formulation of the problem—often attributed to Epicurus, and closely paraphrased here by Hume—helps to indicate the general strategy that must be taken in order to make a contradiction explicit:

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I shall use the term ‘theism’ to refer only to the kind of theistic belief embodied in the dominant (Judeo-Christian-Islamic) religious tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Deductive versions of particular importance to the trajectory of the twentieth century debate can be found in Mackie’s (1990), and McCloskey’s (1964).

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the problem gets formulated with a specific statement of God’s *omniscience*, but strictly speaking this is not required, as omniscience is generally (and correctly, I think) taken to be an ability or power, and so it is properly subsumed under omnipotence.

Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence, then, is evil? (1998: 100)

This sort of analysis of the divine attributes is not, in itself, altogether convincing; indeed, to the extent that we do find this sort of argument persuasive, it is because a key assumption of ours is functioning as a hidden premise which, once made explicit, allows us to draw out a contradiction directly. Namely:

(4) An omnibenevolent God would (want to) either prevent or eliminate evil as far as it can, and an omnipotent God could do so.

When conjoined with 1-3 above, this premise delivers the desired conclusion. Since an omnibenevolent God would prevent or eliminate evil as far as it can, and since (being omnipotent) there is no limit to God's ability to eliminate evil, if there is such a thing as God then it is either not omnipotent or it is not omnibenevolent (on the uncontroversial assumption, that is, that evil exists). Because theism is committed to the denial of this conclusion, the argument, if successful, functions as a proof of the inconsistency of theistic belief.<sup>4</sup>

But the argument, it is often held, is *not* successful. Because the formulation under consideration attempts to demonstrate an inconsistency, in order for the argument to work it simply *cannot be possible* for God and evil to coexist. That is, it has to be maintained that the following statement is false—whereas *in fact* (the theist maintains) it is within our power conclusively to demonstrate its *truth*:

(5) It is possible that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil that exists.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If we've shown that theism involves contradictory beliefs, presumably we've shown that it is not rational to be a theist.

<sup>5</sup> This claim is equivalent to the denial of (4). Indeed, (4) itself is true if and only if the following claim is true: (4\*) It is not possible that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil that exists. (Pike (1990:41), for instance, sets up the argument with a premise more similar to (4\*) than (4).)

Any evil for which there is a morally sufficient reason (henceforth, *MSR*)<sup>6</sup> would seem to be an evil the allowance of which is permissible, and if it is merely possible that God has such a reason for *all* evils, then the existence of evil surely cannot be formally or logically inconsistent with God's moral perfection. This is Pike's crucial insight (1990). All that the theist needs to do is to give one possible (i.e., non-contradictory) explanation of the compatibility of God and evil, however far-fetched or improbable. In order for this strategy to work against the logical version of the problem of evil, it need not even be an explanation presented as true; we merely need a possible MSR. Or so the theist is inclined to argue, at any rate.

The foregoing consideration can be, and has been spelled out in various ways, but the canonical development of this view belongs to Plantinga (1977: 28-58). As such, it will pay briefly to examine the specifics of his position. Let us agree first of all that libertarianism *possibly* obtains. Suppose further that the possession of morally significant free will is a great good. From here we can observe that possibly the elimination of evil would require the elimination of this great good and that if there is no (logically possible) way to have the one without the other, it can be justified for God not to eliminate the evil necessary for that greater good. (That is to say, the fact of human freedom is one possible MSR.) This position, known as the free will defense, is considerably more intricate than our summary suggests<sup>7</sup>; but for the moment it is sufficient to introduce the defense and to point out that, among atheists and theists

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<sup>6</sup> Coined by Pike in his (1990), the phrase refers to any circumstance or condition sufficient for the elimination of moral blame. Less often in the literature, this same concept is called a morally *excusing* reason.

<sup>7</sup> Chief among the many relevant points of dispute is the question whether God could have created a world in which humans always *freely* do no evil, as was maintained by Mackie and others. A more obvious difficulty for Plantinga's position concerns the fact that while it seems to succeed in rendering compatible God's existence with *moral* evil, it's not clear how it can account for natural evil (e.g., natural disasters, famine, etc). As it turns out, however, Plantinga offers an acceptable explanation of how his Free Will Defense can handle natural evil; while entirely implausible as a story of the compatibility of God and natural evil, it is not *impossible*—and this is all that Plantinga needs to show.

alike, there exists a virtual consensus that Plantinga defeated the logical version of the problem with this move.

## §1.2 The Evidential Version

Because most philosophers concluded from the work of Pike and Plantinga that the skeptic is entitled only to a more modest conclusion than the one drawn from the problem of evil by mid-twentieth century philosophers such as Mackie and McCloskey, there arose the need to recast the problem in a way that would sidestep the force of Plantinga's argument. This project, first seriously undertaken by William Rowe in his (1979)<sup>8</sup>, consisted in the development of an *evidential* or *probabilistic* version of the problem. An argument of this form proceeds by first acknowledging that God's existence and the existence of evil are indeed logically compatible; but it goes on to point out that this is a fact that the skeptic never needed to deny. Even if 1-3 above are not antilogistic, it remains the case that the evidence (that is, evil) renders God's existence exceedingly *improbable*; this fact, the skeptic argues, is itself sufficient to cast significant doubt on the rationality of theistic belief. Or so the argument goes.

Let's take a brief look at Rowe's original formulation of an evidential argument from evil and see if it fares any better than the crude logical version did. Rowe's argument focuses on apparently gratuitous human and animal suffering. He sets it up as follows (1979: 336):

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

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<sup>8</sup> There were, unsurprisingly, earlier attempts at fleshing out the evidential relevance of the problem, but most managed only clumsily to articulate the crucial difference between a logical argument and a probabilistic one where evil is concerned. See, for instance, Hare and Madden's (1969).

2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

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3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Clearly, the premise that stands in need of defense is (1). Rowe's first step in defending it is simply to identify an instance of *seemingly* pointless or gratuitous suffering. Here is the case he considers:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering (1979: 337).

To most of us, this does certainly *seem* to be a clear case of pointless suffering. But why? Our feeling that this suffering serves no purpose seems to have its origin in our inability to imagine any good that could be so *intimately connected* with this event as to *require* that the suffering occur for the sake of its realization.

But does this *prove* that Rowe's first premise is true? Certainly not. The mere fact that we cannot imagine how the fawn's suffering is connected to some great good does not establish that there *is* no such connection. The reason for this, Rowe claims, is that there's an obvious gap in epistemic powers between us and God (if such a thing exists). Because we may either not be aware of all of the goods that there are or not be aware of the causal relation between the fawn's suffering and a good we *are* aware of, we're simply not warranted in asserting that we *know* that the sorts of evils described in his first premise exist (1979: 337).

Fair enough. But *why*, Rowe asks, should we even think that our task is to *prove* the truth of (1)? After all, the inability to prove a given claim does not, obviously, mean that we do not have *rational support* for that claim:

We are often in the position where in the light of our experience and knowledge it is rational to believe that a certain statement is true, even though we are not in a position to prove or to know with certainty that the statement is true (1979: 337).

So the fawn's suffering—while certainly not *proof* of the truth of (1)—seems in any case to provide rational support for Rowe's claim. *How*, Rowe asks, could it be reasonable to deny this? In other words, is it *reasonable to believe* that there exists some overriding, great good directly attached to an instance of suffering that seems so entirely pointless? And is it not *even less* reasonable to believe that such connections exist between an unspecified good or goods and *all* seemingly pointless instances of suffering, as the theist *must* believe? On the whole, then, cases such as the one Rowe considers seem to provide rational support for atheism.<sup>9</sup>

### §1.3 “Logical/Evidential”: An Unhelpful Distinction?<sup>10</sup>

Graham Oppy correctly notes that “[m]any philosophers [including, e.g., Alston, van Inwagen, Howard-Snyder] seem to suppose that the argument of Plantinga...utterly demolishes the kinds of ‘logical’ arguments from evil developed in Mackie” (2004: 59). But there is a definite sense in which this dramatic sort of claim about the nature of Plantinga's success seems unwarranted; I think, furthermore, that having pointed out why this is so, a revised view of the logical/evidential distinction immediately suggests itself. In this section, I develop this view largely by reconstructing William FitzPatrick's assessment of the state of play<sup>11</sup>, an assessment which I think the reader will find attractive; this will help us to more accurately identify the argumentative burdens placed on both the theist and the atheist in this debate.

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<sup>9</sup> That is, the “variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God, provides, nevertheless, *rational support* for atheism.” (1979: 335fn.)

<sup>10</sup> For the ideas contained in this section, I owe a debt to William FitzPatrick, who has succeeded in convincing me that the received view (on both the failure of the logical version and the logical/evidential distinction itself) cannot quite be right.

<sup>11</sup> The content of this assessment comes from conversation with, and unpublished notes by, FitzPatrick.

As I pointed out in §1.1, in order to generate a formal inconsistency between God's existence (together with his attributes) and the existence of evil, it is necessary to expand our triad into a quartet which includes:

(4) An omnibenevolent God would (want to) either prevent or eliminate evil as far as it can, and an omnipotent God could do so.

Whereas it is obviously false that the original triad is logically inconsistent, it is obviously *true* that this new quartet is inconsistent. That is just to say that not all four of the propositions from §1.1 can be true at once. The obvious strategy for the theist, then, is to deny (4). This is exactly what Plantinga sought to do. But let's take a look at *how* he went about doing that.

Plantinga showed, to almost everyone's satisfaction, that because it is *possible* to describe a world in which (4) is false, it is *possible* that (1)-(3) are all true. This means that it is *possible* that God's existence is consistent with the existence of evil. But, importantly, this does *not* show that God's existence and the existence of evil *are* consistent. In order to be entitled to this further claim, we'd have to show that (4) *actually is* false. Similarly, in order to have *good reasons* for believing that God's existence and the existence of evil *are consistent*, we need to have good reasons for believing that (4) *actually is* false. But any such reasons can only issue from an account that offers a *plausible* MSR, as opposed to a merely *possible* one.

So it already begins to seem unclear what Plantinga's demonstration that there is a possible MSR is even supposed to show: the original triad was already clearly not formally inconsistent; and the (genuinely inconsistent) quartet is *not* affected by Plantinga's argument. The only claim his argument *could* "demolish" is the (implausible and much stronger) claim that not only is it the case that the quartet is inconsistent, but also that (4) is absolutely certain and

*could not possibly* be false. This position, it is worth noting, does seem to be held (albeit naively) by *some*. It is not altogether clear whether it is fair to attribute it to Mackie and McCloskey, but, as Pike observes, Hume's Philo is committed to such a view in Part X of the *Dialogues* given the *kind* of argument for inconsistency he is pushing:

[Philo's position] demands that he affirm [proposition (4)] as a *necessary truth*...an omnipotent and omniscient being would have no morally sufficient reasons for allowing instances of suffering—just as a bachelor would have no wife (Pike, 1990: 42).

But this complication rests on a mistake. Philo's error consists in claiming that the *triad itself* is inconsistent; in order for *that* claim to be true, it must indeed be the case that (4) is a necessary truth.<sup>12</sup> But what he ought to have claimed is that the *quartet* is inconsistent: from there he would have merely needed to motivate the claim that the reasons for accepting (4) are better than any available reasons for rejecting it.

These matters become even clearer if, as FitzPatrick suggests, we give this same analysis once the problem is in argument form:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent.
2. An omnibenevolent God would want to either prevent evil or eliminate it, and an omnipotent God could do so.
3. If God existed, evil would not exist. (1,2)
4. Evil exists.

