Int J Philos Relig (2009) 66:139–154
DOI 10.1007/s11153-009-9202-4

Privation theories of pain

Adam Swenson

Received: 12 May 2008 / Accepted: 10 December 2008 / Published online: 12 April 2009

Abstract Most modern writers accept that a privation theory of evil should explicitly account for the evil of pain. But pains are quintessentially real. The evil of pain does not seem to lie in an absence of good. Though many directly take on the challenges this raises, the metaphysics and axiology of their answers is often obscure. In this paper I try to straighten things out. By clarifying and categorizing the possible types of privation views, I explore the ways in which privationists about evil are—or should or could be—privationists about pain's evil.

Keywords Privation theories · Problem of evil · Physical evil · Suffering · Pain · Hick · Christian science · Privation

Augustine saw a privation account of evil as the only way to answer the problem of evil without falling into the Manichean heresy. Many of his successors have agreed. If evils are privations, they are not substances that God had to separately and intentionally create. They are mere ontological byproducts of creating finite beings. That's not to say that evils aren't real. It's just that they don't exist apart from particular goods and the particular substances in which they inhere. The hole in a donut is certainly real; it just doesn't exist apart from the dough. Or, put more technically, evils and holes *exist* but they do not *subsist*.[1]

Most modern privationists accept that a privation theory of evil should explicitly account for the evil of pain (it's less clear that their medieval antecedents saw

[1] For brevity, I'll sometimes speak loosely of privation theories 'solving' or 'answering' the problem of evil. But such theories only tell us what evil is. Strictly speaking, they are only one part of a theodicy. See *infra* n. 26.

A. Swenson (✉)
Department of Philosophy, California State University, Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8253, USA
e-mail: adam.swenson@csun.edu

pain as distinctively pressing). As Hume made clear, pain's evil poses a special set of challenges to any theodicy.[2] Unfortunately, though many directly take on these challenges, the metaphysics and axiology of their answers can be rather tangled.

In this paper, I'll try to straighten things out. I'll explore the ways in which privationists about evil are—or should or could be—privationists about pain's evil. My purpose here is simply exegetical and taxonomic. I won't evaluate the views at hand. Nor will I assess the solutions to the problem of evil that they suggest. These theories have been influential and popular.[3] It's thus worth focusing just on understanding what they can hold.

Because terms like 'pain', 'evil', and 'bad' can be used in importantly different ways, a few stipulations about usage and some conceptual assumptions will help anchor our discussion.

First, I'll assume that 'bad' and 'evil' can be used interchangeably in this context.

Second, I'll use 'pain' in a relatively broad sense to mean something like 'the experience of physical pain'. On this use, pains need not be merely painful sensations. For example, a pain's essential properties might include certain desires or emotions like fear.[4] I'll also take pain to be only one kind of suffering. I'll focus herein only on clear cases of physical pain; I won't use 'pain' to refer to grief, heartache, or other forms of suffering.

Third, pains are bad in many ways. They can ruin your day, indicate bodily damage, or interfere with your love life. But here I'll only discuss the badness of *pain per se*—very roughly, the way a pain is bad in itself (I'll use this interchangeably with 'badness per se'). This is the epistemically immediate badness of what it is like to be in pain. Brief reflection on a recent pain should yield a rough sense of this kind of disvalue that will suffice for this project. Of course, this category ushers in many deep issues. But aside from the assumption that badness per se is necessary—a thing has its badness per se in any possible world—these issues can be left unmentioned.

Fourth, by 'bad' I shall always mean *bad for*. An account of how x is bad for a person may not entail an answer to how it is *bad that* there is x, or vice-versa. On most understandings of the problem of evil, the problem arises with either sort of badness. Nonetheless, I think the former brings us closer to the heart of the problem. The problem of evil is most pressing and hardest when we are trying to square the way evils affect people and animals with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. Job's pain did diminish the total goodness of the universe. But that's not why it was a trial for him.

[2] For example, (Hume 1779, parts X and XI).

[3] As Hick describes the metaphysical situation "[Given Christian theological premises, evil] can only consist in a malfunctioning or disorder that has somehow come about within an essentially good creation. The privative view of the status of evil thus follows inevitably from various prior positions of Christian faith and is valid within this context." (Hick 1966, p. 186).

[4] This use accommodates common, though contentious, claims like 'pains are necessarily disliked' or 'necessarily feared'.

Our topic is therefore privationist accounts of the way an experience of pain in itself is necessarily bad for a person. These are the concepts that will always be at issue. But to save words I'll usually just say 'pain's badness'.

