



4-5-2016

## Suffering and Soul-Making in Disney/Pixar's Inside Out

Bertha A. Manninen Ph.D.

Arizona State University at the West Campus, [bertha.manninen@asu.edu](mailto:bertha.manninen@asu.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Manninen, Bertha A. Ph.D. (2016) "Suffering and Soul-Making in Disney/Pixar's Inside Out," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss2/37>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# Suffering and Soul-Making in Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out*

## Abstract

John Hick (1922-2012) was an extremely influential philosopher of religion who wrote ground-breaking essays in the areas of religious epistemology, religious pluralism, and the problem of evil. With specific reference to the latter, in his book *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), Hick devised what has come to be known as the "soul-making theodicy" – in essence, Hick argues that one of the reasons God allows so much apparently pointless suffering in the world is because it is an essential aspect of advancing our moral and spiritual education.

Although perhaps an unlikely venue, I will argue that Disney/Pixar's 2015 animated film *Inside Out* can help us see how suffering serves the role Hick attributes to it. One of the film's many messages is that suffering not only forms the foundation for the cultivation of compassion and human intimacy, but is an indispensable aspect of attaining a healthy moral, spiritual, intellectual, and mental maturity.

While there is little to suggest that *Inside Out*'s director Peter Docter had theodicies specifically in mind while making the film (though he has admitted that his Christian views have infused his films in the past), the fact that we can appeal to philosophy and theology to further our understanding of the film's themes illustrates the connection these fields of study can have to (secular) popular culture, and that theists and non-theists can find common language to talk about the perennial philosophical issues that permeate human existence.

## Keywords

problem of evil, soul-making theodicy, animation, disney, pixar

## Author Notes

Bertha Alvarez Manninen is an associate professor of philosophy at Arizona State University. Her main areas of research and teaching include philosophy of religion and applied ethics. I would like to thank my friend, Ryan Ehrfurth, for our many conversations about philosophy and film, including *Inside Out*, which greatly contributed to the content of this paper. I would also like to thank my children, Michelle and Julia, who have given me new eyes with which to view the world. Your childhoods allow me to appreciate this film far more than I ever otherwise would. And to my husband, Thomas Manninen - long after their childhood memory orbs turn to dust in our girls' minds, they will live forever brightly in our hearts.

## Introduction

John Hick (1922-2012) was an extremely influential philosopher of religion who wrote groundbreaking essays in the areas of religious epistemology, religious pluralism, and the problem of evil. With specific reference to the latter, in his book *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), Hick devised what has come to be known as the “soul-making theodicy” – in essence, Hick argues that one of the reasons God allows so much apparently pointless suffering in the world is because it is an essential aspect of advancing our moral and spiritual education. Although perhaps an unlikely venue, I will argue that Disney/Pixar’s 2015 animated film *Inside Out* can help us see how suffering serves the role Hick attributes to it. One of the film’s many messages is that suffering not only forms the foundation for the cultivation of compassion and human intimacy, but is an indispensable aspect of attaining a healthy moral, spiritual, intellectual, and mental maturity.

To be sure, there is nothing in *Inside Out* that suggests that its writer and director, Peter Docter, had such a theodicy explicitly in mind; that is, the film is not *deliberately* offering a theodicy, or addressing the theological problem of evil. There is no representation of a theistic God in the film, nor is there a question of whether Riley’s (the main character) emotional pains are instances of apparently needless or gratuitous suffering. As will be discussed below, the film is explicitly far more infused with cognitive psychology than with philosophy or theology. That is not to say that it is impossible that Docter had some theological principles in mind, given his own devout Christianity. In a 2009 interview with *Christianity Today*, he admitted that at times some of his theological views have permeated his films. In response to the interviewer’s question whether he wants his audience to “read between the lines, rather than hit them over the head with Bible verses,” Docter replies: “Exactly. And I think even sometimes people who are decidedly

non-Christian have these very Christian things to say.”<sup>1</sup> In another interview, when asked specifically about how his Christianity influenced *Inside Out*, Docter states: “Even in discovering what this film is about, the most important things in our lives is relationships with each other. That seems deeply part of who we are, and it’s an important part of Christianity as well. But I try to make it not too explicit.”<sup>2</sup> It’s no secret, then, that Docter tries to infuse some Christian values in a way that speaks to non-Christians. Given this, *Inside Out* could be interpreted as Docter’s attempt to give a secular response to how to deal with suffering in a way that may have theistic underpinnings. Regardless of whether he deliberately meant to do this, *Inside Out* showcases the vital role suffering and sadness plays in our lives in ways that is commensurate with Hick’s theodicy. In this way, the film illustrates how there can be constructive dialogue between religion and culture (even secular culture) in unexpected ways. Before delving into my analysis of *Inside Out*, I will set the stage for the conversation by presenting philosopher William Rowe’s influential rendition of the evidential argument from evil, and how John Hick’s soul-making theodicy is meant to respond to many of Rowe’s concerns.

### **The Evidential Problem of Evil**

In his seminal essay “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” William Rowe argues that atheism is a reasonable philosophical and theological position to hold given the existence of apparently gratuitous suffering in the world. He begins by offering the following argument.

