

The Logical Necessity of Suffering:

A Modal Resolution of the Theodicy Problem

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Abstract

For over two millennia, the theodicy problem has challenged theistic belief: If God is omnipotent and benevolent, why does suffering exist? We offer a novel resolution by demonstrating that suffering is not something God "permits" but a logical necessity for any conscious being. Using modal logic, we prove that: $\Box \forall x[(C(x) \wedge \tau(x) > 0) \rightarrow \exists t E(x,s,t)]$ — necessarily, for any entity x , if x is conscious and experiences time, then x will experience suffering at some point. The proof proceeds from three premises: (1) consciousness requires discriminating potential (the ability to distinguish favorable from unfavorable states); (2) discriminating potential entails the capacity for suffering (a value system without a negative pole is no value system); (3) any possible world containing conscious beings must contain differences (a world without differences would be maximum entropy — heat death). We then apply this result to the concept of paradise, demonstrating that a "comforting paradise" — one offering reunion, joy, and peace — is logically impossible: $\Box \neg \exists x[P(x) \wedge \text{Comfort}(x)]$. This dissolves rather than solves the theodicy problem: the question "why does God permit suffering?" is ill-formed, as not even omnipotence extends to logical impossibilities.

Keywords: *theodicy, problem of evil, modal logic, consciousness, suffering, paradise, philosophy of religion*

1. Introduction

The theodicy problem, named by Leibniz in 1710 but formulated by Epicurus in the 3rd century BCE, presents a trilemma: If God is omnipotent, he could prevent suffering; if he is benevolent, he would want to prevent it; since suffering exists, God is either not omnipotent, not benevolent, or non-existent.

Proposed solutions have included:

Free will theodicy: Suffering results from human choices (Augustine, Plantinga)

Soul-making theodicy: Suffering enables moral development (Irenaeus, Hick)

Greater good theodicy: Suffering serves purposes beyond our comprehension

Skeptical theism: Our cognitive limitations prevent understanding God's reasons

All these approaches share a common assumption: that a world with conscious beings but without suffering is logically possible, and God's permission of suffering therefore requires justification.

We challenge this assumption directly. Our thesis: suffering is not contingent but logically necessary for any conscious, experiencing being. The theodicy problem dissolves because its central question — "why does God permit suffering?" — presupposes a possibility that does not exist.

2. Definitions and Formal Framework

Let us establish our formal vocabulary:

Symbol	Definition
x	Any entity
$C(x)$	x is a conscious being (possesses evaluative awareness)
$D(x)$	x has discriminating potential (can distinguish favorable/unfavorable states)
$S(x)$	x has the capacity to suffer
$E(x,s,t)$	x experiences suffering at time t
$\tau(x) > 0$	x has proper time (experiences temporal succession)
\Box	Necessity operator (true in all possible worlds)
$P(x)$	x is in paradise
$\text{Comfort}(x)$	x experiences what makes paradise attractive (reunion, joy, peace)

The concept of proper time (τ) derives from special relativity: it is the time experienced by an entity itself, as opposed to coordinate time measured by external observers. An entity with $\tau > 0$ experiences a "before" and "after" — it undergoes temporal processes. This is essential for experiencing anything, including joy or suffering.

3. The Core Argument: Necessity of Suffering

3.1 Premises

P1: $\forall x[C(x) \rightarrow D(x)]$

Consciousness requires discriminating potential.

The evolutionary function of consciousness is pattern recognition — specifically, problem recognition. A consciousness that cannot distinguish "good for me" from "bad for me" is functionally useless. It would be what philosophers call a "neutral zombie"¹ — processing information without evaluation.

P2: $\forall x[D(x) \rightarrow S(x)]$

Discriminating potential entails the capacity for suffering.

A thermometer must be able to indicate both hot AND cold. A value system without a negative pole is not a value system. If an entity can register "favorable," it must structurally be able to register "unfavorable." The capacity for suffering is the negative pole of evaluative consciousness.