I'll begin with three challenges the nature of pain and its badness pose for privation theories of evil. I'll then introduce some distinctions to help taxonomize possible privation theories into some rough families by their structures and resources for meeting these challenges. I'll conclude by briefly putting this model into action by suggesting that, contrary to appearances, John Hick holds a kind of privation theory of pain's evil.

Three challenges

Challenge 1: Locate pain's badness in its phenomenology

Privationists hold that evils are absences. Yet pain as it is experienced seems like an entity unto itself. As Schilling points out

> Whatever may be the ultimate status of evil, as encountered in human life it is not the absence of anything, but an experience that is agonizingly present…. The relentless pain caused by malignant tissue is no more fictitious than the enjoyment of perfect health…. Evils like [pain] may have no essence of their own, but they hurt as much as any substantial evil could. The torment and distress they occasion remains undiminished by redefinition. They come to consciousness as evil, and they must be dealt with as such.[5]

Similarly, Kane claims that

> pain seems clearly to be more than merely the absence of its contrary opposite. There is a marked difference between a limb which merely lacks feeling—is numb or paralyzed or anesthetized—and one that is racked with pain. In the former case it is quite plausible to say that is merely a privation of something, namely normal feeling, that under usual circumstances would belong to the limb. But it is clearly inadequate to describe a limb aching with pain as suffering *merely* a privation of good health or normal feeling. When pain occurs in the body, there is something new and different in a person's experience which is not present when the body has simply lost feeling.[6]

These suggest an important challenge which privationists about pain's evil must overcome.[7]

It seems like an experiential—if not conceptual—datum that the way pains feel is a central part of what makes them bad. But pains don't seem to feel like absences.

[5] (Schilling 1977, pp. 93–94).

[6] (Kane 1980, p. 49).

[7] See also, for example, (McCloskey 1964, p. 65; Hick 1966, pp. 61–62).

Without some larger metaphysical background, a theory which places pain's badness outside of the way it feels is unlikely to survive a severely stubbed toe.

Challenge 2: Make pain a privation of the right sort of thing

Second, a privationist must tell us what pains are privations of. Cold is the absence of heat; ditches the absence of dirt; diseases the absence of health. But what about pain? The traditional suggestions that it is a privation of normal consciousness, pleasure, good health, et cetera, seem misguided. When you slam your fingers in a door, the fact that you're missing normal consciousness isn't at the heart of what seems bad about the pain. Mutatis mutandis for the others.

Challenge 3: Don't make the privation too ontologically positive

Third, the first two challenges suggest that pain's badness as a privation must lie in its phenomenology. But that seems to ascribe qualities to a privation that are too ontologically positive. Basing the badness in the phenomenology seems to require us to say that some privations hurt. But that sounds like a category mistake; like saying that a hole dug in the earth is brown. A hole's sides can have color. But holes themselves cannot. Similarly, how could a privation have pain's distinctive phenomenological qualities? Insisting that it does seems to slide quickly toward the claim that pain's evil subsists.

As we'll see in a bit, these challenges don't affect all privation theories equally.

The parts of a privation theory

Not every loss or absence is a privation. Aquinas writes:

> Because evil is the privation of good, and not a mere negation … not every defect of good is an evil, but the defect of the good which is naturally due. For the want of sight is not an evil in a stone, but it is an evil in an animal; since it is against the nature of a stone to see.[8]

Thus, a *privation* is a loss or absence in something that a thing of its kind ought to have. Put more carefully,

> P1: There is a privation of x if and only if something y lacks or loses x, and the nature of y is such that it ought to have x.

Privations are therefore parasites. They cannot exist apart from their host substances.[9]

[8] (Aquinas 1947, I, Q48, A5); see also (Aquinas 1947, I, Q48, A3).

[9] While holes and cold are common analogies used to explain privations, they are not privations in this sense. Cold is the absence of heat in something. But arctic air is not a great evil; nor is air better off in the tropics. Aquinas does sometimes say things like 'fire is an evil of water.' But this is the product of other features of his view. It needn't be a feature of P1.

The claim that x is evil because x is a privation involves at least two theses.

P2: x is an ontological parasite. x cannot exist apart from the substance in which it inheres.

and

P3: x is an axiological parasite. x is bad in virtue of its relationship to a privation of some good y.

If these were the whole of a privation theory, we should be able to infer the fact that x is bad from the fact that x is a privation of y. But even given the conception of privation in P1, satisfying P2 does not entail satisfying P3. There are at least two reasons for thinking that there is a conceptual gap between the ontological and axiological theses that a privationist must bridge with some additional claim.