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.
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.
3. Therefore, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>3</sup>

Theists and atheists alike will likely agree with premise two: If there is a God, given that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, He would only permit suffering to occur if there is some greater good that comes from it that He could not otherwise obtain. If the greater good were somehow attainable without the suffering, God, in His perfect goodness and omnipotence, surely could and would opt to take that route.

The controversial premise, therefore, is the first one - *are* there instances of suffering in the world that are utterly gratuitous or pointless, i.e., that did not result in the attainment of a greater good, or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse? An atheist would likely answer in the affirmative – much of the evil and suffering that takes place in our world seems utterly pointless in that there is no clear greater good that arises from them, nor is a greater or equal evil averted. A theist, however, seems committed to answering in the negative: there is no such thing as gratuitous suffering. Take, for example, the writings of sixth century Christian philosopher Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. He dismisses the occurrences of what appears to be unjust or meritless suffering by emphasizing human ignorance and exalting divine knowledge: what *appears* unjust to us is a result of our mistaken mind, rather than an indication of the reality

of the world: “Therefore, even though things may seem confused and discordant to you, because you cannot discern the order that governs them, nevertheless everything is governed by its own proper order directing all things toward the good.”<sup>4</sup> Is it reasonable to believe that every single instance of suffering in the world, appearances to the contrary, all result in some greater good or prevent an even worse evil from occurring?

Rowe argues that this is not at all a reasonable stance to hold. He admits that there is no way to *prove* that premise one is true. It is certainly *possible* that every single instance of evil and suffering that we see in the world is indeed necessary for the attainment of some greater good, even if we cannot fathom what that greater good would be.

... even [if] we cannot see how [suffering] is required to obtain some greater good (or to prevent some equally bad or worse evil), it hardly follows that it is not so required. After all, we are often surprised by how things we thought to be unconnected turn out to be intimately connected... indeed, it would seem to require something like omniscience on our part before we should lay claim to *knowing* that there is no greater good connected to [suffering] in such a manner than an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved that good without permitting that suffering or some evil equally bad or worse.<sup>5</sup>

But there is a marked distinction between the premise being *possible* (as in, there is no logical inconsistency in believing it) and the premise being *plausible* (as in, there is evidence to support it), and Rowe does not think the latter holds here. Genocide, child rape and murder, immense natural disasters, children dying from painful diseases - it seems absurd to hold that, in some mystical unknown way, the world is somehow better off because these things occur. Would a theist commit to saying that the world is somehow *better* because the Holocaust occurred, even though there is no empirical evidence that this is the case? And if some good *could* be found

from this abhorrent example of mass genocide, would it be *good enough* to render God allowing it permissible? Rowe argues that there is no clear evidence that can satisfactorily answer these questions to the benefit of theism. Therefore, it is far more sensible to believe that the reason there appears to be so much gratuitous suffering in the world is because there *is* an abundance of gratuitous suffering in the world.

It seems quite unlikely that *all* the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of a greater good or the prevention of evils at least as bad: and even more unlikely, should they somehow all be so related, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods (or prevented some of those evils) without permitting the instances of suffering that are supposedly related to them. In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.<sup>6</sup>

There is good reason to believe, therefore, that premise one is true. Consequently, Rowe holds, there is good reason to believe that the traditional theistic God does not exist.

Some philosophers (see Mackie 1955)<sup>7</sup> argue that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of suffering, and therefore that the theistic God *cannot* exist given the existence of evil; this is referred to as the “logical problem of evil.” However, this is not the kind of argument that Rowe is proffering. His argument (and others like it, e.g., Draper 1989) concedes that it is possible that God and evil can indeed co-exist insofar as it is *possible* that some greater good justifies all this apparently pointless suffering. Nevertheless, the existence of such instances of suffering provides strong evidence against God’s existence; or, as Draper

(1989) puts it, that the existence of so much apparently gratuitous suffering is far more likely in a world where theism is false than in a world where theism is true.<sup>8</sup> Arguments of this sort are referred to as the “evidential problem of evil.”

In response, theistic philosophers and theologians have sought to provide arguments that defend not just the compatibility of the existence of God with the existence of evil, but to mitigate the alleged antitheistic evidence the existence of evil purportedly provides. Christian philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, for example, rely heavily on what is known as the “free will defense”—that the moral evils of the world are attributable to the free choices of human agents, and that having this free choice is a good that is so great that it justifies God allowing these evils to occur.<sup>9</sup> Swinburne also argues that natural evils (suffering that occurs as a result of events not caused by human agency, e.g., natural disasters or certain diseases) provide learning opportunities that expand our range of free choices. Then there is John Hick’s influential “soul-making” theodicy, which attempts to understand what role suffering can play in the development of our moral, mental, and spiritual lives.

### **The Soul-Making Theodicy**

According to Hick, atheists (or “antitheists” as he calls them) erroneously assume that a theistic God would want to create a world that serves as “a hedonistic paradise” for His creation, and therefore, to the extent that the world we actually live in does not resemble such a paradise, “it proves to them that God is either not loving enough or not powerful enough to create such a world.”<sup>10</sup> Hick challenges this assumption by asking what kind of world it would be if humans experienced no, or even minimal, suffering, and he concludes that such a world would not at all be conducive toward any kind of personal, moral, intellectual, or spiritual growth.