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5. Therefore, God does not exist. (3,4)

This argument is clearly valid, but is it sound? Well, it seems evident that it stands or falls with its second premise. The theist will deny this premise, asserting *P: It is not the case that an omnibenevolent God would want to either prevent or eliminate evil*. But this claim will only be

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pike: "...Philo holds that 'There are instances of suffering' and 'God exists' are logically incompatible. But [these propositions] will be logically incompatible only if [the claim that God would have no MSR] is a necessary truth. Thus, if Philo is to argue that [God and evil] are logically incompatible, he must be prepared to affirm [the MSR-denying claim] as a necessary truth" (1990: 42).

true if it is the case that *Q*: *there is an MSR for allowing the evil that exists*. Again, it will not do to merely point out that P and Q are possibly true; we need them *actually* to be true! The implications of this are the same as those mentioned above (in our discussion of the triad and the quartet), but it will be useful to quote FitzPatrick at some length on this matter in order to make completely clear where things currently stand:

If all we can say is that [P and Q] could possibly be true (for all we know), then all we're doing is saying that the above deductive argument isn't 100% certain, since it's possible that premise 2 is false. But how powerful a response is that? It's only as interesting as the plausibility of the story we tell to support our possibility claim. If it's a mere possibility claim, which is "far-fetched or improbable", then we haven't accomplished anything interesting... The logical argument still stands, and all we've pointed out is that it's possible (though unlikely) that one of the premises is false. Surely that's no big deal: no interesting philosophical argument I'm familiar with has premises all of which are 100% certain and cannot coherently be doubted.<sup>13</sup>

*Right*, one is inclined to say. But if this is correct, matters begin to take a very different shape. For not only will it be wrong to think that very much of anything turns on Plantinga's contribution, but we will also have some reason to think that the logical/evidential distinction itself is on shaky ground: Recall that the principal difference between a logical version of the argument and an evidential one was supposed to be that the former makes a claim of logical inconsistency while the latter retreats from this and settles for the allegedly weaker claim that the existence of evil provides merely "*rational support* for atheism" (1979: 335fn.). But if the very point in *either* case is to provide rational support for the premises of one's argument, to the extent that the proponent of an evidential argument has succeeded in doing so, the resulting argument will still be making a claim of inconsistency (just as the logical version does); the only difference will be that *calling it* an 'evidential' argument explicitly acknowledges that the rational support provided is not (and indeed *cannot* be) support that delivers complete certainty.

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<sup>13</sup> FitzPatrick, "Notes on the problem of evil" (unpublished).

But there's no reason why the original logical (deductive) version of the argument needed to do that either.

These considerations suggest that we merely introduce a distinction that holds *in name only* (and which brings with it a sort of conceptual confusion) when we treat these forms of argument as importantly distinct. The task facing the theist—when confronted with *either* form of argument—is to offer plausible reasons for denying the crucial premise that an omnibenevolent God would want to prevent or eliminate evil—or to show that there actually is an MSR for the evil that does exist (which comes to the same thing). In the next two sections, I consider attempts to do just that.

#### **§1.4 Skeptical Theism and the Need to Specify an MSR**

Recall that Rowe's evidential argument acknowledges its own limitations with regard to being able to *prove* that there are instances of gratuitous suffering. He points out, for instance, that we're often "surprised by how things we thought to be unconnected turn out to be intimately connected", and suggests accordingly that there may be perfectly familiar goods outweighing the fawn's suffering "to which that suffering is connected in a way we do not see." (1979: 337) Alternatively, there may be *unfamiliar* goods—that is, goods we "haven't dreamed of"—that are bound up with the fawn's suffering. If either of these possibilities is actually the case, the fawn's suffering clearly cannot count as a case of gratuitous suffering.

While it is obviously appropriate for Rowe to acknowledge these limitations, it turns out that this very acknowledgement has spawned a massive literature that's often taken by theists to establish decisively the impotence of his argument from evil; the literature to which I'm referring has its origin in Wykstra, in an influential paper he wrote in response to Rowe's (1979). Seizing

upon Rowe's concession, Wykstra argues in his (1990) that the "does not appear" claim<sup>14</sup> which is so central to Rowe's argument violates a "condition of reasonable epistemic access (CORNEA)." Wykstra spells out CORNEA as follows:

On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim 'It appears that *p*' only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her (1990: 152).

Wykstra's claim is that CORNEA is a requirement which would not be reasonable to reject. Evaluating Rowe's claim about the fawn in the light of this proposed requirement yields an unfavorable result for Rowe; when we ask, as CORNEA demands, how likely it is that we'd be aware of an outweighing good intimately connected to the fawn's suffering *if there were in fact such a good*, it seems difficult to answer in the affirmative. For, as Rowe himself notes, we do not ourselves have the benefit of God's omniscience. In relation to God we are, rather, epistemically more like an infant is to an adult. As Wykstra notes, this picture implies that if there are outweighing goods of the requisite kind, "that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer—which is to say, it is not likely at all." (1990: 156)

Putting it a bit more succinctly, we can summarize Wykstra's critique as follows: Rowe should (and ultimately does) acknowledge that *if* theism is true, then "the outweighing goods by virtue of which God allows suffering would generally be beyond our ken"; but given CORNEA, the claim that the fawn's suffering does not appear to serve any outweighing good can be licensed only by the belief that if such goods exist, they would be *within* our ken (1990: 157). So,

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<sup>14</sup> Viz., that much suffering (e.g., the fawn's) *does not appear* to serve any outweighing good.

properly understood in its “cognitive-epistemic sense”, Rowe’s “does not appear” claim is not capable of doing the work that his argument requires.

This “skepticism” about the claim that we possess the requisite kind of epistemic access to divinely-desired goods forms the crux of the position known as *skeptical theism* (henceforth, *ST*). In a more recent discussion of *ST*, Bergmann (2001: 279) has defined the position as the conjunction of (i) a theistic commitment that God exists and is omnipotent and omnibenevolent and (ii) a skeptical commitment that is usually associated with one or more of the following theses:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

*Qua* skeptical theist, Bergmann thinks that each of these claims is *prima facie* plausible, given our “awareness of our cognitive limitations.” Echoing Wykstra, he aims to show that any evidential attempt to formulate the problem of evil involves a *prior* rejection of one of these three theses; so if we can independently motivate and defend these three theses, we will have cut off the very possibility of developing a workable version of the problem. What, then, are Bergmann’s reasons for accepting ST1, ST2, and ST3? Well, what it really comes to is this:

...[T]he skepticism recommended...is extremely modest and completely appropriate even for those who are agnostic about the existence of God. It is just the honest recognition of the fact that it wouldn’t be the least bit surprising if reality far outstripped our understanding of it. There is nothing bold or dogmatic or even theistic about [this]. Nor is it excessively skeptical (2001: 284).

Locating the central weakness in this position is not a difficult matter. Bergmann himself devotes considerable space to the defense of his view that ST is not “excessively skeptical”—and with good reason: it is often maintained by proponents of the problem of evil that the sort of skepticism Bergmann recommends leads inevitably to a more global moral skepticism that (for independent reasons) theists ought to categorically oppose.

Mark Piper has argued that because ST opens a “Pandora’s box of skepticism towards the epistemic rights to theism itself”, the position is self-defeating; he gives three reasons for thinking that this is so (2008: 135):

(P1) ST has the effect of making confident knowledge (i.e., knowledge not vulnerable to reasonable skepticism) of the correctness of our own conception of goodness, and confident knowledge of God’s actual moral will, at the least highly questionable and at the most impossible;

(P2) There is good reason to think that ST threatens a great deal of theological knowledge;

(P3) The epistemic limitation considerations contained in ST can be consistently used in reverse: that is, they can be used to disclaim any ascription of certitude or likelihood that apparently good events are evidence of the work of a good God.

Let’s focus on (P1). Here we have the observation that ST must maintain that, plausibly, our knowledge of the “modalities and orders of goodness” is in some serious way limited; but, Piper points out, if this position works against the problem of evil, it also raises the following two possibilities (2008: 136):

(A) Our cognitive limitations are such that we cannot have confident knowledge (i.e., knowledge invulnerable to reasonable skepticism) of the nature of goodness.

(B) Our cognitive limitations are such that we do not know God’s relation to goodness.

But clearly the theist *should not* accept (A), and *cannot* accept (B). She should not accept (A) because doing so would be destructive to ordinary moral discourse; and she cannot accept (B) because doing so would entail skepticism (or, at best, agnosticism) about the theistic

commitment (i.e., God's omnibenevolence) that generates the problem of evil in the first place. And yet, it seems obvious that there could be no principled way of restricting the application of the sort of skepticism recommended by ST to claims such as Rowe's and not to claims about (A) the nature of goodness and (B) God's relation to it.

I am not interested in claiming that the foregoing constitutes a knock-down argument against skeptical theism, as there is little doubt that the serious skeptical theist will manage to develop a response which at least deserves our attention; but the considerations above do, in any case, seem to be powerful (if defeasible) reasons for rejecting skeptical theism. So much, then, for our discussion of ST's merits *qua* response to the problem of evil.

But if skeptical theism's failure leaves the theist unable to dismiss the problem of evil as an ill-formed challenge; and if, as our discussion in §1.3 suggests, she cannot hope to evade the problem by simply pointing out the existence of some merely possible (if far-fetched) explanation for God's failure to prevent seemingly gratuitous evils (*a la* Plantinga), what form *can* her response take? In particular, can the theist be justified in claiming—as, for instance, Chisholm (1990) does—that it is rational to maintain that every individual evil is defeated by some good, *without also claiming to know what goods defeat them?*

*Or*, alternatively, must the theist actually *specify* (or be *able* to specify) a *plausible* MSR for God's not preventing various evils? Although the skeptical theist is apt to endorse the view that it is not necessary to specify an MSR, making a strong case against skeptical theism (as I will assume that we have done) does *not* in itself disconfirm, in equal measure, this latter view. So before turning (in §1.5) to the topic of theodicy, I will attempt presently to show how an argument of Robert Richman's suggests, *contra* Chisholm, that the burden *is* on the theist to actually specify an MSR.

Richman's critique of Chisholm's view begins with some relevant observations regarding skepticism (generally, rather than theistically, construed):

The skeptic continually relies on the bare possibility of falsifying conditions—specified or not—to cast doubt on the truth of propositions which we all accept. But it is not rational to doubt, for example, the existence of a table before me on the ground that it is *possible* that all my present experiences might occur in the absence of a table. Nor is the possibility of my dreaming, for example, sufficient to make a belief in the non-existence of the table a rational belief, *on pain of complete skepticism with regard to sensory knowledge*. (1969: 208, italics mine.)

The key move in Richman's argument is to remind us that this state of affairs holds likewise with regard to morality; in the interest of preserving the rhetorical force of his original phrasing, I quote Richman here at considerable length:

Someone who lies, steals, or kills may have a morally sufficient reason for performing such an action. Actions of these sorts are wrong *ceteris paribus*; their avoidance is a matter of *prima facie* obligation. Similar considerations apply to acts of omission: there may be good reason for not preventing a child from walking into the path of a moving automobile, or for failing to warn a dinner companion of the cyanide in the salt shaker. But in the absence of morally sufficient reasons, if we perform such actions [or fail to prevent them] we are clearly guilty of gross immorality. If moral judgments are to make any sense at all, the burden of proof must be placed on the individual who has violated his *prima facie* duty—or on his defender—to supply the morally sufficient reason for his doing so. The alternative is moral skepticism, the impossibility of moral judgment... Suppose that someone has killed a fellow human being. He is not to be absolved of moral (or legal) guilt simply on the ground that there may be sufficient excusing conditions for his act, or on the ground that his mother (or his attorney) claims that there *must* be such conditions... If no sufficient excusing condition can be specified, then the claim that the killing is not blameworthy is simply unwarranted. Of course, this procedure does not *prove* that a sufficient excusing condition does not exist. But this is unimportant, since supplying such a proof would be a logical impossibility [since it could always be claimed that one has not yet considered all possible excusing conditions]. The point, again, therefore, is that if we are to avoid moral skepticism, the burden of proof must be placed on the defender of one who has committed or permitted a reprehensible act to specify the morally sufficient reasons for the act... (1969: 208-209)

It is not difficult to see the relevance of such observations to our own inquiry. Ordinary moral discourse demands that *only if we can specify* the morally sufficient reason a moral agent has for permitting suffering that he can prevent, can we rationally hold that the moral agent is not blameworthy for permitting that suffering. Insofar as God is himself a moral agent, the same must hold in the case in question: the world contains instances of preventable suffering, and the theist must specify the MSR for those evils if she is to maintain that God is not blameworthy for them; and if she cannot do so—leaving God *prima facie* blameworthy—then it cannot be rational for her to hold that God is perfectly good.

What, then, is the consequence of all this? Chiefly, that if the theist is to maintain the rationality of her belief in God, she must

set forth an adequate and plausible account of morally sufficient reasons for God's permitting evil in the world. Since the argument from evil, at least as the argument is developed in this paper, is not designed as an analytic derivation of the proposition that God does not exist from the proposition that there is evil in the world—against *that* proposed argument the specification of merely possible reasons, or even the noting of the possibility of there being morally sufficient reasons, would be adequate defense—the reasons will have to be statements of excusing conditions which are proposed as actual (Richman, 1969: 211).

Once again, it is not at all surprising that this should be the conclusion of our inquiry, given especially the considerations of §1.3, which in large measure foreshadowed this result. What shall we call such a specification of a morally sufficient reason (or system of reasons) proposed-as-actual? This would be to offer a *theodicy*.