First, the inference depends on an auxiliary claim about the relationship between teleological and evaluative facts—for example that what a thing does tells us about what is good for it.

Second, the conceptual gap between P2 and P3 can be brought out with a kind of open question argument. We can imagine a blind person who accepts that blindness is a defect in human beings but who denies that blindness per se is bad. The truth of this claim doesn't matter. It seems like we could have a substantive discussion about it (or about the tenability of the example). That would be a discussion of how to get from P2 to P3 for blindness. Thus the privationist needs a *bridge principle* to close this onto-axiological gap.

Medieval privationists like Augustine and Aquinas bridge the gap by holding something like

BEING: If x subsists, then x is in that respect good per se.[10]

On P1, the absence of a form of existence that a thing ought to have is a privation. Thus when BEING is combined with a claim like

DIMINUTION: It is bad per se to diminish good things

the fact that something is a privation entails that it is bad per se as a privation. As we'll see, other privationists might appeal to different bridge principles.

Five theories

Thus privationist theories have (at least) three elements—a metaphysical thesis, an axiological thesis, and a bridge principle. We can taxonomize privationist theories of pain's badness into five families by how they answer four questions.

About the metaphysical thesis we can ask:

[10] See, for example, Augustine's claim that 'Omnis natura bonum est.' (Augustine 1961, Ch. iv. 13).

Q1: What are pains privations of?[11]

About the axiological thesis:

Q2: Are pains bad as privations?

And, about the bridge principle:

Q3: In virtue of what privation is pain bad?
Q4: How does a privation make pain bad?

There are five basic families of privationist theory:[12]

T1: Pains are privations of x and bad in virtue of being privations of x.
T2: Pains are privations of x and are not bad.
T3: A pain is a privation of x and is bad in virtue of a privation y it accompanies. But x and y needn't be the same privation.
T4: Pains are privations of x and are bad in virtue of something that is not a privation.
T5: Pains are not themselves privations, but they are bad in virtue of their relationship to a privation.

These are conceptual categories. I'm not claiming that all of them have proponents or that the theories they encompass are plausible. Indeed, because few writers explicitly separate the metaphysical and the axiological aspects of privation theories, I suspect that many of these categories have gone unnoticed.[13]

I'll now discuss some resources each family has for meeting the three challenges and contributing to a theodicy which answers the problem of evil.

T1: Pains are privations of x and bad in virtue of being privations of x

T1 theories are the stereotypical privation theories we've been imagining so far. They claim that everything evil is a privation. Since they agree that pain is evil, they hold that pains are privations. They thus owe a bridge principle that can account for this. The claim that subsistence is good and that it's bad to diminish good things would be such a principle. Hence what I described above as a medieval privation theory is a T1 theory.

T1 theories face all three challenges. Because pains are privations, we must worry whether the theories adequately consider pain's phenomenology and whether they

[11] Putting this as a question about identity may be tendentious. I suspect it is conceptually possible for a privationist to hold that privations are necessary or sufficient (but not both) conditions of pain, or that some other metaphysical relationship holds between them. Thus other families may be possible. For simplicity, I'll only discuss identity.

[12] Since it takes us away from a privationist account of pain's evil, I won't directly discuss the completely negative answer T0: Pain is neither a privation nor bad.

[13] In illustrating these categories, I'll use existing views wherever possible. But in several places where a view has gone unnoticed, I'll have to rely on artificial and thinly described examples. Since these are constructed with an eye toward illustration and not truth, some of them may seem far-fetched. That should be taken as a strike against my imaginative faculties; not as a strike against the possibility of better theories with that structure.

capture enough of pain's essential properties without making the privation too ontologically positive to contribute to a solution of the problem of evil for pain.

T2: Pains are privations of x and are not bad

T2 theories suggest a simple, if hard line, answer to the problem of evil for pains: Pains aren't evil, so the problem of evil doesn't arise for them. Nonetheless, T2 theorists are at least privationists about the nature of pain. They don't deny that pain is an ontological parasite.

Since they deny that pains are bad it's odd to call T2 theories 'privation theories'. I do so for two reasons. First, they are solutions to the problem of evil for pain. Second, there are at least two conceptually possible kinds of T2 theory with different bridge principles. On a T2a theory, some, but not all, privations are evil. Pains aren't bad but other absences (perhaps of God's love) may be bad as privations. These theories' bridge principles would explain why not every privation is evil. For example, one might try restricting the class of bad privations to those which involve a person's relationship with God. That might allow sin, but not pain, to be bad as a privation. On a T2b theory, nothing is evil in virtue of its being a privation. The latter's membership in the privationist club is dubious. But the former's credentials are better.[14]

T2 theories don't face the first or third challenges. On these views pain isn't bad. Thus there is no need to locate pain's badness in the phenomenology or to make the privations ontologically positive enough to support the phenomenology and its badness. However, they do claim that pains are privations. Thus they face the second challenge. They must get the substrate of pain right.