The concept of "discriminating potential" is not merely philosophical abstraction but a regulatory requirement in pharmaceutical quality control. The ICH guidelines and major agencies (FDA, EMA) mandate that analytical release tests — for example dissolution testing — demonstrate "discriminatory power": the ability to distinguish between product batches of different quality (Figure 1). A method operating in the plateau region, where all curves converge, is considered unsuitable: it would release both acceptable and defective batches indiscriminately.

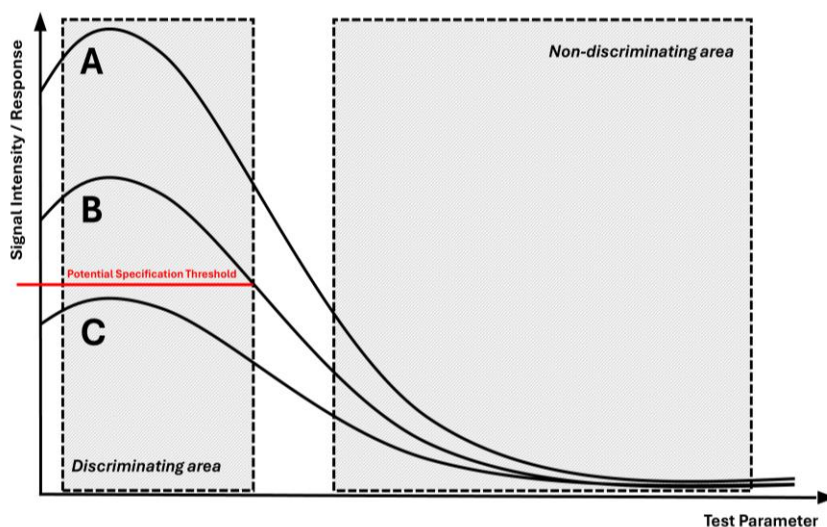


Figure 1: Discriminating potential in pharmaceutical batch release and stability testing. In the discriminating area (left), quality differences between batches A, B, and C produce measurably different signals. In the non-discriminating area (right), all curves converge — the method loses its ability to differentiate. A specification threshold can only be meaningful in the discriminating region.

¹The term "philosophical zombie" was introduced by Chalmers (1996). Our "neutral zombie" differs slightly: while Chalmers' zombie lacks qualia entirely, ours possesses experiential states but no evaluative dimension — processing without caring.

The parallel to consciousness is striking: just as a dissolution test for batch release must operate where quality differences produce measurably different signals, consciousness must operate with a value system registering both favorable and unfavorable states. A non-discriminating test tells us nothing about quality; a non-discriminating consciousness would tell us nothing about the world.

P3a: $\Box \exists u [\text{Difference}(u)]$

Necessarily, differences exist in any possible world.

A world without any differences would be a homogeneous state of maximum entropy — heat death (the "Big Freeze")². No structure, no life, no consciousness. Even paradise must contain differences, or it would contain nothing and no one.

P3b: $\forall x [C(x) \rightarrow \text{Calibrated}(x)]$

Consciousness is calibrated to existing differences.

Evolution — or any rational designer — calibrates the sensitivity of consciousness to perceive actually existing differences. An eye that does not register light is useless. A pain system that does not report injuries is lethal. A consciousness blind to its environment will not survive.

The sensitivity problem. Evolution — or any rational designer — would calibrate consciousness to detect *actually existing* differences, however minute. Consider a thought experiment: God creates paradise and rewards each soul daily with ten pieces of chocolate. On one day, he gives only nine. Would the blessed notice? Of course — a calibrated consciousness *must* notice, for that is its function. Would they suffer? The "injustice" of receiving less than usual, less than others, less than expected — this *is* suffering at the scale of paradise. The absolute magnitude is irrelevant; what matters is the deviation from baseline. Even in a world of perpetual abundance, calibrated consciousness would discover — or create — differences to evaluate. In our world, evolution ensures that even the minutest differences in the capacity for suffering become salient.

P3c: $\forall x [(D(x) \wedge \text{Calibrated}(x) \wedge \exists u \text{ Difference}(u)) \rightarrow \exists t E(x,s,t)]$

A calibrated discriminating consciousness in a world with differences must register suffering.

This is the crucial linking premise. A calibrated system registers the differences it is calibrated to detect — that is its function. If these differences include "good vs. bad" — and they do for any consciousness with discriminating potential — then the system will register both poles. Not just the positive one.