### **§1.5 An Attempt at Theodicy**

I define *theodicy* as the effort to use the resources of the faith to show that, in the final analysis, the *actual beliefs* of theists—when taken together—are consistent, and *do* provide a way of meeting the charge of lack of warrant for theism leveled by those who take the problem

of evil to count decisively against theistic belief. This is to be contrasted with the strategy employed by (i) skeptical theists, whose manner of defense appeals to considerations that lie *outside* of any body of religious doctrine, and (ii) philosophers such as Plantinga, who are concerned not to provide a theological defense formulated on the basis of actual beliefs, but who instead point to merely *possible* (if highly improbable) ways of reconciling theistic belief with the existence of evil. *Thus, if Richman's observations are sound, it is precisely theodicy (so construed) to which the theist must turn if she is to have any hope of deploying legitimate methods in her effort to overcome the problem of evil.*

It will come as no surprise to the reader that the history of Western philosophy is replete with attempts at theodicy. Unfortunately, due to the relatively limited scope of this project it would simply not be practicable to undertake a systematic analysis of the various theodicies that have been proposed. One approach, accordingly, would be to attempt to provide a cursory overview of the various strategies that have been employed throughout the past two thousand years, highlighting their similarities and differences and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses along the way. Instead, I have taken a somewhat different approach: my strategy has been to provide a brief summary and analysis of what I take to be the strongest and most promising available theistic response to the problem of evil; thus, in this section I discuss the important and widely influential theodicy constructed by John Hick in his (2007).

Because Hick's theodicy possesses many virtues altogether absent in other theodicies—and because, therefore, there is good reason to believe that Hick's theodicy succeeds where other attempts have clearly failed—taking Hick's contribution as an exemplar of theodicy means representing the theist's position in what is perhaps the most favorable way possible; if this is

right, then if we can adequately respond to Hick in the following chapter, our argument there may be applicable to theistic defenses more generally.

Crucial to Hick's view is the distinction between what he calls the Augustinian and the Irenaean types of theodicy. The Augustinian type is meant to encompass the vast majority of all theodicies ever offered, and has the following as its essential features: (1) a metaphysical conception of evil as the privation of good; (2) elaborate use of free-will defense to explain both the origin of, and the MSR for, evil; and (3) use of the principle of plenitude in order to develop a partially aesthetic defense (2007: 38).

This form of theodicy has been extremely influential, and its appeal has seemed undeniable to many theists. Nevertheless, Hick argues that this approach is largely misguided and that a viable theodicy should deemphasize these points of focus and instead emphasize the theological importance of "soul-making." Indeed, the Irenaean theodicy is built around this very idea. Elements key to this program include: first, the idea that man was "created at a distance from God" so that he could freely come to Him (2007: 232); second, that man was not created in a "finished state", but rather is still in a "process of creation" (2007: 253-254); third, that this process involves crucially the need for spiritual growth; and, finally, that the world must contain evil in order for this spiritual maturation to occur (2007: 258).

Hick, of course, is offering an MSR for the evil we find in the world. But unlike Plantinga's effort, Hick's proposal is not only possible but perhaps even *plausible*. It is not at all difficult to see, for instance, how various forms of mental and spiritual suffering could be required for a kind of spiritual development that constitutes an overarching and great good. Hick's proposal even seems capable of explaining the evils of: death, even when premature or seemingly unfair; disease processes, including those that result in loss of bodily function or loss

of limb; the entire gamut of mental illness, ranging from depression and anxiety to more serious and debilitating conditions such as schizophrenia; loss of loved ones; estrangement from God and “spiritual” suffering more generally; psychological or mental suffering that results from all forms of moral evil; and—although I have serious reservations about the availability of an MSR for such evils—certain forms of natural evil (e.g., natural disasters).

Fortunately, I am prepared to admit that Hick’s theodicy (or, for that matter, someone else’s) is capable of providing a plausible MSR for all of these forms of suffering. (Or at any rate I am conceding this for the sake of argument.<sup>15</sup>) For there is still one form of suffering the existence of which could not, in principle, be redeemed by an MSR; this form of suffering, I shall argue, is physical pain. Thus our task in the following chapter will be to show that we can admit that Hick’s proposed MSR for such evils succeeds and yet hold that his theodicy simply cannot account for this important class of evils.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Essentially, the idea is this: Let’s just throw out all of the horrible forms of suffering (i.e., mental) that could reasonably count as data in our construction of an argument from evil. Instead, let’s just use physical pain as our challenge. Allowing most—and the most significant kinds of—evil to escape closer scrutiny does a favor to the theist and also allows us to bracket the objections and rejoinders associated with many popular theodicies.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief discussion of whether we’ve succeeded in this, see the beginning of §2.4.

## Chapter 2: The Problem Recast: The Problem of Pain

### §2.1 A Note on Omnipotence

Before proceeding to our argument proper, a fairly lengthy digression is in order. So far I have said nothing about the sense given to the divine attributes; but for the purposes of what follows, it will be necessary to do so. Omnibenevolence poses no serious problem of interpretation—we can render it as either “wholly good” or “all-loving” without inviting controversy. But, by contrast, quite a bit will turn on our understanding of *omnipotence*.

Perhaps the simplest construal available is what Trakakis calls the “absolutist theory of omnipotence (*ATO*).” A proponent of *ATO* will hold the following:

“The theistic God is omnipotent in the sense that he is able to bring about absolutely any state of affairs, including those states of affairs which are logically impossible to bring about and those which are inconsistent with any of his attributes” (Trakakis, 1997: 55).

Descartes, for instance, holds this view.<sup>17</sup> But—his endorsement of it notwithstanding—it obviously will not do to assume that the theist accepts an interpretation of omnipotence as radical as this. The vast majority of all theists, after all, would likely reject it.

A natural modification of this view consists in retreating to the more modest claim that God can do whatever is logically possible. But this position, too, has its opponents. Both Anselm and Aquinas, for instance, hold that there are logically possible feats which God cannot perform. The ability to walk or to commit a sin (e.g., to tell a lie) are typically cited as examples of such feats.<sup>18</sup> Trakakis points out that this has the surprising implication that God cannot do things which humans *can*. But, fortunately for our purposes, this puzzling observation suggests the more precise formulation: there are feats “which are logically possible *for* humans but logically

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Mersenne, April 15, 1630.

<sup>18</sup> Although, as Phil Olson has pointed out to me in conversation, it seems more correct to call God’s committing a sin a *moral* (rather than *logical*) impossibility. If, however, the conception of omnipotence I endorse below (LP\*) is accepted, it does in fact seem correct to say that committing a sin is an example of an act that it is logically impossible *for God* to perform (constrained as he is by his (perhaps necessary) attributes).

impossible *for* God...” (1997: 59, italics mine). This, I think, seems right. For instance, as Wierenga notes, given God’s attribute of omnibenevolence sinning is “just a special case” of doing what is impossible for *God* to do, as opposed to impossible *tout court* (1983: 367). So we can conclude that there is a class of seemingly logically possible tasks which God cannot perform, but that—given his nature—are actually tasks which are logically *impossible* for *God*.

This suggests a further modification of our definition of omnipotence, and it is the definition I endorse:

*LP\**: God can do whatever is logically possible *for him to do*, where this indexical is included only to take into account otherwise-possible feats which are in fact *impossible* for God *given his nature* (as determined by his other [perhaps necessary] attributes). My intuition is that *LP\** accommodates enough of the limitations on power that theists are apt to demand that, as a definition of omnipotence, it will secure considerable agreement; it seems to me, furthermore, much more plausible than the most obvious alternative, which is to restrict God’s power to the domain of the mere *metaphysically* possible: given that our task is to interpret ‘omnipotence’ in a way that does justice to the term’s meaning (i.e., “*all-powerful*”), it is natural to suppose that we should require compelling reasons each time we move away from the strictest (or strongest) possible interpretation of the term. (Such reasons were available when it was suggested that, for instance, we exclude from omnipotence the ability to do the logically impossible; but what considerations could warrant downgrading from *LP\** to a conception that allows only for the ability to do the *metaphysically* possible?)

But this understanding of omnipotence does, it should be admitted, face *at least* one problem: even if *LP\** is granted, there can still be disagreement over what exactly is meant by “logically possible.” Plantinga, for instance, points out that when philosophers have construed ‘omnipotence’ as the ability to do whatever is logically possible, they did not intend that this be

taken as the ability to do anything the denial of which is “not a theorem of first-order logic.”<sup>19</sup> If it were the case that God’s omnipotence meant the ability to do anything that does not involve a contradiction in first-order logic, then he should be able to do things which we plainly do not expect of him, e.g., to make it the case that something be both red and not colored (since this is not precluded by that understanding of logical possibility).

But this is *not* what LP\* intends by “logically possible.” By “logical possibility,” I mean the broadest possible form of subjunctive possibility, the test for which is taken to be the ability to conceive of a state of affairs without involving oneself in a contradiction. In keeping with this understanding of logical possibility, we shall hold that a logically *impossible* state of affairs is a state of affairs which cannot be *coherently conceived*. So given this understanding of the concept, “x is red and x is not colored” *is* logically impossible; once we understand what the terms in the statement are “standardly used in English to express,” we find that we cannot coherently conceive of the state of affairs described (1997: 69). That, at any rate, is the sense I give to “logically impossible.” When understood in this way, moreover, it seems evident that Plantinga could not reasonably object.

These considerations suggest that in order to avoid unnecessary controversy we would be better off speaking of *conceptual* possibility and impossibility. I do *not* assume, as (for instance) Chalmers does, that the extension of the logically possible is identical with the extension of the metaphysically possible.<sup>20</sup> (I hold only that logical possibility is determined by coherence of concepts, whereas metaphysical possibility is determined by the nature of reality.) But I *do*

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<sup>19</sup> This quotation and the ones that follow in this paragraph are from a personal correspondence between William FitzPatrick and Alvin Plantinga (November 3, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Doing so would certainly make things easier, but because (as will become clear below) we’re looking for a *neutral* modal basis to motivate our more controversial claims, it will not do to help ourselves to a position as contentious as the view that what is logically possible is coextensive with what is metaphysically possible.

assume that, as Stalnaker puts it, what is conceivable is conceptually possible (2002: 386). (Although fortunately I have the luxury of remaining silent on whether the inference from conceptual possibility to metaphysical possibility is sound.)

For the time being, these few remarks on modality should be sufficient. Let us proceed, then, to our subject matter proper; we will begin, in the following section, with some preliminary remarks on the nature of pain.

## §2.2 What is Pain?

The problem of evil concerns suffering. The distinction between mental and physical suffering, however, is rarely made. Perhaps this distinction will help. What I want to focus on specifically is the *phenomenal experience of pain*. This is to be sharply contrasted with what is sometimes called “pain” when really something closer to “mental suffering” is meant. The latter—while distressing and “painful” in its own right—will not concern us here. (One consequence of this is that we will treat any evaluative/emotional aspect of physical pain as distinct from pain itself; on this view, it is to be regarded as a form of (mental) suffering that occurs when one reflects upon the pain itself (i.e., the phenomenal experience thereof).)

In order to succeed in adequately reframing the problem of evil, I shall say a few words about the nature of the sort of pain I have in mind. Suppose you inadvertently place your hand on a hot stove. The pain you’re apt to suffer consists, to be sure, in a phenomenal experience. There are, of course, other aspects of pain (including, importantly, its aversive/motivational aspect), but it will be the actual phenomenal (sensory) *experience* of pain that our argument focuses on. But, before proceeding with our argument, it will be instructive nonetheless to give a fuller characterization of the nature of pain, and to that end I cite a lengthy but helpful passage in Clark:

There is indeed a distinct sensory system devoted to pain, with its own nociceptors and pathways. As a species of somesthesia, pain has a distinctive sensory organization and its own special sensory qualities. I think it is fair to call it a distinct sensory modality, devoted to nociceptive somesthetic discrimination. But the typical pain kicks off other processes too. For one it can grab your attention in a distinctive way, alerting you to its presence and sometimes obliging you to focus attention on the damaged member. Intense pain can eliminate your ability to think about anything else. Pain typically has direct and immediate motivational consequences: one wants it to stop, has an incentive to do whatever one can to reduce it, and is gratified by its termination. As these desires and motives collide with neural reality, emotional components of mental anguish, anxiety, and dread arise (2005: 177).

Thus we find the distinction—crucial to contemporary scientific research on pain—between the sensory-discriminative and the motivational-affective components of pain. (The former involves the ability to identify and feel some stimulus as painful and to determine its location, while the latter involves the desire to avoid the sensation and the drive to *do something about it*.) Precisely because these are distinct components of pain phenomenology, it is possible for them to come apart. (As I will discuss below, in pain asymbolia (congenital indifference to pain) the motivational-affective component is impaired while the sensory-discriminative aspect is left intact.) The fact that these two aspects of the phenomenology of pain are *distinct* will be important in what follows, and for that reason I will return to it shortly; but for the moment let's continue with our inquiry into the nature of pain and look briefly at questions concerning its biological function.