T3: A pain is a privation of x and is bad in virtue of a privation y it accompanies. But x and y needn't be the same privation

On T3 theories, pain is a privation and is bad in virtue of a privation. But a pain could be the privation of one thing and bad in virtue of a privation of something else. This potentially locates the source of pain's badness outside of the pain itself. But this remains a privationist response to the problem of evil. Since pain's evil lies in a privation, the evil is something God didn't create.

Here's an ersatz view with this structure. Suppose, *arguendo*, that pain is just the privation of pleasure and that pain is always accompanied by bodily harm—a privation of bodily function. That is, x being a privation of pleasure is necessary and sufficient for x being a pain. But the absence of pleasure by itself isn't bad. Since there can be bodily harm without pain—for example, under anesthesia—the presence of bodily harm is a necessary but not sufficient condition of being in pain. Thus pains are privations of pleasure and bad in virtue of the privations of normal bodily function that always accompany them. On the assumption that badness per se is

[14] For one use of this distinction, see *infra* n.28.

the only kind of necessary badness, this would rest the badness of pain per se on a privation.[15]

I suspect all T3 theorists will have to dig in their heels against the first challenge and insist that the distinctive phenomenology of pain isn't really the source of pain's badness. Though those who claim that pains are the privation of pleasure or normal consciousness can at least appeal to some of the phenomenology, just not the intuitively most central part.

Like most other views, T3 theories will have to find a plausible substrate of pain to answer the second challenge. Different theories may favor different candidates. But it's unlikely that there are any problems here that are unique to T3 theories.

T3 theories try to avoid making the privation too ontologically positive by pawning pain's badness off on something else—like injury or disease—whose status and badness as a privation is more plausible. Whether they are successful in meeting this third challenge will depend on which privations they choose in answering the first and second challenges.

T4: Pains are privations of x and are bad in virtue of something that is not a privation

Schleiermacher may hold a T4 theory when he writes that

> as man, were he without sin would not feel what are merely hindrances of sensuous functions as evils, the very fact that he does so feel them is due to sin, and hence that type of evil, subjectively considered, is a penalty of sin.[16]

T4 theories suggest an interesting solution to the problem of evil. God doesn't create privations. Hence God doesn't create pain. Somehow we do.[17] Pain's badness then could lie in something ontologically positive outside of the pain. This could be a human construction. For example, pain's badness could lie in our reactions to it—in the fact that we don't like it or that we want it to stop. Even if we are wired so that we always hate pains whenever they occur, pain's badness would nonetheless come from us. Thus, as with T2 theories, on T4 theories it may be that God created neither pain nor pain's evil. But unlike T2 theories, T4 theories put pain's evil in something real.[18]

If we make pain bad by our reactions to it, the source and object of our reactions should be the way the pain feels. Thus, unlike T2 theories, T4 theories face all three challenges. They must explain how pain's badness lies in its phenomenology. This requires the delicate balancing act posed by the third challenge: They must give the

[15] NB, I've characterized T3 theories only as holding that there is *some* privation for *each* pain. Thus there is room for a T3 theory to hold that the relevant privations are of different kinds for different sorts of pain.

[16] (Schleiermacher 1928, p. 319), referenced in (Hick 1966, p. 226ff).

[17] Or perhaps the privation that is pain arises through the unguided evolution of life. I admit I have trouble imagining how these claims might be defended.

[18] Of course, on such a view God did create humans as the sort of beings that can be subject to the evil of pain. But that's not a problem for T4 theories alone. It's a general problem that many theodicies face equally.

phenomenology enough reality to be the sort of thing we can react to and impose badness upon without claiming that pains subsist in their own right.

Interestingly, some T4 theories may have less trouble meeting the second and third challenges than T1 and T3 theories. A T4 theorist may only need to show that pain's evil lies in our negative reactions to the experience of a privation. She might begin doing this by pointing out that we often negatively react to feelings of absence in cases like grief, heartache, and sorrow. If these feelings are privations in our sense, they might provide a model for how our reactions confer badness per se on non-subsisting pain.