²On the thermodynamic fate of the universe, see Adams & Laughlin (1997).

Consider an analogy: A thermometer calibrated to the range 15-25°C will indicate temperature changes in both directions — warmer AND colder. A thermometer that only shows "warmer" is broken. Consciousness is the organism's thermometer. It registers deviations from optimum — in both directions.

3.2 The Proof

Step	Statement	Justification
1	$C(x) \wedge \tau(x) > 0$	Assumption: x is conscious and has proper time τ
2	$D(x)$	From 1, P1 (Modus Ponens)
3	$\text{Calibrated}(x)$	From 1, P3b (Modus Ponens)
4	$\exists u \text{ Difference}(u)$	P3a (necessary truth)
5	$C(x) \wedge D(x) \wedge \text{Calibrated}(x) \wedge \exists u \text{ Difference}(u)$	From 1-4 (Conjunction Introduction)
6	$\exists t E(x,s,t)$	From 5, P3c (Modus Ponens)

3.3 Conclusion

$$\Box \forall x[(C(x) \wedge \tau(x) > 0) \rightarrow \exists t E(x,s,t)]$$

Necessarily: For any x , if x is conscious and has proper time, then x will experience suffering at some point.

The box operator (\Box) indicates this is not a contingent feature of our universe but a logical truth holding in all possible worlds. Not even an omnipotent God could create a universe where conscious beings never suffer — for that would contradict the very definition of consciousness.

4. Application: The Paradise Dilemma

4.1 The Trilemma

Our proof generates an inescapable dilemma for any conception of paradise:

Horn 1: The blessed experience ($\tau > 0$)

If souls in paradise are conscious and experience — enjoying reunion, feeling joy, beholding God — then they have proper time. Then our proof applies. Then they will suffer. An experiencing paradise is not a suffering-free paradise.

Horn 2: The blessed never suffer

If souls in paradise truly never suffer — not for a moment, not for eternity — then by contraposition of our proof:

$$\forall t \neg E(x,s,t) \rightarrow \neg(C(x) \wedge \tau(x) > 0)$$

Whoever never suffers is either not conscious or has no proper time. A suffering-free paradise is an experience-free paradise.

Horn 3: Paradise without consciousness

An existence without experience offers no comfort — no reunion, no joy, no understanding. It is existence without consolation.

Conclusion:

$$\square \neg \exists x [P(x) \wedge \text{Comfort}(x)]$$

It is necessarily impossible for anyone to be in paradise AND experience comfort.

5. Objections and Responses**5.1 The Divine Recalibration Objection**

Objection: God is omnipotent. He could recalibrate our sensitivity — setting the dial so we experience only mild discomfort and extreme joy.

Response 1: The scale shifts, the structure remains.

Imagine God recalibrates us to experience only sensations from "mild discomfort" to "extreme joy." What happens? The "mild discomfort" becomes the new maximum of the negative. It now feels as bad as the worst pain used to feel — because it is the worst we can experience. The absolute scale is irrelevant. What matters is relative position. We know this from everyday life: Those who have never hungered find "appetite before dinner" unpleasant. Those who have never frozen find 18°C "cold." Recalibration shifts the scale but does not eliminate the structure.

Response 2: The identity problem.

Suppose God recalibrates not once but constantly — permanently adjusting our sensitivity so we only feel joy. The result? A being whose consciousness is permanently manipulated is no longer itself. It is a puppet. Its "joy" is not its joy — it is an externally imposed state. This connects to the problem of personal identity: Resurrection is supposed to reward us, not manipulated versions of us. A permanently recalibrated consciousness exists but is no one. Not redeemed but erased.

Option	What God does	Result
One-time recalibration	Shifts the scale	Milder suffering feels stronger
Permanent recalibration	Constantly manipulates	Destroys identity
Eliminates negative pole	Removes capacity for suffering entirely	Eliminates discriminating potential → no consciousness

5.2 The Heavenly Transformation Objection

Objection: Perhaps resurrected beings are transformed into a fundamentally different kind of entity — one that experiences without discriminating.