Undoubtedly the most obvious adaptive use to which pain is put involves its motivational-affective aspect. In order to see how this is so, consider a case where this aspect of pain perception is altogether *lacking*: the oft-discussed (though decades-old) case of Miss C., as she is known in the literature. Miss C. is one of many sufferers of congenital insensitivity to pain (henceforth, *CISP*), a rare condition in which an otherwise normal individual lacks the sensory modality under discussion and consequently never experiences pain. It is well-known that

sufferers of CISP lead extremely difficult (and often short) lives: their inability to feel pain results, unsurprisingly, in frequent injuries that often go unnoticed and therefore untreated. In the case of Miss C., the course of this ailment unfolded rather dramatically:

Outwardly she appeared a friendly, well-adjusted and highly self-reliant young woman. However, her medical history revealed a long record of hospitalization for injuries and illnesses connected with inability to feel pain. At the age of 3, for example, she suffered third-degree burns from kneeling on a hot radiator while looking through a window at children playing on the street...The tip of her tongue was deformed from biting it in temper tantrums as a child, and she had multiple scars on her hands, legs, and feet...One might be tempted at this point to think Miss C. was extraordinarily lucky: certainly a completely pain-free life has its attractions. However, there is another side of the coin, and it soon made itself apparent. A year after the tests she noticed she was beginning to limp and that her right hip was becoming stiff...She began to experience difficulty climbing stairs, numbness of the lower limbs...In the remaining two years of her life both hip joints had to be incised and drained. The history of bone trauma and infection is understandable in view of her insensitivity to pain. Unable to feel discomfort when standing too long on one leg or sleeping too long on one side of her body, she did not make all those little postural adjustments we make unconsciously, to relieve stress on the skeletal structure. In the last month of her life Miss C. reported pain for the first time, in the left hip. But by then it was too late (Puccetti, 1975: 260-261).

While Miss C., as a sufferer of CISP, had deficiencies in the sensory-discriminative component of pain perception in addition to deficiencies in the motivational-affective component, it is really the latter deficiencies that are relevant in explaining her horrible quality of life: whereas one would expect an individual with an intact motivational-affective component and an impaired sensory-discriminative component to *succeed* in avoiding unnecessary and severe injury, one would expect an individual with an impaired motivational-affective component and a properly functioning sensory-discriminative component to have just as little luck as Miss C. when it comes to avoiding serious injury. Indeed, this is precisely what we find in cases of congenital indifference to pain (henceforth, *CIDP*), a related condition which involves *not* the absence of

the sensory-discriminative modality itself, but rather merely the inability of painful phenomena to evoke normal aversive/motivational responses in the individual. (Persons afflicted with this condition have the phenomenal (sensory) experience of pain—and even recognize it as painful—but are not motivated to take action to make the pain *stop*.)

In any case the relevance of Miss C.'s case to our present inquiry (*viz.*, the nature of pain, and its use or function) is quite clear: in light of what happened to her as a result of her disorder, there is, as Puccetti puts it, “a strong *prima facie* case for pain having biological usefulness” (1975: 261).<sup>21</sup> There is, however, just one problem. The French surgeon René Leriche, who is often quoted in this context, puts the point nicely:

Defense reaction? Fortunate warning? But as a matter of fact the majority of illnesses, even the most serious, attack us without warning. Sickness is nearly always a drama in two acts, of which the first takes place, cunningly enough, in the dim silence of our tissues, with the lights out, before the candles have been lit. When pain makes its appearance, we are almost in the second act...Pain merely makes more distressing and sad a situation already long lost...In fact, pain is always a baleful gift, which reduces the subject of it, and makes him more ill than he would be without it (1939: 22-23).

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Nagasako et al. (2003: 213): “...the observation that these people often die in childhood because they fail to notice injuries and illnesses has been viewed as compelling evidence that the ability to perceive pain has great survival value. That is, the sensation of pain protects humans (and other species) from the tissue-damaging effects of dangerous stimuli, and appears to be critical for survival of the organism.”

Compare, also, Clark (2005: 90): “Suppose you are God up in genomic heaven, designing survival mechanisms to transmit and propagate your genes. Clearly one would want to lower the odds that [a sufferer of CISP] will continue to injure her body. What is the simplest and cheapest mechanism one can imagine that would serve this end? We would like (for example) to lower the odds that [an individual] will stand with all her weight on a fully dislocated ankle. For this we need some mechanism to register the difference between the dislocated ankle and the ankle in normal working condition; some means of making [the organism] notice the difference (to get her attention, and shift it to the damaged member); some signal that makes it less likely that she will continue to stand on the fully dislocated ankle—ideally one that would make her stop immediately (provided there are no other over-riding survival needs, like running away from a tiger); and (if possible) some more enduring state that would motivate [her] to repair her injuries, or at least allow them to heal. One would not want these signals to be easy to ignore, and one would not want the recipient to be able to habituate to them, since then they would lose their motivational power. In these ways the signals must be different from other sensory signals.”

Hence the intuition that while some modicum of pain may be necessary to avoid a situation such as Miss C.'s, it seems altogether possible that we could have been so constituted as to permit this—but *nothing more*<sup>22</sup>:

In order to retain the biological advantages of pain while being spared the sufferings of [gratuitous] pain, no less is required than a special neural mechanism which, when tissue damage is occurring post-traumatically, or when it is so extensive that recovery of the organism is unlikely, automatically shuts off pain mechanisms, thereby producing general analgesia.<sup>23</sup> Now this would be very nice, but it amounts to smuggling God into the central nervous system. *Such a mechanism is not predictable on Darwinian principles, since its absence confers no evolutionary disadvantage to a species.* (Puccetti, 1975: 263)

This observation supports the idea that there exists pain which is gratuitous *simpliciter*, since it is gratuitous biologically speaking. If this reasoning is sound, we have stumbled already upon a successful formulation of the problem of evil; gratuitous evil (in this case, pain) is evil for which there is no MSR, and we have already seen that, in order to save God's moral character, there *must* be an MSR for every instance of suffering.

But in what follows I will largely set aside the intuition that although there are some instances of (biologically) necessary physical pain, there are nonetheless instances of *gratuitous* pain<sup>24</sup>; instead, I will try to establish the stronger conclusion that *every* instance of pain is gratuitous, viz. that God could have put into place a “special neural mechanism” which blocks not merely the phenomenal experience of pain only when some threshold is surpassed, but which instead *blocks it altogether*—and that he could have done so without thereby bringing about a disastrous state of affairs in which we regularly sustain serious injury (as in, for instance, Miss

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<sup>22</sup> Puccetti is not the only one to have had this insight. Both William FitzPatrick and James Klagge have pointed this out to me in conversation.

<sup>23</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, I do *not* dispute the obvious fact that pain has a biological (adaptive) use. I am only concerned to **deny** the following: that, as a means of promoting survival in the way that it in fact does, pain is the only candidate in logical (conceptual) space for such a purpose.

C.'s CISP).<sup>25</sup> That, at any rate, is the basic intuition which informs this project; our task, accordingly, is to rigorize this intuition in the formal argument which follows.

### §2.3 An Argument from Pain

Pain, we have seen, is important for our survival. But, *from a theistic perspective*, is it not surprising that pain should be the way that it is rather than otherwise? That is, could an omnipotent God not have created a universe capable of fulfilling his plan but without the presence of phenomenologically painful experiences? The argument below asserts (in its fourth premise) that this is indeed something an omnipotent God could have done, and from this fact it concludes that God does not exist. (That, at any rate, is the most concise way of summarizing it.) Doubtless some will find this intuition—and thus the premise that exploits it—objectionable, but in what follows I will argue at length that the intuition is sound.

#### Argument from Pain (AP)

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is omnibenevolent.
3. In the actual world, W, physical pain exists.
4. There is a conceptually possible world, W\*, *identical* to ours except it is a world in which sentient creatures do not have the phenomenal experience of pain.

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<sup>25</sup> As the foregoing suggests, due to the seeming inevitability of frequent and serious injury resulting from CISP, the disorder may at first blush be thought (as it is, for instance, by Hick) to support the idea that without the phenomenal experience of pain we would *necessarily* be much worse off than we are. It seems obvious, however, that we can grant that this medical condition (as it presents itself in the actual world) invariably brings about a state of affairs worse for individuals than does *sensitivity* to pain, and yet still *deny* that this shows anything significant counterfactually about how things *could* have been for us with insensitivity to pain. (That is, instead of CISP we can imagine what might be called *idealized* insensitivity to pain, or CISP that *does not* bring with it an impaired ability to avoid injury, etc.)

It is also worth noting that the very existence of CISP *destroys* the oft-invoked idea that pleasure is somehow impossible without pain: sufferers of CISP, while unable to feel pain, are certainly not incapable of experiencing pleasure (whether this be physical or mental). As a species of the more general theological notion that good is impossible without evil, it is useful in the defense of our argument to be able to dismiss this confused suggestion before giving it a second thought.

5. Because pain is a bad-in-itself, a world containing no pain is better than a world containing pain when the two worlds are otherwise identical.<sup>26</sup>
6. Something that is bad-in-itself cannot be good-in-itself.
7. Pain is not a good-in-itself (and so, *a fortiori*, not a divinely-desired good-in-itself). (5, 6)
- (8. *Therefore*, W\* is a better world than W. (3, 4, 5))
9. If God exists, then God can and does choose to actualize the best conceptually possible world compatible with all divinely-desired goods-in-themselves.<sup>27</sup> (1, 2)
10. If physical pain exists in the actual world, then God has chosen *not* to actualize<sup>28</sup> the best conceptually possible world compatible with all divinely-desired goods-in-themselves. (4, 5, 7)
11. God has chosen *not* to actualize the best conceptually possible world compatible with all divinely-desired goods-in-themselves. (3, 10)
12. It is not the case that God exists. (9, 11)

Before moving on to the principal task of the rest of this chapter—which is both to spell out the content of, and also to defend, the premises of the above argument—it will be useful to provide a brief premise-by-premise commentary on *AP* in order to motivate the basic strategy I’ll employ.

The first two premises are simply the theist’s commitments; we begin by assuming them to be true. The third premise is self-evident and, accordingly, cannot reasonably be denied by the theist *or* the atheist.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thanks to both Ted Parent and Dan Parker for suggesting this phrasing. (Originally the premise read: “Because pain is not a good-in-itself...”) Thanks are also owed to Yael Loewenstein in this connection.

<sup>27</sup> Such goods may include free will, soul-making, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Matt Sayball for helping me see the importance of this phrasing. (“God has not chosen to...” would have had different truth conditions.)

<sup>29</sup> Of course, a strict behaviorist (or perhaps a Wittgensteinian) would object to our talk of the phenomenal experience of pain. But if this led her to deny our third premise, she would simply be denying the existence of this kind of evil, which is tantamount to rejecting one of the three propositions in the original inconsistent triad. And while it is of course open to the theist to “solve” the problem of evil by denying either the existence of evil, or God’s omnipotence or omnibenevolence, doing so amounts to abandoning traditional theism, since these three propositions are ordinarily taken to be essential constituents of theistic belief. (The same reply is applicable to the Augustinian notion that evil is merely a privation of good and therefore in some sense not real.)

As I've already indicated, the fourth premise, by contrast, will likely appear highly controversial to some readers. Accordingly, considerable space is devoted to defending (4) below. I am confident, however, that upon closer examination it will seem *much less* contentious than it might initially. For present purposes, suffice it to say that the basic idea at play in (4) is the thought that there is no *prima facie* contradiction or conceptual incoherence involved in conceiving of a world identical to our own, save the phenomenology of pain.<sup>30</sup>

One would be hard-pressed, I think, to deny our fifth premise (and, hence, our seventh premise, which is deduced from our fifth and sixth—the latter being, I take it, self-evident).<sup>31</sup> To deny the fifth premise is to assert either (a) that pain is an intrinsic good or (b) that it is “morally neutral,” i.e., neither a good-in-itself nor a bad-in-itself. Considered empirically (or experientially), the first possibility, (a), is *manifestly false*. And while it seems equally obvious on the basis of our routine experience of pain that (b) is false—and while it is consequently difficult to see how to argue against it in any *direct* way—I assume in any case that virtually all theists will simply *admit* that pain is an evil, and that (because an evil is not (in itself) a good) pain is not in itself a good. (The theist will likely hold (as she should) that an evil is, at best, only

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<sup>30</sup> Note that, if such a world is not conceptually impossible, given his omnipotence (premise 1) God could have chosen to actualize W\*. It may help to think of it as follows. Is there anything **incoherent** about epiphenomenalism? Certainly not, it seems. It may not be a very plausible picture of what is going on in the *actual* world, but it surely isn't conceptually impossible that it could obtain in some other possible one. Now, if this much is granted, consider the following: in essence, all that (4) is committed to is a modest extension of epiphenomenalism. The latter holds that mental states bear no necessary connection to their corresponding brain states, and that mental states are causally inefficacious. (4), by contrast, only maintains (i) that this is the case with respect to *one* particular kind of mental state (i.e., pain), and (ii) that given the denial of (strong) mental supervenience, to which epiphenomenalism is committed, it follows that there can be a world in which pain—rather than being epiphenomenal—is *altogether absent*, since from the point of view of causal concerns, it comes to the same thing. Needless to say, the foregoing remark is merely a sketch of the position I aim to defend, and is included here only for the purpose of foreshadowing things to come. (In particular, see §2.4 below.)

