

The Broken-World Lever

Discontent, Existential Friction, and the Apologetic
Conversion of Unease into Doctrine

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: 0009-0009-3725-8682

A visual preview:

THE BROKEN-WORLD LEVER

Distinguishing between the universal feeling of
'brokenness' and specific theological conclusions.



SHARED UNEASE

Human beings universally experience
a sense of mismatch, loss, and moral
frustration with the world.

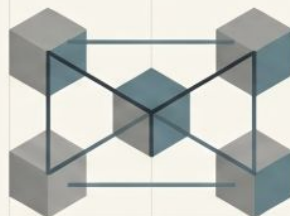
The Broken-World Lever

A rhetorical maneuver that converts
ordinary human discontent into
theological motion toward a specific
doctrine.



RESONANCE VS EVIDENCE

A story may resonate because it names
our pain, but resonance does not provide
the evidence required for truth.



RIVAL EXPLANATIONS

Evolutionary psychology, sociology, and other
worldviews explain human suffering just as
effectively as the concept of 'The Fall'.



EXISTENTIAL FRICTION

Discontent is the natural rub between
finite agents and reality, requiring no
cosmic catastrophe to explain it.

Abstract

Christian apologetics often begins with a psychologically powerful observation: human beings experience the world as broken. We feel mismatch, loss, injustice, moral frustration, unmet longing, and the ache of possible improvement. This paper argues that the apologetic move from that unease to Christian doctrine is not an argument so much as an affective conversion device. It takes a broadly human phenomenon—the capacity to compare what is with what might be—and treats it as though it were evidence for a specific theological story of fall, sin, redemption, and divine restoration.

The critique is not that the world contains no suffering, disorder, or moral failure. It plainly does. Nor is it that religious narratives cannot provide meaning to those who inhabit them. The narrower claim is that existential discontent is evidentially underdetermined. Alienation, grief, moral aspiration, and dissatisfaction are compatible with many accounts: evolutionary psychology, social comparison, moral imagination, political critique, Buddhist dukkha, tragic humanism, secular progressivism, Christian fallenness, and other religious cosmologies. The apologetic argument succeeds rhetorically by moving too quickly from a shared mood to a sectarian diagnosis.

I develop the argument through existential philosophy, sociology of religion, cognitive bias research, and confirmation theory. The central distinction is between diagnostic resonance and evidential discrimination. A story may resonate because it gives pain a name, but resonance does not show that the story is true. The paper concludes that broken-world apologetics should be treated as pastoral rhetoric unless it can specify why human discontent confirms Christian doctrine more strongly than rival interpretations of the same data.

Introduction

The world often feels wrong. Innocent people suffer, institutions rot, bodies fail, promises collapse, and human beings routinely disappoint themselves and each other. Even in ordinary comfort there can be a strange pressure of insufficiency: the sense that life might have been more whole, more just, more beautiful, more durable, or more awake than it is. Christian apologetics frequently begins here because the starting point is emotionally available. One need not accept doctrine to feel the pressure.

The apologetic inference is more ambitious than the observation. It says, in effect, that our sense of brokenness points beyond ordinary frustration to a theological diagnosis. The world feels damaged because it is damaged by sin. Human longing reaches for restoration because restoration is the telos lost in the Fall. Moral unease is a clue that reality is not merely difficult but disordered in relation to God.

That inference has a pastoral music, but its evidential grammar is weak. A person can feel discontent because she has evolved capacities for counterfactual imagination, because social life creates comparison, because desire outruns satisfaction, because moral concern registers preventable harm, or because conscious agents can imagine possibilities not actualized. None of these requires a cosmic catastrophe. The gap between actual and possible is not automatically a footprint of Eden.

This paper calls the apologetic maneuver the broken-world lever. It is a lever because it turns ordinary unease into theological motion. It begins with a real pressure point and uses that pressure to move the hearer toward a prior doctrinal frame. The problem is not that the pressure is fake. The problem is that the lever moves more than the evidence warrants.

The argument proceeds in seven stages. I first distinguish phenomenological force from evidential force. I then analyze discontent as a feature of counterfactual consciousness. Next I examine the underdetermination of brokenness interpretations.

I then explain how apologetic rhetoric moralizes malaise and recruits longing. A formal section shows why the inference fails as a confirmation argument. The final sections consider objections and propose a cleaner account of existential friction.