Hick begins his argument by contesting the traditional Christian belief that humans were created in a state of perfection but then fell into sin given the transgressions of Adam and Eve. Such a view, Hick contends, is widely implausible, and conflicts with our intellectual sensitivities. Philosopher Mark Scott explains Hick's rejection thusly:

According to the [traditional] narrative, Adam and Eve violated the divine command and their "original" sin tarnished creation and transmitted it biologically to humanity, like a spiritual contagion, infecting every person from birth. That mythical narrative, however, has been replaced by the scientific narrative of evolution, which does not trace evil back to a singular event or a primordial couple, but to the ongoing struggle of life, forcing Christians to reexamine traditional doctrines of creation and original sin.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, Hick appeals to the writings of St. Irenaeus, who had a very different interpretation of the creation story found in Genesis:

Instead of regarding man as having been created by God in a finished state, as a finitely perfect being fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence, and then falling disastrously away from this, [Irenaeus' perspective] sees man as still in the process of creation... and so man, created as a personal being in the image of God, is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God's creative work.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, human beings were not created, initially, as perfect beings who then brought about their imperfection as a result of their insolence against God. Rather, humans were created deliberately morally immature by God so that they can spend their lives *earning* their spiritual and moral maturity. Instead of pining for the perfection of a mythical past *vis-à-vis* the Garden of

Eden, Hick argues, as Scott puts it, that “perfection lies in the future, not the past. We must look forward, not backward, for insight into our spiritual nature and destiny.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, why would God deliberately create humans this way? One possibility, Hick suggests, is that not even an omnipotent being could create morally and spiritually mature beings ready-made: “personal life is essentially free and self-directing. It cannot be perfected by divine fiat, but only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of human individuals in their actions and reactions in the world in which God has placed them.”<sup>14</sup> Because God, in His moral perfection, must act and construct the world in ways that best serves His creation, He opted to create the kinds of beings who earn their goodness for themselves, rather than having that goodness handed to them.

The value-judgement that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ad initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue... human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.<sup>15</sup>

When teaching this theodicy to my students, I always underscore this point by showing them clips of the MTV reality show *My Super Sweet 16*, which features teenagers whose parents are willing to pay an exorbitant amount of money towards the celebration of their sixteenth birthday. Often, such teenagers are portrayed as petulant and spoiled, rarely appreciating the financial luxuries they were given (rather than earned). We then engage in a conversation about the virtues that come with earning things for oneself through hard work and labor, versus being given everything on a “silver spoon.” In general, most students conclude (and I am sympathetic to their

views here) that there are psychological and moral lessons that are learned when we attain something through struggle and hard work that simply do not exist if we are just given those same things. It seems to me that Hick is making a similar observation here. Virtues that are earned, rather than given, are intrinsically more valuable.

If we accept this, the pertinent question then becomes: what is the best possible world God can create in order to help human beings grow in moral and spiritual maturity? Hick suggests that we begin to answer this question by looking at the differences between how humans treat their pets versus how we treat our children. Our pets are sentient beings who suffer when in pain and are gratified when feeling pleasure. But they are not capable of moral or spiritual growth – at least not to the same extent as are humans. Dogs do not ponder about the virtues that come with being a “good dog,” what their highest *telos* is, or how they can strive to be morally mature, and spiritually moral, canines. As such, a good pet owner strives to make her pet’s life “as agreeable as possible” because this is what best serves their pets. Suffering can serve no opportunity for moral growth when it comes to them. And therefore permitting them to wantonly suffer is certainly *prima facie* morally inexcusable.

We do not, however, treat our children this way. When I was 5, I remember stealing a box of crayons from a store, and my father forcing me to go back into the store to confess my transgression to the manager. I still remember this clearly over 30 years later. And no doubt the fact that he did so caused me to suffer immense humiliation—it would have been far more agreeable to me had he done it for me. But I never stole anything again after that. The lesson was seared in my mind precisely because of the negative feelings attached to the experience. It is a mark of good parenting to teach our children compassion, empathy, humility, care, diligence, responsibility; and an integral aspect of learning these virtues is to allow the corresponding struggles through which these virtues are cultivated. The environment good parents make for

their children should be one “whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.”<sup>16</sup> According to Hick, God, being humankind’s ultimate Parent, has created a world with a similar goal in mind. It is not a world of pure unfettered pleasure because such a world treats us more like pets and less like people with the potential for moral and spiritual growth. From Hick’s perspective, the best of all possible worlds does not “resemble a hedonistic paradise, [rather] the best of all possible world more closely resembles a classroom.”<sup>17</sup>

Such a world is one where suffering and strife is to be expected because certain virtues simply *cannot* arise otherwise. For example, take the virtues of compassion and sympathy, which can exist only in response to someone else’s apparently meritless suffering.