<sup>31</sup> In this connection, *N.B.*: it is “not inconsistent with the belief that pain is evil in itself to say that its existence may sometimes have good results (the virtue of forgiveness could not exist if no one acted wrongly toward his fellow-men; but this does not make moral evil into moral good). All that need be said is that these good results of pain (if they do occur) do not occur necessarily, and therefore do not detract from the evil character of pain as such. When it is said that pain is evil, the reference is to intrinsic evil; and there is no reason why intrinsic evil should not sometimes have good consequences” (Kemp, 1954: 20).

instrumentally good.) But (4) claims that there is a world in which it is unnecessary for the achievement of other goods, even if it is responsible for those goods in W.

(8) is a conclusion that can be deduced from the preceding premises, but it is not used in the subsequent steps of the argument since the same conclusion can be (and is) established in a clearer way, as in (11).

Apart from (4), it is (9) that stands in particular need of defense. However, it should be noted that in fact this claim reflects significant concessions to the theist that deserve to be highlighted; and, I hope, it will become clear that there is no coherent way of challenging it. (9) introduces the idea of “divinely-desired goods.” By this, I mean *any and all* goods that God would desire to obtain in his creation. For instance, recall that Hick’s project is to show how soul-making is one such good-in-itself (in fact, an *overarching* good); this process of spiritual growth, which culminates in a freely-chosen relationship with God, requires various forms of suffering. We can concede this for the sake of argument, and point out that it is *not* a violation of (9) that there exists disease, mental suffering, moral evil (et cetera), since these things are necessary for the divinely-desired good-in-itself just mentioned. Our strategy is to treat such goods as “necessary” ends and to concede that, being means to those ends, such forms of evil are part of the best world compatible with all divinely-desired goods-in-themselves. The same, however, cannot be said for physical pain, as the argument for inconsistency above claims. The idea here is that a world containing any evils that are unnecessary for the fulfillment of the intrinsic goods that God desires for his creation will be a world that contains *gratuitous evils*, or evils the existence of which cannot be justified by way of an appeal to some morally sufficient reason. If we had access to the divine perspective and could compile a complete inventory of the intrinsic goods that have a place in God’s plan, we would be able to tie any particular evil back

to one of these goods<sup>32</sup>; if we were unable to do so, we would have identified an *unnecessary* evil (unnecessary, that is, from the moral point of view).<sup>33</sup> In this way, it is not at all controversial to claim that (9) can be deduced from God's omnibenevolence (premise 2) in conjunction, of course, with his omnipotence (premise 1).

Because (10)-(12) all follow straightforwardly once (1)-(9) are accepted, this completes our preliminary examination of *AP*.

## §2.4 Epiphenomenalism, Zombies, and Theism

Before moving on, in the following chapter, to a more thorough defense of our argument, it will be helpful first to make a general observation about the argumentative strategy I've employed with *AP*. It seems clear that a viable argument from evil must make direct appeal to Rowe's position that if God exists there *must be* (whether we can specify it or not) an outweighing good connected directly to every instance of suffering we observe; for, as even Wykstra admits, denying this is

tantamount to saying that God could allow some intense suffering either because he enjoys the sight of occasional suffering for its own sake, or because he is indifferent to it. It is hard to see how such a being could be meaningfully praised as a *good* God... (1990: 141-142)

Now, the chief motivation behind structuring an argument from evil in the way that I have is that, if successful, it *altogether eliminates* the possibility of specifying an MSR for the existence of pain; this strategy, in other words, has the virtue of enabling us to demonstrate the falsehood of (5) from §1.1.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> If not, we'd at least be able to say that for a particular evil, if that evil had not obtained then some equally-bad or worse evil *would have*.

<sup>33</sup> Our task, of course, is to show that physical pain is one such evil.

<sup>34</sup> Recall that it was precisely this claim—viz., that it is possible that God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil that exists—that forced the move away from a logical version of the problem and toward the more recent probabilistic versions discussed in §1.2.

Our claim is that (G) God has no MSR for allowing us to experience pain, and our task is to provide strong support for thinking that (G) is true. But, as was argued in §1.4, the onus is ultimately on the theist to show that (G) is false. In order to do this, the theist needs to specify an MSR for any given instance of evil.<sup>35</sup> So now we can ask the theist: given what has *already* been said, what MSR could there possibly be for the phenomenal experience of pain?

By way of wrapping up our assessment of Hick's theodicy (from §1.5), suppose that the theist held (along roughly soul-making lines) that the phenomenal experience of pain is just as important to our spiritual growth and the cultivation of our relationship with God as is, say, mental suffering; in other words, *soul-making* is God's MSR for not preventing us from experiencing the phenomenal experience of pain. *Without even taking into account* the content of the following three sections of this thesis, we are already in a position to disconfirm this hypothesis with the following response. Cases of CISP allow us to say that there are some people who experience pain and some who do not. But this in itself shows that pain cannot be necessary for the soul-making process, unless the theist is willing to claim that those afflicted by CISP are put at a spiritual disadvantage by virtue of their disability (in which case, the problem of evil becomes the (equally serious) problem of justifying the lot of those unfortunate few afflicted by the disorder). Thus if soul-making occurs *at all*, it must be possible for it to take place in the absence of physical pain. So Hick's theodicy is impotent to provide a successful response to our formulation of the problem of evil.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> If the theist is in possession of an MSR (via, presumably, theodicy), our argument fails and will not pose a problem for the rationality of the theist's belief. But being *unable* to specify an MSR—and thus being unable to show why the premise that there *is no MSR* fails—means not being in possession of a belief that would render one's belief in God rational.

<sup>36</sup> It is the fact that physical pain is the one form of suffering that is *not* common to all people (since some individuals have CISP) that allows us to formulate the problem in the above manner and to draw the negative conclusion for Hick's theodicy. (We obviously couldn't say, "there are some people who experience (mental)

Consider the following illustration, which is intended to demonstrate more persuasively the potential force of our MSR-eliminating construction of the argument. Suppose (as I do *not*) that epiphenomenalism is true in the actual world, W. So in W, physical events cause mental events, but mental events cause no physical events. That is just to say that mental events cause *nothing*. *Qua* phenomenal experience, the experience of pain counts as a mental event; so if epiphenomenalism obtains in W, then in the actual world the phenomenal experience of pain causes nothing. Now, recall that in order for an MSR to exist for some evil E, it must be the case that E is necessary for the production of some outweighing good G. In other words, without E, G could not occur. But if we take E to be the phenomenal experience of pain, it is immediately clear that (on the assumption of epiphenomenalism) there can in principle be no G for which E is necessary. Thus, there can be no MSR for epiphenomenal pain. This is simply because epiphenomenal pain causes *nothing*, much less a morally-justifying or overriding good.<sup>37</sup>

So one tangential conclusion we can draw at this point is that *the theist cannot be an epiphenomenalist*. If epiphenomenalism is true in W, the problem of evil (as the problem of pain) surfaces in an essentially intractable form, viz., it *ensures* the logical inconsistency of the theist's beliefs. While this is a substantive development that, to my knowledge, has not been pointed out in the literature, it hardly constitutes a knock-down argument against theism. For, obviously, it is open to the theist to *deny* epiphenomenalism about mind and to argue that it is precisely because

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*suffering* and some who do not" –or, more generally, "there are some people who suffer evil and some who do not." This makes the case of pain uniquely qualified to serve as a *disproof* of Hick's *soul-making theodicy*.

<sup>37</sup> To reiterate: because epiphenomenal pain does not cause anything, there simply cannot be any overriding good (or anything else for that matter) that results from it, which means that there cannot be any morally sufficient reason for its existence.

of the foregoing considerations that God created a world in which the phenomenal experience of pain *does* cause things (among them, importantly, *good* things).<sup>38</sup>

Importantly, however, for our purposes we needn't demonstrate that epiphenomenalism obtains in the *actual* world in order to make our argument go through (although, if it were possible to do so, that certainly would be one way of establishing our conclusion); *rather*, it would suffice to show that (*EP*): there is a possible world in which it obtains. From there, we would merely need to point out that if such a world is possible, then: (4) so too is a world identical to ours but without the relevant phenomena altogether—which itself is uncontroversial since (on epiphenomenalism) everything could go on exactly as it does without phenomenal experience.<sup>39</sup>

But how might we establish *EP*? The one method that comes immediately to mind is the method most widely used in reasoning about possible worlds; it is the intuitive use of conceivability to establish possibility. The idea should be familiar: if we can coherently conceive it without contradiction, it is possible. But notice that if we grant the legitimacy of this method, we needn't even really bother going about establishing *EP* and deducing (4) from it after the fact; rather, we can use this very same method to establish (4) directly. In both cases, we're concerned with whether a particular counterfactual state of affairs (i.e., some possible world) exists, and it seems that the *only* plausible way of going about this is by putting faith in the inference from conceivability to conceptual possibility. As Yablo puts it:

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<sup>38</sup> To spell it out in more detail, the theist might say: "If God had actualized a world in which epiphenomenalism holds, whatever overriding, good purpose that pain *does* serve in our world would not be fulfilled in that one, and we'd be worse off because of it. But in the actual world, pain does cause things, and one thing it causes is an overriding good(s) which happens to be the basis for the morally sufficient reason God has for allowing pain."

<sup>39</sup> Cf. fn. 30.

...we have no other option than to rely on what we find conceivable in drawing conclusions about what can, and what cannot, happen...the vehicle of modal knowledge, if that knowledge can be obtained at all, must be our ideas [i.e., modal intuition]...Unless we are willing to give up our claims to knowledge about something about what could have happened, though it did not, it seems unavoidable that we treat conceivability as a respectable, if not infallible, guide to possibility...The point for now is simply that this *is* our policy; *within limits*, what we are able to conceive as possible, it is our practice to admit as possible... (1990: 179)

Once the move from conceivability to conceptual possibility is granted, it is easy to establish our conclusion. For reference, here once again is (4): “There is a conceptually possible world,  $W^*$ , *identical* to ours except it is a world in which sentient creatures do not have the phenomenal experience of pain.” There certainly seems not to be any good *prima facie* reason for thinking that  $W^*$  is inconceivable. On the contrary, it is *easy* to coherently conceive of such a world: we imagine that God uses his omnipotence to intervene and block the phenomenal experience of pain from emerging out of its physiological bases; in its place he endows us, perhaps, with an epistemic or cognitive faculty that conveys information about being in “pain” (i.e., a faculty that plays the same functional role as the phenomenal experience we actually have) without requiring that pain be felt. Because our pain-behavior would remain unchanged, the result,  $W^*$ , is identical to  $W$  save the experience of pain. (Note that this is only one way of establishing the conceivability of (4).)

Nonetheless, some philosophers would simply deny either the conceivability or the possibility of  $W^*$ , insisting that the preceding imaginative construction involves some sort of confusion. In §3.2, I explain in detail—along roughly Kripkean lines—*why* it is sometimes thought that this modal intuition is a product of confusion, and I attempt to show that these worries are inapplicable to our own case. This undertaking is preceded, in the following section (§3.1), by a discussion of mental supervenience.

Before turning to the topic of mental supervenience, however, I pause briefly to take note of important structural features my argument shares with Chalmers' well-known conceivability argument (2002: 249); once these argumentative similarities have been noted, it is possible to draw a conclusion which should be of interest both to theists and to philosophers of mind.

Of course, the aim of Chalmers' argument (i.e., to establish that consciousness is nonphysical) bears no resemblance to the aim of ours, and so I'll merely highlight the relevant deductive step in his argument:

1. It is conceivable that there be zombies.
2. If it is conceivable that there be zombies, it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies.

From this, of course, we can deduce: (3) It is metaphysically possible that there be zombies. I mention Chalmers' argument in this context because (3) asserts a claim *almost* equivalent to (4) in *our* argument. In fact, (4) is a weaker claim than (3), since it is committed not to the possibility of zombies with *no* consciousness, but rather to the possibility of what Chalmers calls "partial zombies", i.e., creatures physically identical to us but with "*some* experiences absent"<sup>40</sup> (2002: 249).