Phenomenological Force Is Not Evidential Force

Some experiences arrive with tremendous felt authority. Grief can seem to disclose the world's cruelty. Wonder can seem to disclose depth. Guilt can seem to disclose moral order. Absurdity can seem to disclose metaphysical homelessness. These experiences deserve attention, but their intensity does not settle their interpretation. Phenomenological force is not the same as evidential discrimination.

This distinction is familiar outside religion. A conspiracy theory can feel illuminating because it connects scattered anxieties. A political ideology can feel morally urgent because it names real injustice. A romantic narrative can feel destined because it organizes desire. In each case, the experience may be sincere and revealing without being a reliable guide to the explanatory story attached to it.

Broken-world apologetics tends to blur this distinction. The apologist points to the shared ache of human life and then offers a narrative in which the ache becomes expected: creation was good, humans fell, the world is damaged, and redemption is needed. The story has internal coherence. But internal coherence after the fact does not show that the story is the best explanation of the ache.

Camus and Nagel both treat the felt mismatch between human aspiration and reality as philosophically important without moving to Christian fallenness ([Camus, 1942/1991](#); [Nagel, 1971](#)). Taylor's discussion of good and evil likewise shows that moral reflection can be serious without being doctrinally Christian ([Taylor, 1970](#)). The phenomenon is real; the Christian interpretation is one candidate among many.

The problem becomes sharper when the apologetic claim is presented as public evidence. A religious community may use fall-language devotionally to interpret

suffering. That is different from claiming that the felt brokenness of the world confirms Christianity for outsiders. Public confirmation requires contrast. The evidence must fit Christianity better than plausible rivals. Mere resonance is not enough.

Counterfactual Consciousness and Adaptive Discontent

Human beings are counterfactual animals. We do not merely register what occurs; we compare it to what might have occurred. This capacity is part of planning, regret, moral learning, technical improvement, and social reform. We imagine better tools, safer cities, kinder relationships, more reliable institutions, and lives less damaged by preventable loss. The feeling that things could be better is therefore not strange. It is one of the engines of human agency.

The same capacity generates pain. To imagine what could have been is to suffer the distance between possibility and fact. Parents imagine the life a dead child might have lived. Citizens imagine a society less corrupt. Patients imagine health. Lovers imagine repair. Such imagination is not a theological anomaly; it is part of the cognitive machinery that lets finite creatures learn from reality and attempt improvement.

Cognitive psychology helps explain why discontent can seem especially salient. Human judgment is vulnerable to availability, loss aversion, framing, and negativity bias ([Tversky and Kahneman, 1974](#); [Kahneman, 2011](#)). We remember injuries more sharply than neutral continuities. We notice threats more quickly than ordinary functioning. We compare our lives not only with actual alternatives but with imagined, idealized, and socially displayed alternatives.

None of this reduces suffering to illusion. It means that the mind's sense of mismatch has many natural sources. Pain, comparison, anticipation, learning, empathy, and social aspiration all produce pressure toward better states. These pressures can

be ethically fruitful. They can also be manipulable.

The apologetic move is manipulative when it treats adaptive discontent as though its mere existence pointed to a lost perfect order. A creature capable of imagining improvement will often feel that the world is not as it ought to be. That does not show that the world once was as it ought to be, that sin damaged it, or that a particular theology owns the repair.

The Underdetermination of Brokenness

The brokenness datum is radically underdetermined. If the evidence is that human beings experience suffering, moral failure, alienation, and longing, many explanatory frameworks can accommodate it. A Christian can say the world is fallen. A Buddhist can say existence is marked by dukkha and craving. A Marxist can identify alienation under exploitative social conditions. A secular humanist can diagnose evolved needs meeting fragile institutions. A tragic humanist can say finite life contains goods that inevitably wound us by ending.

The mere fact that a worldview has a place for pain does not make pain evidence for that worldview. Almost every serious worldview has such a place because pain is too obvious to ignore. A hypothesis gains support when the evidence is more expected on it than on salient alternatives. If all major alternatives predict human discontent, then discontent alone does little discriminating work.

This point parallels a basic rule of confirmation theory: evidence confirms a hypothesis only comparatively ([Howson and Urbach, 2006](#); [Sober, 2008](#)). If E is almost as likely under H_2 , H_3 , and H_4 as under H_1 , then E does not strongly favor H_1 . Broken-world rhetoric often suppresses that comparison. It asks whether Christianity can explain the ache, not whether Christianity explains it better than its rivals.