... try to imagine a world which, although not entirely free from pain and suffering, nevertheless contained no unjust and undeserved or excessive and apparently dysteleological misery. Although there would be sufficient hardships and dangers and problems to give spice to life, there would be no utterly destructive and apparently vindictive evil. On the contrary, men’s sufferings would always be seen either to be justly deserved punishments or else to serve a constructive purpose of moral training. In such a world human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service... men and women often act in true compassion and massive generosity and self-giving in the face of unmerited suffering... It seems, then, that in a world that is to be the scene of compassion, love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Hick presents a retort to one of Rowe's main concerns: the reason suffering appears pointless is not because it actually *is* pointless (as a Christian, Hick would certainly agree with Rowe that a theistic God would never allow *actual* gratuitous suffering), but because it *has to appear* pointless in order to cultivate the appropriate feelings of compassion and sympathy in human beings. For better or worse, humans do not typically respond to someone's suffering if we feel that they somehow brought it upon themselves. Consider, for example, the popularity of the so-called "Darwin Awards," given to people who have either caused their own death or sterilization (thereby "chlorinating the gene pool," as the website refers to it) due to their own senseless actions. The Darwin Awards are meant to be comedic, and they largely succeed by emphasizing that these instances of death or physical dismemberment are somehow deserved or warranted because the subjects brought it upon themselves.

Now, contrast the general public's reactions to the Darwin Awards with the world-wide outrage that surfaced after pictures of a dead three-year-old Syrian refugee, Aylan Kurdi, were released on social media in 2015. Aylan and 11 others (including his family) drowned in the Aegean Sea on their way to the Greek Island of Kos after their boat collapsed. Aylan's body washed ashore in Turkey, where it was captured on film and released to the media. Aylan's picture humanized the Syrian refugee crisis in a way that led to many European leaders welcoming fleeing Syrians into their country (though, as of this writing, an on-going battle continues). Arguably, the out-pouring of grief over Aylan's death is a visceral response to a picture of, essentially, what appears to be the gratuitous suffering of the most innocent of beings; a small child. The differences between the general public's reaction the Aylan's death versus the death of those who have "earned" Darwin Awards underscores Hick's point; it is only when suffering appears completely undeserving that we tend to respond with unmitigated feelings of compassion and sympathy.

Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne emphasizes this point as well. He mainly defends God permitting both moral and natural evils on the grounds that these incidences serve to expand our free will and cultivate genuine and significant moral responsibility to each other, but he also highlights how facing evil and suffering helps foster many virtuous character traits.

A particular natural evil such as pain makes possible felt compassion – one’s sorrow, concern, and desire to help the sufferer. It is good that if pain exists, compassion exists, whether or not it can lead to action. It is good that one feel compassion for the suffering of those involved... but also for those with whom one is not involved, in distant lands at distant times... For it is good to have deep concern for others; and the concern can be a deep and serious one only if things are bad with the sufferer... It is good that the range of our compassion should be wide – extending far in time and space.<sup>19</sup>

Rowe argues that God is only justified in permitting an instance of suffering if it is *logically necessary* in order to lead to a greater good (or prevent an evil equally bad or worse from occurring). Swinburne argues that robust libertarian free will (where we have the freedom to choose our actions and the desires that fuel those actions) is a great good because it allows us to be co-creators with God in the reality of our lives. But such free will logically entails that many will use it immorally, leading to great evils. Cultivating virtuous character traits, like compassion and empathy, is also a great good, but such cultivation would be logically impossible if people did not genuinely suffer. (Swinburne also argues that, even though the *appearance* of suffering may serve to cultivate empathy and virtue, a perfectly good God would not create a world with such systematic deception.) Swinburne puts this rather poetically when he writes: “the bad state of pain (or other suffering) is the grit which makes possible the growth of the pearl.”<sup>20</sup>

Now that we have a basic understanding of the evidential argument from evil, and how the soul-making theodicy is meant as a response to the argument, I will present an analysis of Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* that highlights three of the theodicy's main points: first, that the virtues of compassion, care, and empathy arise as a direct response to other people's unmerited suffering; two, that seeking and insisting on a world of unbridled and unmitigated joy only serves to stunt our mental and moral maturity; and third, maintaining and cultivating this maturity involves facing suffering in a way that allows us to grow in intimacy with our fellow human beings. While it is doubtful that Docter had a theodicy in mind when he wrote the film, these similarities illustrates how there can be unexpected common ground between religion, philosophy, film and, in this case, cognitive psychology.

### **Sadness leads to “soul-making”**

Disney/Pixar's 2015 *Inside Out* is an ingenious coming-of-age story. The movie takes us into the mind of Riley Andersen, an eleven-year-old girl who has to move from Minnesota to San Francisco due to her father changing jobs. The main characters of the film are Riley's emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. Each character is shaped in a way that mirrors their emotion: Joy is a shining star, Sadness is a teardrop, Anger is a red brick, Fear is a frayed nerve, and Disgust is a stalk of broccoli (Riley's most hated food). A good portion of the film takes place in Riley's mental “headquarters,” where the emotions monitor her life and “take-control” when appropriate. Her main emotion, however, is Joy, who takes pride in the fact that most of Riley's memories (symbolized as glowing orbs that take the color of the predominant emotion felt when the memory was created) are happy ones. As Riley grows and is challenged by more

mature situations and issues, Joy finds herself reluctant to let go of her position as Riley's predominant emotion.