T5: Pains are not themselves privations, but they are bad in virtue of their relationship(s) to a privation

Anglin and Goetz may hold a T5 theory:

> However, just insofar as it is an experienced quality, pain is not an evil. Indeed, in some cases, the *absence* of this experienced quality would be an evil. If you cut your finger it would be worse if you did not than if you did feel pain.[19]

Similarly, this may be what Ahern has in mind when he writes:

> Pain can have no absolute goodness or value in it, for, if it had, it might rightfully be sought for its own sake and then cultivated. Its goodness is only relative to a situation in which physical evil already exists. In these circumstances, it is appropriate and good that sensations of well-being give way to sensations of unwell-being or of pain. Of course, there may be privation here. The body may be deprived of the sensation of well-being, the good which is part of the body's perfection and, therefore, which may be sought as an end in itself. This is brought about by the presence of pain, a good which is not part of the body's perfection and which has meaning only in reference to physical evil. I conclude, therefore, that pain, agonizing though it may be, should not be called evil in any proper sense. Rather, given the circumstances in which it exists—a sick man or a sick dog—it has the particular type of value which I have attempted to point out. Hence, it offers no special difficulty to the privation theory.[20]

Like T3 theories which metaphysically separate the nature of pain from the privation which makes it bad, T5 theorists take the traditional privationist route to solving the problem of evil and make it more attractive by pawning pain's badness off onto something that is more plausibly bad as a privation. For Anglin and Goetz this seems to be bodily damage; for Ahern it is physical evil.

Since pains aren't privations, T5 theorists sidestep the second and third challenges. Their accounts of pain's substrate need not avoid making pain subsist. They do owe

[19] (Anglin and Goetz 1982, p. 5; italics original).

[20] (Ahern 1965, pp. 20–21). He makes the priority of the privation to pain clear when he writes that "it is the question of pain which [McCloskey] takes up, saying little about the more fundamental thing, the physical evil which causes pain." (Ahern 1965, p. 21).

an explanation of the phenomenology and properties of pain which meets the first challenge. But this is not a challenge they face as privation theorists—any account of pain's badness owes us such an explanation.

Christian science

An example may help. The Christian Science theodicy is often mentioned as a paradigmatic privation theory. There are at least three interpretations of its basic claims on our taxonomy.

First, unlike Aquinas and Augustine, Christian Scientists sometimes seem to deny that pains are real at all. For example, its founder Mary Baker Eddy writes

> Sin, disease, whatever seems real to material sense, is unreal … All in harmony of mortal mind or body is illusion, possessing neither reality nor identity though seeming to be real and identical.[21]

and

> the immortal fact that neither pleasure nor pain, appetite nor passion, can exist in or of matter, while divine Mind can and does destroy the false beliefs of pleasure, pain, or fear and all the sinful appetites of the human mind.[22]

In our sense, privations are parasites. But they are nonetheless real. Hence this version of the Christian Science theodicy wouldn't be a privation theory.

Second, Eddy may be using 'unreal' in a way compatible with the traditional claim that evils exist but don't subsist. Her claim thus might be that pains are real, but their apparent evil is not. That is a T2 theory.

Third, she could be claiming that the badness of pain per se is somehow imposed upon the pain by its sufferer. That may be implied by passages such as

> When a sufferer is convinced that there is no reality in his belief of pain—because matter has no sensation, hence pain in matter is a false belief—how can he suffer longer?[23]

This could be a T4 theory.

Suffering theories

We now face a further wrinkle: How much does the badness of pain per se matter for the problem of evil? On most of the theories so far, this is uninteresting. But on another group of privation theories, the real problem of (physical) evil involves both the badness of pain per se and the badness of suffering per se (though many discount the former).

[21] (Eddy 1971, p. 257).

[22] (Eddy 1971, p. 327).

[23] (Eddy 1971, p. 346).

My broad usage of 'pain' suggests a complication for fitting these *suffering theories* into our taxonomy. I've been using 'pain' to refer to something broader than a painful sensation and narrower than suffering in general. In doing so, I've assumed that pain is a subclass of suffering which also includes (seemingly) sensation-free psychological states like grief, despair, and depression.

This affects how we understand the suffering theorist's claims about pain's badness. Some writers seem to use 'pain' in a narrow sense to refer to just a painful sensation. They might, for example, adopt the well-worn distinction between

> the 'pain sensation' (i.e., physical pain as such) and the 'pain experience', which latter [sic] includes the affective state of distress or suffering that is normally produced by physical pain.[24]

This helps these views gain support from the common observation that some painful sensations aren't bad (masochism and prefrontal leucotomies are commonly alleged examples). That may deflect some of the force of the three challenges—suffering is in some ways more abstract and more general than pain, and it often involves some kind of loss.