Nonetheless, Chalmers' argument—because of the conclusion about physicalism that it ultimately draws—is highly controversial, and so we ought not appeal to it as a way of buttressing our own argument for (4). However, I *would* like to point out a tangential conclusion that can be drawn from the above considerations (supplementing the conclusion drawn earlier about the incompatibility of theism and epiphenomenalism): *if a theist is also a dualist, she cannot consistently employ a zombie argument such as Chalmers' in support of her dualism.*

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<sup>40</sup> Emphasis added.

This is because, as we have seen, an endorsement of that argument leads inexorably to an endorsement of (4); and once this premise is accepted, the theist has no way out of our formulation of the problem of evil. That, however, marks off the precise extent of the scope of this result. Clearly it will not do to assume that all theists are dualists; much less will it do to suggest that those who *are* must endorse their dualism on the basis of a zombie argument.<sup>41</sup> And so, as mentioned earlier, a conceivability argument such as Chalmers' does not *in itself* support (4). In fact, insofar as Chalmers' argument is deemed unsatisfactory, it may even be thought to furnish indirect support for the *denial* of our claim.

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<sup>41</sup> However, perhaps the following remark is worth making. There is every reason to believe that among contemporary philosophers, theists disproportionately embrace dualism. If that is so, then it is also fair to assume that among those who endorse an anti-physicalist argument such as Chalmers', theists are in the majority. So, if we can show that theism is incompatible with such an argument, even though we will not have necessarily struck a blow to either theism or dualism themselves, we will have shown that Chalmers' argument—even if successful—can be consistently endorsed by only a minority of those who actually do endorse it. To put it differently: if one is a theist, one cannot consistently defend dualism on the basis of such an argument; conversely, if one is a dualist on the basis of such an argument, one cannot also rationally maintain theism.

### §3.1 Theism and Mental Supervenience

How, then, are we supposed to determine the truth or falsehood of (4)? It seems clear, I think, that *unless* we can provide a strong defense for the reliability of the inference from conceivability to possibility in the case in question, our assessment of (4)'s truth-value will hinge on our view on the related question of *mental supervenience*. In §3.2 I turn to the more difficult task of defending the inference from conceivability to possibility; at present, I address (in brief) this question of supervenience in the hope that some headway can be made by considering the compatibility of various mental supervenience theses with the basic tenets of theism.

Making the success of our argument dependent upon the outcome of a debate on a matter as controversial as supervenience would, with little doubt, be imprudent. Fortunately, however, we do not need to argue for a particular supervenience claim; rather, we need merely to show that the position on mental supervenience that's required to keep (4) afloat is a position that would not be reasonable for the *theist* to reject. In other words, it is not necessary that we make the denial of strong mental supervenience plausible. All that we have to show is that the *theist* cannot endorse this kind of supervenience.

To that end, it will be useful to recall once again that our argument is being presented *to* the theist; so, if helpful, we can legitimately incorporate her core beliefs into the premises of an argument against strong mental supervenience. The theist is committed to God's omnipotence, so let's see if that fact is of any help. That is, assuming (i) God's existence and his omnipotence and (ii) mental supervenience of *some sort or other*, can we draw any conclusions about how strong this supervenience can be?

At least one thing is clear: the theist cannot endorse a form of supervenience that undermines God's omnipotence. Weak supervenience, in focusing on what goes on *within* a given possible world, is not a problem.<sup>42</sup> *Strong* supervenience, on the other hand, concerns *all* possible worlds<sup>43</sup>: according to Kim, B-properties strongly supervene on A-properties if and only if for any possible worlds P and Q and for any objects x in P and y in Q, if x in P is A-indiscernible from y in Q, then x in P is B-indiscernible from y in Q (1987: 317).

If this is fleshed out as the claim that you get B-properties 'automatically' without needing anything further, this need not necessarily pose problems for the theist, so long as she can still maintain that God *could* (if he *desired* to intervene in that process) keep the A-properties the same in both worlds, but block the emergence of B-properties in one of them. But to *deny* that God could do this is to place a limit on his power that is ostensibly not a logical (i.e., conceptual) limit, since (as already noted) there seems to be no *prima facie* logical (i.e., conceptual) impossibility involved in the act; placing such a limit is, from the perspective of anyone who maintains God's omnipotence, unacceptable. At first blush, then, these considerations suggest that the theist must *not* endorse the strong sort of mental supervenience that would be required in order to block the establishment of (4) and thereby prevent our argument from going through.

Unfortunately, things are not quite so simple. A clear implication of my position is that God's omnipotence includes the ability to do the *nomologically impossible*. This is to say that God has (or at least once *had*) it within his power to alter the (or at least to have *chosen different*)

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<sup>42</sup> The idea here is that it says nothing about God's omnipotence that mental supervenience happens to hold in, say, the actual world. For we can assume that the existence of a given supervenience relation is not the result of an inability (of God's) to prevent it from obtaining. But, strictly speaking, omnipotence would seem to require even the ability to violate *weak* supervenience *were it the case* that God desired to do so.

<sup>43</sup> See Klagge's (1987: 315).

laws of nature. In particular, I am committed to its being within God's power to have chosen different *psychophysical* laws.

Even so, my argument is vulnerable to an obvious objection: if the theist is prepared to endorse an identity theory of mind, the argument I've constructed will not pose any problems for her view. This is because, as a "type-A materialist", according to Chalmers she will hold the view that "consciousness, insofar as it exists, supervenes *logically* on the physical..."<sup>44</sup> (1997: 165). To the extent that the identity theory of mind can successfully be defended on independent grounds, her position entitles her to the attendant view that it is not *logically* (or conceptually) possible for God to interfere with psychophysical laws, which means that it cannot count against his omnipotence that he didn't do so.

It is indeed true that this move allows the theist to escape from our argument unscathed. But it is arguably the *only* way of doing so. And, *importantly*, I suspect that few theists are willing to bite the bullet and to embrace an identity theory of mind, as this creates a *prima facie* (albeit defeasible) tension with other commitments<sup>45</sup> in the typical theist's overall system of beliefs.

But even this path would be closed to the theist were we to make one small concession enabling us to present a reworked version of our argument. This version would circumvent the problem just discussed as follows. Instead of requiring that W and W\* be identical in all physical respects (and differ only with respect to the presence or absence of the sensation of pain in those worlds), we can stipulate that W and W\* are only *functionally or behaviorally identical*: if

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<sup>44</sup> Emphasis added. This concession is key. For, in all cases but the case of identity theory, strong mental supervenience is not taken to mean *logical* supervenience.

<sup>45</sup> I.e., a commitment to some form of dualism, or at least immaterialism with respect to the existence of the soul, etc.

viewed ‘from the outside’ they would be indistinguishable in terms of events or happenings. This modification allows us to hold, less controversially, that in W\* there is not only an absence of pain but also an absence of C-fiber stimulation; this makes it possible to sidestep problems raised by those who claim an identity between C-fiber stimulation and pain.

When modified in this way, our argument nonetheless secures essentially the same result as our original argument: W\* is a better world than W because nowhere in it do we find the sensation of pain, and yet because everything else that happens in W\* is identical to what takes place in W, specifying an MSR for the pain in W is still impossible (unless, of course, the theist wants to claim that pain is an *intrinsic* good). Again, the two worlds *will* differ in terms of neurophysical events, but it has been stipulated that this occurs in such a way that its only impact is to deprive subjects of the sensation of pain; so, to repeat, the two worlds are still otherwise identical (at least on the macro, observable, or behavioral level). And yet, this revised strategy makes it possible to *entirely set aside* the question of mental supervenience with which we were previously concerned. All we need to maintain is that certain different physical configurations would have led to states of affairs in which human beings did not experience the sensation of pain but still behaved identically to their counterparts in the actual world (since behavioral states are multiply realizable).<sup>46</sup>

It may be objected that a painless sensation that nonetheless plays the same functional role as pain is not possible, but this objection seems merely to suggest an imaginative deficiency

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<sup>46</sup> In effect, our revised argument retains the original intermediate premises about conceivability and possibility, but changes the definition of ‘partial zombie’: it is *now* defined as something behaviorally identical (rather than both behaviorally *and* physically identical) to its human counterpart in W. (This move removes some of the original tension between our argument and physicalism, but it may still be objected that either (i) partial zombies, conceived as such, are not actually conceivable or (ii) that they’re conceivable but not possible. Whereas (i) had some force as an objection to our original argument, it seems much less likely to pose problems for this revised version. What about (ii)? Is it perhaps the case that the original temptation to deny the inference from conceivability to possibility is removed when we change the definition of zombies in this way?)

on the part of our interlocutor: first, surely the evolution of the sensation of pain is just as contingent and arbitrary (in the sense that it could have been replaced by some other more or less useful property) as is any other physiological characteristic of living organisms. But if that's so, then it would be implausible to maintain that *only* pain (in its actual incarnation) is capable of playing the important role that it does. Second, and more importantly, certainly we can conceive of a world in which pain has been replaced by a non-painful sensation and yet people go on avoiding things we, in the actual world, regard as painful; this would require only that our counterparts in that world acquire the knowledge that their painless sensation warns them of harm, just as we, in the actual world, acquire the knowledge that pain warns us of harm. (For empirical evidence that this can and does happen, see §3.3 below.)

Now, the theist might claim that since, on this revised argument, W and W\* differ not only with respect to the sensation of pain, but now *also* with respect to neurophysical events, it is open to the theist to assert that God has some MSR bound up with the particular neurophysical events upon which the sensation of pain supervenes in the actual world. But surely such an objection is not very strong. For, in what sense can it reasonably be claimed that a particular set of neurophysical events A is intrinsically better than another set B when they lead to identical behavioral and functional events but differ only with respect to the fact that in fact it is B that appears better (since, unlike A, it does not lead to the sensation of pain)?

### **§3.2 Conceivability and Possibility: A Closer Look**

In the previous section, we saw that unless the theist is prepared to adopt an identity theory of mind, any mental supervenience thesis she might hold will not prevent our argument from going through; and that if our argument is modified appropriately, even the identity theory of mind is unable to pose serious problems for our formulation of the problem of evil. But recall

that this state of play holds *only if* we are unable to provide convincing reasons for thinking that it is legitimate to make the inference from conceivability to possibility in the case at hand. If we *can* provide such reasons, we will be able to move significantly beyond the results of the preceding section.

Our first objective, then, is to spell out exactly *why* it is sometimes thought that the inference from conceivability to possibility misfires in the case of C-fiber stimulation and its imagined ability to come apart from pain. No one will maintain that “pain = C-fiber stimulation” is an a priori necessary truth; but it can be, and often is, maintained that this alleged identity is an a posteriori necessary truth of the sort Kripke discusses in *Naming and Necessity*.

It is this notion of a posteriori necessity that generates *prima facie* difficulties for our view. The *pre*-Kripkean view of the relation between conceivability and possibility stems from the idea that P is *Conceivable* (a term of art) if and only if it is not a priori that not-P: “if all and only a priori truths are necessary truths, then all and only Conceivable truths are possible truths” (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2002: 32). But on the *post*-Kripkean view, this accounts fails. Because Kripke (and Putnam) showed that there are a posteriori necessities (e.g., water = H<sub>2</sub>O), it can, as a consequence, be necessary that not-P even if it is not a priori that not-P; this, in turn, means that it can be Conceivable that P in spite of its not being possible (2002: 33).

Some philosophers (such as Putnam) take these difficulties to mean that the tie between conceivability and possibility is generally unreliable and not to be trusted. This, for obvious reasons, would spell trouble for our argument. But, as Gendler and Hawthorne (2002: 9) point out, *most* philosophers seem to think that—even in the absence of a “fully satisfying

explanation” of the connection between the two—something’s being conceivable is a good *prima facie* indicator that it is possible.<sup>47</sup>

Nonetheless, it is beyond dispute that there are *some* cases where conceivability seems to lead us astray as a guide to possibility. (Were one to conceive of water not being H<sub>2</sub>O, one would be conceiving of something impossible.) This fallibility in the inference from conceivability to possibility is an obstacle to the success of our argument insofar as it might be thought that we are led astray in *this particular case*.

So what reasons are there for thinking that we *are* so led? In fact, there are two possible ways in which we could be led astray in the case at hand: as the preceding suggests, we could be wrong to infer possibility from conceivability—and to that objection I will turn momentarily; but we could also be wrong to think that we are conceiving what we think we are when we imagine a world such as W\*. Specifically, we may *not* be entitled to our claim from §2.4 that it is easy (or at least possible) to coherently conceive of such a world by imagining that God uses his omnipotence to block the phenomenal experience of pain from emerging out of its physiological bases: despite whatever convictions we might have to the contrary (the objection runs), we simply are *not* conceiving what we take ourselves to be conceiving when we try to imagine W\*.