Although Joy recognizes the important role most of the other emotions play in Riley's life, she does not extend this understanding to Sadness, who she frequently tries to "repress" and push into the background (for Riley's first day of school, for example, she gives every emotion a job to do, while relegating Sadness to the back of headquarters where she can read "mind manuals"). Much to Joy's dismay, however, Sadness feels compelled to touch Riley's memories, particularly her "core memories" (significant memories in her life which influence her "islands of personality"), and turn them from yellow (Joy's color) to blue (Sadness' color). In an attempt to yank Riley's core memories from Sadness' grasp, Joy and Sadness get ejected from headquarters into the deeper portions of Riley's mind (specifically, long-term memory, the subconscious, dream production, abstract thought, and imagination land). This leaves only Anger, Fear, and Disgust left running the show which, in conjunction with the loneliness that comes from her leaving her life in Minnesota behind, propels Riley into a depressive state, where all her "islands of personality" come crashing down. The rest of the film follows Joy and Sadness' attempts to return to headquarters so that Riley can feel happy again, and Joy's increasing realization that Sadness has as much of an important role to play for Riley's mental health as she does.

*Inside Out* as been recognized for its clear and accurate depiction of many important psychological principles. Psychologist Janina Scarlet has praised it for "how accurate it is to cognitive, developmental, and clinical psychology."<sup>21</sup> One of the main themes of the film is the detriment that comes with eschewing grief as a response to suffering, symbolized by Joy's repeated attempts to ostracize Sadness, and even by Riley's own mother, who encourages her to just "keep smiling" for her dad as they all struggle to find their place in San Francisco. Both Joy



and Riley's mother are well-intentioned, but the consequences for Riley are harmful. Scarlet writes:

Joy's good intentions backfire when Riley is unable to receive the support she so desperately needs to help her with adjusting to her new environment. In fact, Riley initially seems to be having symptoms of an Adjustment Disorder with Depressed Mood, where she has a hard time coping with her move, she withdraws from her parents and old friends, she misses school, and even tries to run away. By being unable to experience her sadness about all these changes and pretending that she was ok, Riley ends up being angry, anxious, and irritable, getting into a fight with her parents and her best friend, before shutting down altogether.<sup>22</sup>

In reference to the role suffering and grief plays as part of our emotional health, Scarlet continues:

If we numb sadness, we also numb joy. We need to openly experience all our emotions, and that includes sadness, as painful as it may be sometimes. Sadness allows for connection; when we see someone else feeling sad, we might feel sad too (this emotion is called empathy) and might want to alleviate their sadness (this is compassion). When we stay with this individual and share our emotions together, the resonating effect can produce a healing experience.<sup>23</sup>

This perfectly echoes Hick's point that one of the roles that suffering plays is that it allows us to cultivate important moral virtues, and that it engenders a deeper connection and intimacy amongst human beings (this latter focus on the cultivation of relationships through strife, as abovementioned, is something Docter deliberately focuses on in the film, and something which he considers an important Christian value).

One example in the film perfectly illustrates Hick's (and Scarlet's) point. While navigating the terrain of Riley's long-term memory, Joy and Sadness run into Bing-Bong, Riley's former imaginary friend. While residing in "imagination land," Bing-Bong has begun to fade, and he desperately wants to return to headquarters so that Riley can remember him. At one point, the red wagon Bing-Bong and Riley used to play with is dumped into a valley where everything is permanently forgotten. Bing-Bong is devastated, as he was planning to use the wagon to "take Riley to the moon." As he mourns, Joy responds in her characteristic way; by trying to cheer Bing-Bong up. She makes faces at him to try to get him to laugh, tickles him, and just repeatedly tells him that everything will be ok, never once affirming the validity of his feelings. After failing to cheer him up, Sadness approaches a crying Bing-Bong and just sits with him, and highlights all the reasons he is right to feel sad:

*Sadness*: I'm sorry they took your rocket. They took something that you loved. It's gone. Forever.

*Joy*: Sadness, don't make him feel worse!

*Bing-Bong*: It's all I have left of Riley.

*Sadness*: I bet you and Riley had great adventures!

*Bing-Bong*: Oh they were wonderful! Once we flew back in time; we had breakfast twice that day!

*Sadness*: It sounds amazing. I bet Riley liked it.

*Bing-Bong*: Oh she did. We were best friends. [At this point Sadness touches his arm, reaffirms his grief, and Bing-Bong embraces her as he cries. Shortly thereafter, he stops and gets up]. I'm ok now. Come on, the train station is this way. [Joy is now utterly perplexed that Sadness was successful in cheering Bing-Bong up].

*Joy*: How did you do that?

*Sadness*: Well, I don't know. He was sad, so I just listened to what he had to say.

As Hick emphasizes, compassion and empathy primarily arise as a response to the suffering of others. A world without suffering “would be a world without need for the virtues of self-sacrifice, care for others, devotion to the public good, courage, perseverance, skill, or honesty. It would indeed be a world in which such qualities, having no function to perform, would never come into existence.”<sup>24</sup> Because Joy only knows to respond to situations with nothing but happiness, she is unable to connect with Bing-Bong on any intimate level. As such, she comes off as completely unsympathetic and uncaring to his needs. It is only Sadness, who affirms the existence and importance of suffering, who illustrates these character traits.