Some of these views can be easily assimilated into our taxonomy. We haven't been talking about pain as just a sensation. Thus for some suffering theories which use 'pain' in the narrow sense we might be able to simply cross out 'pain' in T1–T5 and pencil in 'suffering' without adding any new categories.

But other suffering theorists could use 'pain' in my sense. For them, a person in severe pain is in two distinct states—she is in pain and she is suffering. This does complicate matters. These theories make three sets of claims: one about pain; another about suffering; and a third about the relationships between the two.

To begin classifying these views we can ask the analogues of Q1–Q4 for suffering. That is, we can ask both

Q1: What are pains privations of?

and

Q5: What is suffering the privation of?

Mutatis mutandis for Q2–Q4.

The answers to Q5–Q8 are analogues of T1–T5 which explain the axiological and metaphysical structure of suffering as a privation:

S1: Sufferings are privations of x and are bad in virtue of being privations of x.
S2: Sufferings are privations of x and are not bad.
S3: A suffering is a privation of x and is bad in virtue of a privation y it accompanies. But x and y needn't be the same privation.
S4: Sufferings are privations of x and are bad in virtue of something that is not a privation.
S5: Sufferings are not themselves privations, but they are bad in virtue of their relationship to a privation.

[24] (Hick 1966, p. 329).

We can then ask two questions about the relationship between pain and suffering:

Q9: What is the metaphysical relationship between pain and suffering?
Q10: Which evil matters for the problem of evil (and how much)?[25]

Let me begin with the latter.

The phrase 'matters for the problem of evil' may be misleading. Writers like Ahern have emphasized that privationist theories of evil are not themselves answers to the problem of evil.[26] They tell us what evil is. They don't tell us why there should be any of it. That requires a further theory. Answers to Q10 help connect the two projects. For example, some privationists understand evil as a privation and ultimately solve the problem by claiming that the presence of evil permits a much greater amount of goodness than there could've been otherwise (Augustine's principle of plenitude is one example).[27] In telling us what matters for the problem of evil, answers to Q10 thus tell us what needs to be outweighed for these solutions to work.

Because they depend in part on our answers to Q1–Q9, there are many possible answers to Q10. Nonetheless, for our purposes they can be divided into six broad categories:

R1: Since only pain is bad, only pain matters for the problem of evil.
R2: Since only suffering is bad, only suffering matters for the problem of evil.
R3: Both pain and suffering are bad. But only suffering's badness matters for the problem of evil.
R4: Both pain and suffering are bad and matter for the problem of evil, but suffering's badness matters much more.
R5: Both pain and suffering are bad and matter for the problem of evil, but pain's badness matters much more.
R6: Both pain and suffering are bad. Both matter equally for the problem of evil.

R1 is not a suffering theory. Let me make a couple of brief comments about some of the others.

R4–R6 raise interesting questions about the different ways the two evils might be weighted in an answer to the problem of evil. For example, one sort of R4 account might invoke an Augustinian idea of orders of being to claim that, while physical pain is easily outweighed by a small increase in human happiness, a great deal of happiness would be required to outweigh even a small amount of suffering. This might help narrow the range of things involved in the problem of evil. For example, it might help with the difficulty of accounting for animal pain since most animals don't have the psychological complexity necessary for suffering.

[25] We could raise a version of Q10 for some non-suffering views too. There is conceptual room for a view which explains pain and its evil as privations and denies that it matters to the problem of evil. Also, since T3–T5 invoke a second entity, they also may face a version of Q9.

[26] See (Ahern 1965; Ahern 1966; Ahern 1971). Similarly, Hick writes that "the privative doctrine is not offered … as a solution to the problem of evil. All that it does is rule out a dualist solution and thereby advance the definition of the problem a stage by posing the question, How does privation of good come about in a universe that is created and ruled by a good God?" (Hick 1966, p. 187).

[27] For example, (Augustine 1955, vii, 13).

One plausible form of R2 theory holds that pain isn't bad per se, but it does inherit badness from the badness per se of the suffering it often accompanies. The apparent badness of pain per se might be explained away by the fact that the phenomenologies of the pain and the suffering are very close in the way a pain is experienced. Hence, on this view, we spuriously think that the pain is bad per se when it is only bad insofar as (and in virtue of) its accompanying suffering.

This diagnosis is also available to an R3 theorist. Though she must tread a thin line by explaining how pain can be bad without its badness mattering for the problem of evil.[28]

This completes my rough taxonomy of privation theories of pain's evil. Let me close by briefly putting it into practice.