But what positive reasons can actually be given for thinking that we run into error by the very act of conceiving of such a world? In fact, there is at least one positive reason for thinking that we do *not*: Consider the fact that we could in principle be mistaken about the existence of other minds. (Call this *SM*) This is a state of affairs we can coherently conceive (hence the

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<sup>47</sup> Even philosophers such as Hill—who have a vested interest in demonstrating the unreliability of our modal intuitions in establishing possibility in *at least some cases*—nonetheless take great pains to avoid a general skepticism about our ability to possess knowledge of modal facts (1997: 82): “No argument that [as a perhaps unintended or unforeseen consequence] calls the general run of our claims to have modal knowledge into question can be fully satisfactory, for we feel sure that we possess a fairly large amount of such knowledge.”

intelligibility of skepticism about other minds), and on that basis we feel confident in concluding that, although it ranks among the most *improbable* of all metaphysical theses, surely there is nothing conceptually *impossible* about that being the case in the *actual* world; and, importantly, as a thesis about mental content *simpliciter* it implies the narrower thesis that it is not contradictory to imagine the absence of one *kind* of mental content (i.e., painful qualia) in some *possible* world. *SM* makes the commitment that multiple (phenomenal) states of affairs are compatible or consistent with the same behavioral evidence; if this is not conceptually incoherent and hence not impossible (and it surely is *not*), then neither can *W\** be impossible.

What about the idea that—even if we *are* capable of a coherent conception of *W\**—this nonetheless fails to establish its possibility? Recall that we only need to maintain that if something is conceivable it will *usually* be possible and that one is *justified* in believing that a thing is possible on the basis of its conceivability; thus we can (and ought to) admit that conceivability arguments are, after all, fallible (1993: 11). Is there, however, a more serious difficulty with such arguments? Here is one possibility Yablo considers: “*perhaps* I had it appear to me that *p* was possible only because I somehow missed the fact that *p* was not possible” (1993: 12).<sup>48</sup> But, as Yablo puts it elsewhere:

...I take it that it gives me *no* real reason not to trust my intuition that [it is possible for there to be C-fiber stimulation and yet no pain], to be told that that intuition might be due, in part, to my ignorance of what might, for all I know, be the fact that [it is *not* possible for there to be C-fiber stimulation and yet no pain] (1990: 187).

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<sup>48</sup> Perhaps, rather, the modal skeptic’s objection is that “no independent evidence exists that conceivability is a guide to possibility—no evidence obtainable without reliance on the faculty under review” (1993: 3). Yablo’s response to this—which seems right—is to readily concede the skeptic’s point, but to point out that neither is there any independent evidence that perception is reliable about actuality; and “if the worst that can be said about conceivability evidence is that it is as bad as perceptual evidence, that may be taken as grounds for relief rather than alarm” (1993: 3).

The reason that this fact is impotent to dissuade me from my intuition is that such a concern could only have any weight for me if I already had some reason for thinking that in this particular case the conceivability of this state of affairs fails to suggest its possibility. Yablo's own phrasing of this insight is useful:

Absent specific and overriding grounds for doubt, perception affords a (defeasible, but that goes without saying) basis for belief...Not to minimize their differences, [but] conception seems analogous to perception in this respect: absent specific grounds for doubt, *p*'s conceivability as possible *prima facie* justifies me in the belief that *p* is possible...(1990: 181).

Provided that Yablo is right about this, we can ask: what are the *specific and overriding grounds for doubt* in the case at hand? It is not at all clear what these grounds might be; but there are, by contrast, good *prima facie* reasons for thinking that this is *not* a case where it is possible to have conceivability without possibility.

First, consider that—at least on the face of it—it seems entirely implausible that 'pain' rigidly designates C-fiber stimulation. If we had been constituted somewhat differently, such that our nociceptive pathways contained  $\delta$ -fibers instead of C-fibers, it *still* could have been possible for the stimulation of such fibers to produce pain. To put the point somewhat differently: Do we really think that—even in the actual world (not to mention some merely possible one)—if, say, we were to encounter extraterrestrials capable of feeling pain, it would be *impossible* for the cause of their pain to be anything other than C-fiber stimulation?

Let's consider a second reason for thinking that conceivability does establish possibility in our particular case. Although it was Kripke's discussion of a posteriori necessity that got us into this mess, his *own* view (1972: 144-155), for what it is worth, is that pain and C-fiber stimulation are *not* identical; that is—unlike “water = H<sub>2</sub>O” or “heat = molecular motion”—“pain = C-fiber stimulation” is *not* an a posteriori necessity. Why does he hold this view?

According to Kripke, whenever we have a case where it appears to be possible (i.e., a case where it is conceivable) that two properties X and Y are separable (and thus non-identical), unless the appearance of separability can be explained away, *it really is the case* that they are separable (and thus non-identical); as Hill puts it in his summary of Kripke's argument:

In general, if X is a commonsense natural kind and Y is a scientific kind that can plausibly be identified with X, then there is a tendency for it to appear to us that X is separable from Y. However, it is possible in most cases to explain away the apparent separability of X and Y by attributing it to a tendency to confuse X with a different property [read: *you're not really imagining what you think you are!*]*—*a property [call it Z] that normally guides us in recognizing instances of X, but that is only contingently connected with X (1997: 63).

But, according to Kripke, the apparent separability of pain and C-fiber stimulation *cannot* be explained away in this manner. In Hill's words:

...there is no property Z such that (a) instances of Z are normally instances of *being a pain*, (b) this connection between Z and *being a pain* is contingent, and (c) we normally recognize instances of *being a pain* by identifying them as instances of Z. *Being a pain* is *itself* the property that guides us in recognizing instances of *being a pain* (1997: 64).

In case this is not entirely perspicuous, consider the following illustration. Suppose one sought to deny the necessary identity of heat and molecular motion. We can explain this person's intuition that the two can come apart by pointing out that the sensation of heat does, admittedly, fix the reference of 'heat.' But nonetheless the sensation of heat does not *define* 'heat.' Heat, after all, is identical with molecular motion (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2002: 37-39).

Now suppose one sought to deny the necessary identity of pain and C-fiber stimulation. Can we offer a similar explanation of this person's intuition in the case at hand? *No, we could not*; for it would *not* be open to us to say: "the sensation of pain does, admittedly, fix the reference of 'pain.' But nonetheless the sensation of pain does not *define* 'pain.' Pain, after all, is identical to C-fiber stimulation." The reason we cannot say this is that, unlike heat, pain

is not picked out by one of its accidental properties; rather it is picked out by the property of being pain itself, by its immediate phenomenological quality. Thus pain, unlike heat, is not only rigidly designated by ‘pain’ but the reference of the designator is determined by an essential property of the referent (Kripke, 1972: 152).<sup>49</sup>

Thus pain and C-fiber stimulation *are* separable (and therefore non-identical). Or so Kripke’s argument goes.

### §3.3 Empirical Support: Phantom Limb Pain and CISP

In this final section I discuss empirical evidence that supports the claims I have made in this chapter; it is evidence that provides strong reasons for thinking that what might have at first seemed to be a controversial modal claim about pain ought in fact to be uncontroversial. First I will discuss relevant research on phantom limb pain, and then I will move on to cases of CISP.

Phantom limb pain, or the experience of pain in a missing limb (typically after amputation), is a condition the pathophysiological mechanisms of which are unclear; the most dominant hypothesis is that injury of nerve fibers either before or during amputation causes “lasting changes in the synaptic organization of the spinal cord or even the brain that lead to painful somatosensory memories”—memories which in turn produce the sensation of pain (1995: 223). Baron & Maier (1995) attempt to better understand this bizarre process by way of a case study of a 47-year-old amputee; their objective is to answer the question: “Where are neuronal structures located that are responsible for phantom pain memories?” (1995: 225). Their case study—whose subject suffered from post-amputation phantom limb pain—suggests that “painful somatosensory memories that are responsible for spontaneous phantom limb pain are

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<sup>49</sup> Kripke’s view, then, is that—rather than rigidly designating C-fiber stimulation—‘pain’ rigidly designates the qualitative experience of pain.

located in the brain, most probably in the thalamus or cortex” (1995: 226). Their conclusion is that this is a brain-mediated phenomenon rather than the result of ongoing C-fiber activity.

Upon reflection, this is an entirely unsurprising conclusion to draw, since the nociceptors (i.e., the peripheral nerve endings which respond to harmful stimuli) corresponding to the location in which pain is felt *no longer exist!* Put simply: because the nerves which (in normal circumstances) would have fired and caused the sensation of pain no longer exist (since the limb has been amputated) it cannot be the case that this sensation of pain is the *result of* (much less *identical with!*) the stimulation of *those* C-fibers. This suggests, in a rather straightforward way, that the “pain = C-fiber stimulation” thesis fails.<sup>50</sup> Of course, one suspects that this is far too easy a victory; indeed, for reasons I will go into shortly, the foregoing form of argument is misleading and overstated in its conclusion.

But this conclusion—while perhaps a result to which we are not entitled on the basis of the argument above—would be *legitimately* established by scientific findings that individuals suffering from insensitivity to pain experience normal C-fiber activity. In fact, while most cases of CISP are accompanied by *abnormal* C-fiber count, appearance, or distribution,<sup>51</sup> there has been at least *one* case of this kind discussed in the literature.

Sandroni et al. (2006) describe a patient who demonstrates the inability to perceive pain in the complete *absence* of any detectable pathology: a sural nerve biopsy revealed normal

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<sup>50</sup> Similarly, when “pain = C-fiber stimulation” is construed narrowly (i.e., literally) it is, strictly speaking, disconfirmed in equal measure by the existence of neuralgia (a condition which involves, by definition, pain in the absence of nociceptor stimulation).

<sup>51</sup> Most individuals suffering from congenital insensitivity to pain have a type of hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy (HSAN), which comes in five varieties. All five types of HSAN have “involvement of the small-diameter C and A-delta fibers that transmit pain sensations” (2003: 214). In patients with HSAN I, for instance, examination of peripheral nerves “shows losses of all diameters of axons, with the greatest loss being C and A-delta fibers...” (2003: 215).

Nagasako et al. note that the relatively recent ability to detect (microscopically) nerve fiber pathology has made peripheral neuropathy a criterion for the diagnosis of insensitivity to pain” and that a “loss of peripheral afferents [and thus C-fibers] would be expected to cause deficits” in pain perception (2003: 214).

myelinated and unmyelinated fiber count, appearance, and size distribution; electron micrographs revealed no ultrastructural abnormalities of the patient's nerve fibers; magnetic resonance imaging of the spine and head was "unremarkable"; extensive blood and urine laboratory work returned normal results; no evidence was found of any peripheral sensory or autonomic nervous system abnormality; and, apart from the patient's deficits in pain perception, there was no abnormality of the central nervous system.<sup>52</sup>

And yet the patient was able to withstand—among other otherwise painful stimuli administered during testing—"maximal stimulation" of the dental pulp via electrical stimulation, stimulation that would be "unbearable to a normal subject..." (2006: 213). Indeed, not only was he able to *withstand* this stimulation of a nerve-rich (and thus C-fiber-rich) location—he reported feeling *no pain*, but only pressure.

This, then, is a case of both insensitivity to pain *and* normal C-fiber activity in the same subject, suggesting not *merely* that pain and C-fiber stimulation can come apart in some possible world, but that under unusual circumstances they can do so in the *actual* world—a much stronger conclusion than we even need to establish.<sup>53</sup> Of course, it is open to the proponent of "pain = C-fiber stimulation" simply to revise this alleged identity. She can point out that "pain = C-fiber stimulation" was really a sort of shorthand, and was meant to hold only in the absence of some abnormality at the biochemical or molecular level, effectively inserting a *ceteris paribus* clause in her statement of identity. (Something like the availability of this defense was the very reason our phantom limb pain argument was bound to fail.) Now while this defense does depend upon

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<sup>52</sup> This patient does *not*, in other words, satisfy the diagnostic criteria for any of the HSAN disorders.

<sup>53</sup> This is a finding which, I take it, would surprise Yablo, given his remark that "there are not to my knowledge any well-attested phenomena to suggest the possibility of a world like W [where W is a world where C-fiber firings are not felt as pain]" (2006: 25).

the perhaps weak thesis that there simply *must* be some physiological abnormality in the patient (and that this violates the *ceteris paribus* clause in her identity statement)—even though one could not be *found*; and while I am deeply skeptical of the plausibility of such a defense, I nonetheless set this matter aside in order to proceed to considerations which establish more clearly our desired conclusion.