Relatedly, Hick also argues that without suffering, there can be limited cultivation of intimate human relationships.

Perhaps most important of all, the capacity to love would never be developed, except in a very limited sense of the word, in a world in which there was no such thing as suffering.... For such love presupposes a ‘real life’ in which there are obstacles to be overcome, tasks to be performed, goals to be achieved, setbacks to be endured, problems to be solved, dangers to be met; and if the world did not contain the particular obstacles, difficulties, problems, and dangers that it does contain, then it would have to contain others instead.<sup>25</sup>

Had Bing-Bong not suffered, there would be no occasion for Sadness to have comforted and embraced him, drawing them closer as friends. Two other scenes in the film also underscore this point. After accidentally falling into the pit where memories are forgotten, Joy is surrounded by fading gray orbs (memories) of Riley’s childhood, and begins to cry when she realizes that she cannot hold on to Riley’s innocence forever. She reaches for a blue orb, where Riley is seen sitting on a tree branch crying after she failed to make the winning goal for her hockey team. Her parents then come to her and wrap their arms around her as she cries. Her team, also, then seeks

to comfort her. The memory orb then changes from blue to yellow, illustrating how the same event can encompass two different, even conflicting, emotions. What is key, however, is Joy's increasing understanding of the role Sadness plays after a lifetime of shunning her. As she watches Riley's parents and her team comfort her, she notes: "Sadness! Mom and Dad, the team. They came to help... because of Sadness." It is at this point that Joy seeks to find Sadness so that they can return to headquarters together in order to help Riley emerge from her depression.

Back in the "outside world," with Fear, Disgust, and Anger in charge, Riley has rebelled against her parents and has decided to run away back to Minnesota. After being gone a full day, her parents are obviously extremely worried. Joy and Sadness return to headquarters just in time to snap Riley out of her decision, and when she returns home, she breaks down sobbing in front of her parents: "I know you don't want me to, but I miss home. I miss Minnesota. You need me to be happy, but I want my old friends, and my hockey team. I want to go home. Please don't be mad." Her parents, realizing what their insistence on her being happy has done to her, reveal that they too miss Minnesota, and in their empathy for their daughter's sadness, and in feeling their own, the whole family collapses on the floor in one huge embrace—the first time since the beginning of the film where they are all connected. And, significantly, while enveloped in her parents' arms, Riley goes from being overcome by sorrow, to experiencing a profound and peaceful happiness. This deep cultivation of their familial love was only possible because she admitted to her suffering, because her parents, in response, admitted to theirs, and because they responded compassionately and empathetically to their daughter.

Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at UC-Berkeley who specializes in emotions, served as an advisor to Pete Docter. In a *New York Times* article he writes about the importance of sadness in helping us shape our connections with other people:

You might be inclined to think of sadness as a state defined by inaction and passivity—the absence of any purposeful action. But in “*Inside Out*,” as in real life, sadness prompts people to unite in response to loss... toward the end of the film, it is Sadness that leads Riley to reunite with her parents, involving forms of touch and emotional sounds called “vocal bursts”—which one of us has studied in the lab—that convey the profound delights of reunion.<sup>26</sup>

Keltner here provides empirical evidence that supports Hick’s philosophical claims; suffering cultivates virtues and draws us closer to each other in intimacy and care. This, in turn, helps us grow in moral and spiritual maturity. While it is true *Inside Out* does not cash this growth out in religious terms, the penultimate scene in the movie, where Riley is engulfed in her parents’ embrace, and experiences both sadness and happiness at the same time, marks a turning point in her mental maturity. Throughout the film, due to her depression, all of her “islands of personality” collapse, signifying her loss of identity. Because she is a child, all of these islands were relatively small and simple, but no less important. As her mind forms the memory of this occasion with her parents, her memory orb is no longer a single color – this time the orb is a mixture of both blue and yellow, sadness and joy, signifying the new complexity of her emotions. This memory of her and her parents becomes a new “core memory,” giving birth to a new “island of personality”—a more complex and richer version of “family island.” In what is left of the film, we see that she has formed various new “islands of personality.” Some will likely be temporary products of her age (“boy band island,” “fashion island,” and “tragic vampire romance island”) but others are expanded versions of her previous islands; in addition to a more complex “family island” there is also a bigger “friendship island” with a new “friendly arguments” section. All of her memory orbs now are multi-colored, and the “control center” of

her mind has now greatly expanded, with room for all of her emotions to work simultaneously in cooperation.