Hick

In *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick seems to reject—or at least be intentionally ambivalent about—privationist accounts of pain's evil. For example, he writes

> Apart from [the traditional Christian] theological framework, however, an affirmation of the privative character of evil would be as arbitrary as a contrary affirmation of the privative character of good. Either would represent an optional way of thinking about the relation between good and evil, one seeing good as primary and evil as its shadow, and the other seeing evil as positive and good as filling only the interstices of an evil universe. Neither view can claim to be read off unambiguously from the facts of human experience. As experienced, good and evil are equally real, equally positive, equally insistent as forces to be reckoned with.[29]

I'll now use our taxonomy to suggest that he may in fact hold a kind of privationist theory of the badness of suffering and pain.

Let's begin with his answer to Q1/Q5. An answer to these questions requires an account of what pain and suffering are. Hick understands pain in the narrow sense:

> Pain is … a specific physical sensation. Suffering, however, is a mental state which may be as complex as human life itself.[30]

[28] The tenability of R2 and R3 theories depends on which T and S theories we accept. If they use 'pain' in the broad sense, some R2/R3 theories may seem logically inconsistent. Consider an R2/R3 theory which answers Q6 by holding that suffering is bad as a privation (an S1, S3, or S5 account). This seems to hold: (a) pains are a species of suffering; and (b) suffering is bad per se; and (c) pains aren't bad per se. But an R2 theorist has an easy way out. She can deny that pains are a species of suffering by adopting a T0 theory (see *supra* n.14). Combined with an S1 or S3 account on which sufferings are privations, (a) is false. Interestingly, a R2 theorist could instead square (a), (b), and (c), by adopting a T2a theory. If the badness of privations is the only evil that matters, she could hold a version of a T2a theory which has a bridge principle that allows some but not all privations to be bad per se. An R3 theorist is in more trouble. Though she might be able to deny (a) by using 'pain' in the narrow sense.

[29] (Hick 1966, pp. 187–188).

[30] (Hick 1966, p. 354). Even though he is using the narrow sense here, we cannot simply translate his account into the T1–T5 framework. As we'll see, he'll have to address Q9 and Q10—that requires one of the S-theories.

And, on his understanding of suffering,

> the characteristic elements of human suffering are such relatively complex and high-level modes of consciousness as regret and remorse; anxiety and despair; guilt, shame, and embarrassment; the loss of someone loved, the sense of rejection, of frustrated wishes, and of failure…. To be miserable is to be aware of a larger context of existence than one's immediate physical sensations, and to be overcome by the anguished wish that this wider situation were other than it is.[31]

This tells us what pain and suffering are. The rest of his answer to Q1/Q5 is negative: neither is a privation. Pains

> are at least as emphatic and intrusive realities of experience as are pleasure and happiness.[32]

Hence they are too ontologically positive to be privations. In the passage above, suffering is (or constitutes) an awareness and a wish. These are also ontologically positive mental states.

This also answers Q2/Q6. Pain and suffering are not privations so they cannot be bad as privations.

Skipping ahead to Q9, Hick's account of the metaphysical relationship between pain and suffering is a bit puzzling. Pain and suffering are categorically distinct:

> The endurance of pain is sometimes, but not always or even usually, an ingredient of suffering.[33]

When they are related, it is through causation:

> Suffering, however, is not attached to pain in an exact and invariable proportion. The extent to which a given quantity of *the pain sensation causes us to suffer, and comes to determine the quality of our consciousness*, varies enormously both from person to person and from time to time for the same person.[34]

But, in

> a limiting case, very intense pain may so dominate consciousness as for the time being to shut out the wider context of our existence and *itself constitute* a situation of suffering—a situation that we violently desire to escape from.[35]

Given the narrow conception of pain, this invocation of constitution is odd—it seems to drag the complex state of suffering down to the simplicity of brute sensation. Though this wouldn't be odd if he's just using the broad conception of pain in these special cases.

[31] (Hick 1966, pp. 354–355).

[32] (Hick 1966, p. 62).

[33] (Hick 1966, p. 354).

[34] (Hick 1966, p. 331; my italics).

[35] (Hick 1966, p. 355; my italics).