The case which Sandroni et al. consider is unusual in another important way. We saw above that their patient presented no identifiable physiopathology, but consider also the following unexpected finding, on the topic of which it will be profitable to quote the authors at some length:

The clinical presentation of our patient also differs clinically from other reported cases of insensitivity to pain because of the absence of the stigmata of repeated injury. Patients with insensitivity to pain typically suffer from the cumulative effects of repeated injuries due to neglect of threatening stimuli and painless tissue damage. This patient was apparently not greatly affected in this way partly because other sensory functions were intact. Although he had certainly suffered various injuries, he had learned, over time, to avoid serious injury through vigilance and the use of other sensory modalities to react to his environment, albeit imperfectly. Furthermore, the presence of normal small fibers in him prevented the trophic [nutritional] changes commonly seen in sensory neuropathies (2006: 215).

This finding demonstrates that insensitivity to pain does *not* necessitate the miserable quality of life (and overall worse state of affairs) that we so readily (and, to be sure, correctly) associate with cases like Miss C.'s (as well as, for that matter, virtually all reported cases of CISP).

But even more striking than this finding is the conclusion we can draw from the case study discussed by Ploner et al. (1999). To begin with, some brief remarks on neuroanatomy are in order. The cerebral structures responsible for the processing of pain are divided into two systems: the lateral and the medial. The former has as its constituents the primary and secondary somatosensory cortices and the lateral thalamic nuclei; the latter consists of the medial thalamic

nuclei and the anterior cingulate cortex (Ploner et al., 1999). The medial pain system handles the motivational-affective dimension of pain and the lateral pain system handles the sensory-discriminative aspect. (At the peripheral level, A-delta fibers mediate “pricking first pain” while C-fibers mediate “dull second pain.”)

Recall that congenital *indifference* to pain involves a dissociation of the sensory-discriminative aspect of pain and the motivational-affective dimension: the individual perceives the pain (and experiences it as hurting) but is not motivated to avoid it. In this sense, cases of indifference to pain show that it is possible for the motivational-affective dimension and the sensory-discriminative dimension to *come apart*.

But Ploner et al. consider evidence which shows for the first time that it is possible for the two to come apart in the *other* direction: if an individual suffers lesions of primary and secondary somatosensory cortices (thus damaging the lateral pain system), the sensory-discriminative aspect of pain is inhibited; but because the motivational-affective dimension is handled by a *separate* system (i.e., the medial pain system), the individual will continue to have an aversive response to pain *even in the absence* of being able to perceive or sense it. In the case that Ploner et al. consider, this panned out as follows.

Because the location of the patient’s lesion (in the primary and secondary somatosensory cortices) was confined to those areas subserving only the left hand, while he could not perceive pain in that hand, his pain perception in his *right* hand was normal. Thus although his heat pain threshold in his right hand was normal, he was neither able to perceive as painful heat applied to his left hand nor determine even its *rough* location—even at temperatures much higher than those used on his right hand. This of course indicates total lack of function of the sensory-discriminative aspect of pain. But when the stimulus applied to his left hand equaled or exceeded

in temperature the stimulus applied to his right hand—although he could not perceive it as painful (and explicitly answered negatively when asked if he felt “burning”, “slight pain”, “moderate pain”, etc)—he nonetheless had a strong desire to *avoid* the stimulus, clearly indicating intact function of the motivational-affective aspect of pain (because, to repeat, mere “detection of and reaction to painful stimuli” requires neither that the sensation of pain be felt nor that the cortices which produce the sensation be functioning properly).

This bizarre result indicates rather vividly and forcefully the truth of the premise we have sought to establish: that it is possible *in the actual world* to have (what we might call) an *idealized* form of congenital insensitivity to pain—which I have claimed it would be possible for God to endow us with (if only in some merely *possible* world). That is, although insensitivity to pain *typically* involves not only (i) a greatly inhibited ability to avoid injury (which, however, the case of Sandroni et al. shows is *avoidable*), but also (ii) a loss of the motivational-affective (and hence *aversive*) aspect in addition to the loss of the sensory-discriminative aspect, it is nonetheless *possible* to preserve the motivational-affective aspect in the absence of the sensory-discriminative aspect. This is because the cerebral structures responsible for the two components are distinct. Thus, as Nagasako et al. write in their summary of Ploner et al.:

The case of Ploner et al. (1999) demonstrates that the affective-motivational component can be retained even in the absence of the sensory-discriminative component. *Importantly, this suggests that the absence of affective responses in individuals with HSAN [i.e., congenital insensitivity to pain] is not simply a consequence of loss of sensory discrimination but also involves loss of input to the medial pain system caused by the peripheral neuropathy* (2003: 218, italics mine).

The case discussed by Ploner et al. thus shows that it is possible, so to speak, *to have the good without the bad*. In effect, this finding *defeats* the objection that since the motivational-affective aspect of pain possesses a tremendous survival value, pain itself is a necessary evil. As Ploner et

al. put it, in remarking on their findings: “Our results demonstrate, for the first time in humans, a loss of pain sensation with preserved pain affect...” (1999: 211).

More importantly for our purposes, these findings show that *the task I have claimed that it is possible for God to perform*<sup>54</sup> *is in fact possible*—even in the *actual* world (in addition to merely possible ones): with the sensory-discriminative aspect of pain appropriately inhibited (and with the motivational-affective element of pain left intact) everything<sup>55</sup> could go on just as it does in the actual world without sentient creatures ever experiencing the sensation of pain.

This suggests that it is not even necessary to argue for the conceivability of W\* and (on the basis of that claim) for its possibility; if such a situation is “locally” actual, it is *ipso facto* “globally” possible!

Before moving on I pause to elaborate, albeit somewhat redundantly, on the sense in which the findings of Ploner et al. directly support the fourth (and weakest) premise of our

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<sup>54</sup> As in (4) from *AP*.

<sup>55</sup> This requires one important qualification. As William FitzPatrick has pointed out to me on numerous occasions, it seems that there must in any case be at least *one* additional difference between W and W\*. Although these empirical findings suggest that a person P in world W has a counterpart Q in W\* who abruptly pulls his hand off the hot stove just in case P would have done so, P and Q will have different mental content associated with their respective acts. Even if Q *does everything* in W\* that P does in W (as our case study suggests is possible), P’s own behavior will be more intelligible to himself than Q’s will be to *himself*; P will, for instance, understand in an immediate and transparent way *why* he pulled his hand from the stove. Arguably, Q will benefit from no such transparency.

This objection is both subtle and important. Indeed in one respect I do not know entirely how to handle it. However, I offer here two suggestions. First, suppose we grant this difference between P and Q, and hence between W and W\*. What follows? Well, just that there could be some morally sufficient reason for God’s allowing pain in W—an MSR that is bound up with *this very difference* between W and W\*. Do we really want to say, however, that transparency of one’s own behavior in cases of reaction to painful stimuli constitutes a good so great as to outweigh all of the evil (i.e., painful phenomenal experiences) it entails? Second, suppose we once again grant this alleged difference between W and W\*. Suppose this time, however, that we additionally grant the following: (a) that there is possibly an MSR of the kind described in my reply above, and (b) that the transparency of one’s own behavior is indeed a good so great as to outweigh all of the evil it entails. If this is so, then what shall we say about the individual Ploner et al. discuss—and, indeed, any *other* individual so afflicted? Since these individuals are in precisely the sort of situation I have suggested God should have actualized *globally*, if there is to be a morally sufficient reason for his not having done so, what can the morally sufficient reason be for his having allowed these *actual* individuals to have “suffered” in their current state? Thus, on the proposed theistic response under discussion, the problem of evil simply becomes the problem of justifying to Ploner et al.’s patient the lack of transparency in his own behavior. (Recall that a similar form of argument was used at the beginning of §2.4 to address Hick’s claim that soul-making is the MSR for pain.)

argument. Because, in the actual world, it is possible (by virtue of natural causes) for an individual to go about his life reacting to painful stimuli just as the rest of us, except without ever having the phenomenal experience of pain, it is plainly possible (by virtue of God's omnipotence) that we should have all gone about our lives reacting to painful stimuli just as we do, except without ever having the phenomenal experience of pain. And if this is so, then there *is* a possible world identical to ours, save the phenomenal experience of pain. *At most* we must acknowledge that constraints upon omnipotence might be such as to require, in that possible but non-actual world, corresponding alterations in our neurophysiological make-up in order to produce effects identical to those in the case discussed by Ploner et al.; if so, then our fourth premise is weakened *from*:

(4) There is a conceptually possible world,  $W^*$ , *identical* to ours except it is a world in which sentient creatures do not have the phenomenal experience of pain.

*to*:

(4') There is a conceptually possible world,  $W^*$ , identical to ours except that (i) it is a world in which sentient creatures do not have the phenomenal experience of pain; and (ii) it is a world in which certain neuroanatomical features of human beings' somatosensory cortices are slightly different from those of human beings in the actual world.

Now it seems to me self-evident that the incorporation in (4') of (ii) in addition to (i) cannot, *qua* concession, make the smallest difference to the strength of (4) as a premise in our argument.

Were one to hold otherwise, it would be necessary to maintain that—*in itself*—there exists a great and intrinsic morally-redeeming value in our somatosensory cortices being constructed in the precise manner that they are, rather than the way they would have been in  $W^*$ . In case it is not already evident, the patent absurdity of this position is not difficult to draw out: the

suggestion is that God's morally sufficient reason for the permission of all instances of the phenomenal experience of pain is tied directly to his desire that our somatosensory cortices be constructed in the precise manner that they are; and that their actual construction is, in itself, such a great good that its obtaining overrides the enormous positive value of their being constructed, instead, as described in W\*. I hope the reader will agree that, as a possible objection to (4'), this is not a promising line of thought.

### **Conclusion**

The empirical findings of §3.3 illustrate vividly, I hope, the truth of the fourth—and weakest—premise of our argument from §2.3. If this is so, then we need not even rely upon the inference from conceivability to possibility to establish the truth of that premise; we can pass over this controversial inference in silence, sidestepping that debate altogether.

But it is worth noting one further point. Suppose that someone pointed out that because these findings are empirical in nature, they are fallible; and because it is always possible that they are faulty somehow (e.g., that some methodological error was committed in either the collection of, or the analysis and interpretation of, these findings), they do not establish, in any ironclad way, the truth of (4) from §2.3.

Fair enough. But as we discussed at length in §1.2 and §1.3, our task is to provide strong rational support for the truth of (in our case) the fourth premise of AP—just as the theist's task is to provide strong rational support for the truth of her claim that there exists an MSR for all instances of evil. Fallible though they may be, these empirical findings allow us to fulfill this objective. In order to establish our conclusion that there is rational support for atheism (or perhaps even that it is irrational to be a theist), we do not need to establish anything further (such as, e.g., the much stronger claim that (4) is somehow a necessary truth).

But suppose that, for some unspecified reason, we'd nonetheless be wrong to apply these empirical results directly to the problem of evil in the specific way that I have in §3.3 in order to establish what seemed to be a decisive conclusion. Even so, these empirical findings would still play a central role in the defense of our argument from pain. This is because—even if we remain *within* a framework that makes necessary a reliance upon the inference from conceivability to possibility—these findings provide strong support for thinking that our intuition that pain and C-fiber stimulation can come apart is correct, and that this intuition does *not* belong to the class of faulty conceivings to which, for instance, Kripke's heat/molecular motion case belongs. (That is, the empirical results we've discussed provide good reason for thinking that it is *possible* for C-fiber stimulation and pain to come apart in the required way.) Likewise, these findings provide strong support for thinking that (as in our revised argument) when we imagine a world only functionally or behaviorally identical to ours (but in which no one suffers the phenomenal experience of pain), this is *not* on a par with, e.g., incorrectly taking oneself to have conceived of water not being H<sub>2</sub>O. For recall from §3.2 that—on nearly all accounts—unless we have some reason for thinking that a particular application X of the inference from conceivability to possibility is unreliable, we are justified in taking conceivability to support possibility in the case of X. That is because the inference—although fallible—is generally reliable. So not only is it not clear what reasons there might be for thinking that in this *particular* case the inference is *defective*; there are, on the contrary, positive reasons for thinking that it is *reliable*: namely, the findings discussed in §3.3.

And if the inference is reliable in our particular case, then we are entitled to either (4) or (4') from *AP*. But if we are entitled to either (4) or (4'), it is not clear (given the uncontroversial

nature of the remaining premises) how our argument's conclusion could fail to go through. Thus we have at our disposal a strong argument (as laid out in §2.3) for the nonexistence of God.

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