Response: Such an entity would not be conscious in any meaningful sense. It would process information without evaluation — precisely what we defined as a "neutral zombie." More importantly, it would not be us. The promise of paradise is that we will be reunited with loved ones, we will experience joy. A transformed entity without evaluative consciousness is a different being entirely.

5.3 The Beatific Vision Objection

Objection: Traditional theology holds that the beatific vision — direct perception of God — produces perfect, unending bliss that transcends ordinary experience.

Response: This objection faces the same dilemma. Either the beatific vision is experienced (in which case our proof applies — the experiencing being has discriminating potential and will register the negative pole), or it is not experienced (in which case it offers no comfort). The claim that it is "experienced but transcends ordinary experience" is either meaningless or reduces to one of these options.

6. Empirical Support: Hedonic Adaptation

Our modal proof receives empirical confirmation from psychology. Brickman and Campbell (1971) coined the term "hedonic adaptation": we adapt to everything.

Lottery winners are not happier than controls after one year

Paraplegics are not unhappier than controls after one year (Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman, 1978)

This occurs because consciousness is a problem-solving organ, evolved to respond to changes — deviations from the norm. A constant stimulus is filtered out. Only differences penetrate consciousness.

In paradise, there are no negative changes. Everything is perfect, and it stays perfect. After a while, this perfection becomes normality. Normality is not bliss. Normality is neutral.

Julian Barnes illustrated this powerfully in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989): The people in his paradise can have everything — play golf and always win, eat without gaining weight, have sex without complications. Initially it is wonderful. After centuries, it becomes boring. After millennia, unbearable. They begin to wish for the "second death" — final extinction.

But hedonic adaptation is only the psychological surface. Beneath it lies the logical foundation: A value system without a negative pole is no value system. Consciousness without the capacity for suffering is not consciousness.

7. Resolution of the Theodicy Problem

Our analysis dissolves one of the oldest problems in theology. Since Epicurus, people have asked: If God is omnipotent, why doesn't he prevent suffering? If he cannot prevent it, he is not omnipotent. If he will not prevent it, he is not benevolent.

Our answer is radically different: The question is ill-formed.

Suffering is not something God "permits" or "prevents." Suffering is logically necessary for any conscious being. Not even an omnipotent God could create a paradise where conscious beings never suffer — for that would be like a married bachelor, a round square, a timeless process.

Omnipotence means the ability to do anything logically possible. It does not mean the ability to do the logically impossible. The law of non-contradiction is not a limitation on God's power — it is a condition for meaning itself.

$$\Box \forall x[(C(x) \wedge \tau(x) > 0) \rightarrow \exists t E(x,s,t)]$$

This is a logical truth — like the law of non-contradiction, like the laws of mathematics. The price of our existence as feeling beings is that we can also register suffering. This is not cosmic punishment. This is not a karma lesson. This is the unavoidable structure of consciousness itself.

Herein lies the deeper meaning of *Eritis sicut deus scientes bonum et malum* — "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." Knowledge of good and evil is not punishment for the Fall. It is the definition of consciousness. A being that knows only good knows nothing — for knowing is distinguishing.

8. Conclusion

We have demonstrated that:

1. Consciousness necessarily requires discriminating potential (P1)
2. Discriminating potential necessarily entails the capacity for suffering (P2)
3. Any possible world with conscious beings must contain differences (P3a-c)
4. Therefore, any conscious, experiencing being will necessarily suffer at some point

This result has profound implications:

For theodicy: The problem dissolves. Asking why God permits suffering is like asking why he permits triangles to have three sides.

For paradise: A comforting paradise is logically impossible. We must choose between existence with suffering or non-existence.

For existential meaning: The absence of cosmic justice is not tragedy but liberation. We are not owed a pain-free existence. Every moment of joy is gratuitous — unowed and therefore precious. This recognition leads to what we might call *existential gratitude*: not gratitude *to* someone, but gratitude *that* — that anything exists at all, that we experience at all, that joy is possible at all.³

The universe owes us nothing. That is not despair. That is the beginning of gratitude.

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³This concept is developed more fully in the book by Tobias Kohl (2026), *Das Ungeschuldete Universum (The Unowed Universe)*.

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