This is all symbolic of Riley's expanding mental maturity; and this growth was directly initiated not just because she suffered, but because others reached out to her in the midst of her suffering, and because they all grew together in love and intimacy as a consequence. Scott highlights the aspect of Hick's theodicy that likens God to an empathetic parent waiting to catch us when we fall, rather than as a looming judgmental despot waiting to punish us for our mistakes. In this sense, God's role in our life when we suffer is similar to the role Riley's parents chose to play when she comes home after running away:

Like children, we must mature morally, intellectually, and spiritually. Like children, God guides our first and faltering steps toward our *telos*. As we try to find our spiritual and moral footing, we inevitably make missteps. When we fall, as we all do, God does not punish us like a cosmic judge for the sake of God's slighted justice. Instead, like a parent, God picks us up, dusts us off, and has us continue on the journey toward divine likeness.<sup>27</sup>

Riley's parents could have chosen to chastise her, yell at her, and punish her because of her actions. Instead, they offered a compassionate ear, empathetic words, and a comforting embrace. It is this reaction that serves as a catalyst to Riley's mental growth. According to Hick, God's reaction when we falter is similar. He is a God who suffers with us, and He is a God always ready to embrace us.

Such growth would simply not be possible in a world where only Joy was in charge. While Joy ruled Riley's "control center" when she was young, personal growth entails more than one emotion being "in charge." Had Joy continued to eschew all negative emotions from Riley's mind, she would have been (with the best of intentions of course) treating Riley, as Hick puts it,

as nothing more than a pet to keep satiated and satisfied. It is through Joy and Sadness working together, realizing that they needed each other to make a complete human being, that Riley's mental "headquarters" take on increased complexity and depth. It is in this environment that Riley now thrives. Her experience serves as a microcosm for understanding the role that suffering in general plays in all our lives (and, from a religious standpoint, why a theistic God would allow so much of it). From Hick's perspective, God allows suffering for the same reason Doctor tells his audience parents must allow it for their children; it is only in an environment where there is a mixture of sadness and happiness (as well as other emotions) that humans are, as Hick puts it, capable of "realizing... the most valuable potentialities of human personality."<sup>28</sup>

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Nothing in this paper should be construed as a categorical endorsement of the soul-making theodicy. There are undoubtedly difficulties with the view. For starters, it is not at all clear that Hick has answered Rowe's concern to a satisfactory degree; even if *some* instances of suffering helps cultivate moral and spiritual growth, it is far from the case that *all*, or even *most*, instances of suffering do this. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that there were many instances of what he called "useless suffering." The Holocaust, the genocide in Cambodia, the atomic bomb being dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: none of these resulted in any clear cultivation of moral virtue. According to Levinas, to argue that God allowed these unimaginable instances of suffering to occur in order to help humans on their path to soul-making "paradoxically entails a revelation of the very God who nevertheless was silent at Auschwitz."<sup>29</sup>

Another criticism is that Hick only highlights the aspects of suffering that lead to moral growth while all but ignoring, as Scott puts it, the "soul-destroying reality of evil in the world.

We cannot always trace a direct correspondence between individual suffering and soul-making.”<sup>30</sup> That is, there are some instances of suffering that not only fail to result in soul-making, but may even result in making someone a morally worse human being than they otherwise may have been (someone who suffers a traumatic childhood, for example, may grow up to be violent themselves toward others). It is worth noting that Hick himself acknowledges this difficulty, and admits that this is something that he finds it difficult to rationally defend; “our ‘solution,’ then, to this baffling problem of excessive and undeserved suffering is a frank appeal to the positive value of mystery.”<sup>31</sup> For Hick, this is why it is crucial to posit the existence of some sort of afterlife, where he “extends the time frame for our maturation and perfection... sanctification through suffering occurs on the earth and continues after death.”<sup>32</sup>

Yet a third difficulty with the soul-making theodicy, one that *Inside Out* does a good job of framing as well, is that it appears that Hick (and also Swinburne) seem to put an *over-emphasis* on the role suffering has in cultivating virtue and intimacy. Joy, also, can be conducive to this. We do not just bond over pain, but also over happiness. Taking pleasure in another person’s good fortune is a kind of empathy as well, and this kind of empathy is just as important for building a good character. It is happiness that brings Riley together with her hockey team, even after they have lost; and the delight she experiences while watching her parents cheer her on during her game form part of the more expanded “family island.” Hick never denies, of course, that happiness also helps to create moral virtues, but acknowledging this may serve to mitigate the role that suffering plays in doing the same – and leads one to question whether we need *so much* suffering in order to cultivate our moral and spiritual characters. One last criticism of the soul-making theodicy worth mentioning is that it cannot account for gratuitous animal suffering, given that nonhuman animals are not (arguably) capable of the kind of moral or spiritual evolution Hick has in mind. Hick responds by arguing that animal pain solely serves an



instrumental purpose, one that helps in cultivating human soul-making, but this seems exceedingly deficient.<sup>33</sup>

Although *Inside Out* is not deliberately offering a theodicy, the fact that the film is a secular exploration of the role that suffering plays in our lives, one that may be interpreted in a theological manner, illustrates, as Docter himself notes above, that theists and non-theists can indeed hold conversations about these important human issues in a way that focuses on some common language. Moreover, this illustrates that although a non-theist may not have to deal with the *problem* of evil (in that s/he does not have to reconcile the existence of a theistic God with the existence of suffering), this does not make the question of why we suffer, and how to derive meaning from that suffering, any less significant. A reductive materialist may rely on cognitive psychology to explain the role that suffering plays in our lives in the manner in which *Inside Out* presents it; without suffering, our moral maturity would be stunted and our human intimacy sacrificed. But as it turns out, a theist could give a very similar interpretation of suffering, only she may cash it out in terms of soul-making. There are differences, of course, but also (perhaps surprising) similarities; the upshot is that the two sides can indeed converse with each other in fruitful ways about perennial issues that are important to human existence, even if their ultimate metaphysical realities are radically different.

