

Defending the Hypothesis of Indifference

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Abstract: *The problem of evil is the philosophical question regarding how to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God with the pain and suffering in the world. The Hypothesis of Indifference is Paul Draper’s proposal considering that question. His claim is that the pain and pleasure we experience in our lifetimes has nothing to do with God or some other supernatural force acting as an agent of good or evil. In this paper, I argue that Draper’s Hypothesis of Indifference is a better explanation for why we experience pain and pleasure than theism is and that it survives major contemporary criticisms posed by Peter van Inwagen and William Alston.*

Keywords: Problem of Evil, Theodicy, Suffering, Philosophy of Religion, Atheism

The Problem of Evil raises several important questions for theodicians—those who attempt to rationalize and argue for the existence of God despite the multifarious needless suffering in the world. Early evidential arguments from evil focused on instances of evil as proof that God is unlikely to exist,¹ and responses to those arguments from the theistic stance focused on analyzing what sort of epistemic access humans can have to the reasons for suffering and evil to begin with.² This has led to debates between philosophers about the epistemic access humans may have to know God’s moral positions.³

In contrast to these traditional positions, Paul Draper’s text, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” introduces a novel perspective—the Hypothesis of Indifference. Drawing from Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Draper contends that the pain and pleasure we experience in

¹ For further reading with respect to early evidential arguments from evil see Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 335–41.

² For further research into the origins of Draper’s theory, see Nozick, “Knowledge and Skepticism,” and the refutation of the evidential argument from evil most notably credited to Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’” 783–793.

³ For further reading see: Howard-Snyder, “Seeing through CORNEA,” 25–49.

our lifetimes has nothing to do with God or some other supernatural force acting as an agent of good nor evil. Furthermore, even if some God-like being did exist, it would be entirely indifferent to our suffering.⁴ His argument is influential because it extends the scope of those earlier evidential arguments from evil.

In this paper, I argue that Draper's case for the superiority of the Hypothesis of Indifference over theism survives existing criticisms from William Alston and Peter van Inwagen. After summarizing these objections, I present two supporting arguments: first, that the Hypothesis of Indifference explains the biological roles of pain and pleasure better than theism, and second, that expecting morally sufficient reasons for suffering in a theistic framework is reasonable. Finally, I address potential counterarguments and incorporate responses from Draper, concluding with some additional considerations on the roles of pain and pleasure and on Draper's position.

Draper argues that his Hypothesis of Indifference better explains the roles of pain and pleasure as biological functions in humans compared to theism. Moreover, he posits that certain aspects of how we experience pain and pleasure provide compelling reasons to reject theism. Pain and pleasure serve various biological purposes. For instance, pleasure serves as a means of encouraging human reproduction, while pain acts as a deterrent to prevent us from damaging our bodies. Humans experience pathological pain or pleasure when their biological system fails to function correctly. Similarly, biologically appropriate pain and pleasure responses occur when they serve some sort of biological function. If pain and pleasure either serve some biological imperative or are the direct result of some dysfunction in pain or pleasure response, then that real-world experience aligns with the Hypothesis of Indifference but would not align with a viewpoint under which pain and pleasure serves some moral goal. This implies that the probability of the Hypothesis of Indifference being true is much higher than the probability of theism.⁵

Draper's text had two major contemporary critics: Peter van Inwagen, and William Alston. For this discussion, I will begin by examining the critiques put forth by Van Inwagen. Van Inwagen claims that if Draper's argument were successful, then the Hypothesis of Indifference would, in fact, be a better explanation for why we experience pain and pleasure than theism is. However, he introduces a critical challenge for Draper's account: every possible world

⁴ Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," 338–39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

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