To answer Q10, suppose that we can read the degree of importance to the problem of evil off of the relative badness of pain and suffering. With the possible exception of a few extreme pains, Hick's general answer is that suffering matters (much) more. For example, he writes that

> emotional suffering, quite unconnected with physical pain, can grip us more inwardly and encroach more inexorably upon the center of our personal being, and be therefore less endurable, than physical pain.[36]

This is at least an R4 theory—it clearly privileges suffering over pain in the problem of evil. Depending on the precise answer to Q9, it may be an R2 or R3 account and thus give even less of a role to pain's badness.

So far this doesn't seem to be a privation theory. The root of suffering's evil seems to lie in a kind of desire—an ontologically positive mental state. Indeed, his answer to Q3/Q7 rejects the perennial privationist standbys of disease or physical defect as the source of physical evil:[37]

> the quality of evil is not attributed to physical disintegration as such…. It is in fact not the loss of 'measure, form and order' *per se* that is evil, but only this considered as a *cause* of pain and suffering. But the resulting *pain and suffering*, which make us stigmatize their cause as evil, are positive.[38]

Instead, a major culprit is sin. He writes,

> Suffering, so characterized, is a function of sin. Our human experience can become an experience of suffering to us because we engage in it self-centeredly. But in themselves our finitude, weakness, and mortality do not constitute sensations from which we should violently wish to escape; if we were fully conscious of God and of His universal purpose of good we should be able to accept our life in its entirety as God's gift and be free from anguish on account of it.[39]

Part of the answer to Q8 is that sin—traditionally a paradigm privation—metaphysically makes the badness of suffering possible.[40] Without sin we would not suffer. Sin does not cause or entail the badness of suffering. The relation is more subtle: The presence of sin *makes possible* the desires which constitute suffering.[41]

---

[36] (Hick 1966, p. 329).

[37] This seems to be the route taken in, for example, (Augustine 1961, p. xi; Ahern 1971).

[38] (Hick 1966, p. 62); the italics beginning with 'cause' are mine).

[39] (Hick 1966, p. 355).

[40] My categorization of Hick's view depends on the extent to which he conceives of sin as a privation. His view here are complex, but I think they support my claims. For example, he writes that sin "in the singular, consists in man's imperfect relationship to God whilst sins, in the plural, are men's wrong volitions and actions, occurring against God's will … and arising within that disordered relationship." (Hick 1966, p. 16) and elsewhere that sin "is a disorientation at the very centre of man's being where he stands in relationship with the Source and Lord of his life and the Determiner of his destiny…. our sinfulness expresses itself in various kinds of broken, distorted, perverted, or destructive relationships to our fellows and to the natural world." (Hick 1966, p. 300).

[41] See also his comments about Jesus' suffering at (Hick 1966, p. 355).

This, I think, is an S5 theory. Suffering is bad in virtue of its standing in the 'making possible' relation to a privation. Sin, a privation, makes the badness of pain possible by making the desires which constitute suffering possible. Thus in most cases pain is bad in virtue of its causing suffering. On the pain side, this could be either a T4 or a T5 theory depending on whether the 'making possible' relation is transitive.

So, roughly, Hick holds that pain and suffering are ontologically positive entities that get their badness per se from a privation. Of the two, suffering is the more fundamental evil. While this doesn't make pain and suffering ontological parasites, Hick's view remains a privationist account by making the source of their evil something which God did not create.

I don't mean to suggest that this is a problem for Hick. I only hope to have sketched a useful framework for understanding his and other privation theories, and for thinking more generally about pain and the problem of evil.

References

Ahern, M. B. (1965). A note on the nature of evil. *Sophia, 4*, 17–25.
Ahern, M. B. (1966). The nature of evil. *Sophia, 5*, 35–44.
Ahern, M. B. (1971). *The problem of evil*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Anglin, B., & Goetz, S. (1982). Evil is privation. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 13*, 3–12.
Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa theologica* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). New York: Benziger Bros.
Augustine. (1955). *Confessions* (A. C. Outler, Trans.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
Augustine. (1961). In H. Paolucci (Ed.), *The enchiridion on faith, hope, and love*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
Eddy, M. B. (1971). Science and health with a key to the scriptures. Boston: First Church of Christ.
Hick, J. (1966). *Evil and the God of love*. New York: Harper & Row.
Hume, D. (1779). *Dialogues concerning natural religion*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
Kane, G. S. (1980). Evil and privation. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 11*, 43–58.
McCloskey, H. J. (1964). God and evil. In P. Nelson (Ed.), *God and evil: Readings on the theological problem of evil* (pp. 61–68). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
Schilling, S. P. (1977). *God and human anguish*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Schleiermacher, F. (1928). In H. R. Mackintosh & J. S. Stewart (Eds.), *The Christian faith* (2nd ed., 1831). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.