A final, more personal, note. If one stays through the credits, you will see that *Inside Out* is dedicated to the creators' children, asking them, in vain, to never grow up. Given that the film is about the inevitability of growing up, indeed that as parents we *must* embrace our children's increasing maturity and the pain (and joy) that goes with it, it is particularly touching that the creators chose to dedicate the film in such a way. It illustrates what all parents must feel as we watch our children grow—we want to desperately to keep them little, innocent, and pain-free, and we hope against hope that they never suffer. Watching Riley's childhood islands of

personality collapse, and her infancy memory orbs turn into dust, produces profound pain and angst in me every single time I watch it. Like Joy, I want to hold on to my children's innocence forever; like Joy, I just want my children to be happy. Like Joy, however, I (and all parents) have to learn to let Sadness take the wheel from time to time, and all we can do is be there to embrace our children when they come home from dealing with the realities and complexities of an often harsh world. From a theistic perspective, we can only hope that God is there to do the same.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Morning. "What's Up, Doc(ter)?" *Christianity Today*, 2009. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/mayweb-only/petedocter.html?start=1>

<sup>2</sup> Steve Pond. "'Inside Out' Director Peter Docter: The Concept was Easy, the Movie was Hard." *The Wrap*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.thewrap.com/inside-out-director-pete-docter-the-concept-was-easy-the-movie-was-hard/>

<sup>3</sup> William Rowe. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* (David Stewart, ed.), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> J.L. Mackie. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind*, 64 (1955): 200-212.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Draper. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." *Nous*, 23 (1989): 331-350.

<sup>9</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977; Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford Publishing, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> John Hick. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966, pp. 292-293.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Scott. "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain." In *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 289-290.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," p. 101.

- <sup>14</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 291.
- <sup>15</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 291.
- <sup>16</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 294.
- <sup>17</sup> Scott, "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," p. 104.
- <sup>18</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 370.
- <sup>19</sup> Swinburne, p. 161.
- <sup>20</sup> Swinburne, p. 164.
- <sup>21</sup> Janina Scarlet. "'Inside Out': Emotional Truths By Way of Pixar." *Psychology Today*, 2015. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-heroes-and-villains/201506/inside-out-emotional-truths-way-pixar>
- <sup>22</sup> Scarlet, "'Inside Out': Emotional Truths by Way of Pixar."
- <sup>23</sup> Scarlet, "'Inside Out': Emotional Truths by Way of Pixar."
- <sup>24</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 361.
- <sup>25</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 361-362.
- <sup>26</sup> Dacher Keltner and Paul Ekman. "The Science of 'Inside Out'." *The New York Time*, 2015. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-inside-out.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-inside-out.html?_r=0)
- <sup>27</sup> Scott, "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," pp. 102-103.
- <sup>28</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 294.
- <sup>29</sup> Immanuel Levinas. "Useless Suffering" cited in: Tamra Write. *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999, p. 100.
- <sup>30</sup> Mark Scott, "Suffering and Soul-Making: Rethinking John Hick's Theodicy." *The Journal of Religion*, 90, 3 (2010), p. 319.
- <sup>31</sup> Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 371.
- <sup>32</sup> Scott, "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," pp. 108-109.
- <sup>33</sup> See: L. Stafford Betty. "Making Sense of Animal Pain: An Environmental Theodicy." *Faith and Philosophy*, 9, 1 (1992): 65-82.

## References

- Betty, L. Stafford. "Making Sense of Animal Pain: An Environmental Theodicy." *Faith and Philosophy*, 9, 1 (1992): 65-82.
- Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* (David Stewart, ed.), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007.
- Draper, Paul. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." *Nous*, 23, 3 (1989): 331-350.
- Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966.
- Keltner, Dacher and Paul Ekman. "The Science of 'Inside Out'." *The New York Time*, 2015. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-inside-out.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-inside-out.html?_r=0)
- Mackie, J.L. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind*, 64 (1955): 200-212.
- Morning, Mark. "What's Up, Doc(ter)?" *Christianity Today*, 2009. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/mayweb-only/petedoctor.html?start=1>
- Plantinga, Alvin. *The Nature of Necessary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Pond, Steve. "'Inside Out' Director Peter Docter: The Concept was Easy, the Movie was Hard." *The Wrap*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.thewrap.com/inside-out-director-pete-docter-the-concept-was-easy-the-movie-was-hard/>
- Rowe, William. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Scarlet, Janina. "'Inside Out': Emotional Truths By Way of Pixar." *Psychology Today*, 2015. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-heroes-and-villains/201506/inside-out-emotional-truths-way-pixar>
- Scott, Mark. "Suffering and Soul-Making: Rethinking John Hick's Theodicy." *The Journal of Religion*, 90, 3 (2010): 313-334.
- Scott, Mark. "Soul-making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain." In *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.
- Swinburne, Richard. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford Publishing, 1998.
- Wright, Tamra. *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.