The suppression matters because the Christian story adds substantial commitments. It does not merely say that the world contains suffering. It says that suffering

is related to sin, that the human condition is damaged by a primordial rupture, that redemption is mediated through Christ, and that ultimate restoration depends on divine action. Those additions require evidence beyond generic dissatisfaction.

An analogy may help. The fact that a patient feels ill supports the claim that something is wrong. It does not by itself support a specific diagnosis. A physician who leaps from discomfort to a favored disease without differential diagnosis is not practicing medicine. Broken-world apologetics often performs the existential equivalent of skipping differential diagnosis.

Moralizing Malaise

The lever gains force by moralizing malaise. The hearer is not merely invited to notice dissatisfaction; she is invited to treat dissatisfaction as a sign that reality violates an intended moral order. The apologist then frames secular accounts as unable to explain the sense that things ought to be otherwise. Without God, we are told, brokenness becomes only preference, chemistry, or arbitrary disapproval.

This framing is too quick. Moral concern can be human, social, affective, and practical without being arbitrary. One need not posit a divine design to oppose cruelty, hunger, domination, or indifference. Human beings can construct norms around vulnerability, flourishing, reciprocity, and harm. Those norms are not made trivial by being humanly grounded.

Indeed, the Christian move can obscure the social character of repair. If brokenness is primarily metaphysical, then political, medical, economic, and relational work can be redescribed as secondary symptoms management. The deeper problem becomes sin rather than systems, repentance rather than redistribution, conversion rather than institutional accountability. Some Christian traditions resist that narrowing, but apologetic rhetoric often slides toward it.

Berger's work on religion as world-maintenance is useful here ([Berger, 1967](#)).

Religious systems can place suffering within a sacred canopy, making misfortune intelligible and socially bearable. That function is real. It can comfort. But explanatory comfort is not the same as truth. A canopy may stabilize meaning while misdescribing the weather.

The moralization of malaise therefore has a double effect. It gives pain dignity by treating it as metaphysically significant. It also recruits pain into a doctrinal economy. The person who feels that things are wrong is told that she has already begun to sense the Christian diagnosis. The argument works because the emotional premise is universal while the theological conclusion is not.

Longing, Projection, and the Prestige of Fit

Apologists sometimes argue that deep longing points to an object. Hunger points to food, thirst to water, sexual desire to bodies, and the longing for perfect justice or eternal love to God. This style of reasoning has old roots and continuing appeal. It gives desire an ontological dignity: we want more because more is real.

The inference is unreliable. Some desires have objects because they evolved in relation to recurring satisfactions. Other desires are compound, imaginative, socially amplified, or impossible. A desire for absolute safety does not show that absolute safety exists. A desire to reverse death does not show that death can be reversed. A desire for perfect justice may show that finite agents can imagine ideal repair, not that the cosmos guarantees it.

Christianity is not alone in fitting longing. Many traditions promise release, reunion, enlightenment, vindication, cosmic balance, ancestral continuity, or union with ultimate reality. Secular narratives promise progress, solidarity, art, memory, reform, or tragic dignity. If fit to longing is the test, the hypothesis space becomes crowded.

The prestige of fit is partly aesthetic. A story that names loss, explains guilt,

and promises restoration feels narratively complete. But narrative completeness can be produced by human meaning-making itself. A myth can fit because it has been shaped to fit the human condition, not because the human condition was shaped by the myth.

This is why longing should be treated as a datum about human beings before it is treated as evidence about ultimate reality. It tells us what conscious, vulnerable, socially embedded agents suffer and seek. It does not automatically tell us which metaphysical story is true.

A Compact Formalization

Let E be the evidence that human beings experience the world as broken: suffering, moral frustration, alienation, longing, and the gap between actuality and imagined improvement. Let C be Christian fall-redemption theology. Let N be a family of naturalistic accounts involving evolved cognition, social comparison, moral imagination, and institutional failure. Let R_i be rival religious accounts such as Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, or other theological interpretations of suffering.

The apologetic argument often relies on:

$$P(E \mid C) \text{ is high.}$$

But the relevant comparison is:

$$P(C \mid E) \propto P(E \mid C)P(C),$$

with rivals considered:

$$P(E \mid C) \quad \text{versus} \quad P(E \mid N), P(E \mid R_1), P(E \mid R_2), \dots$$

If E is also highly expected under N and many R_i , then E does not strongly

discriminate for C .

The problem is not that C cannot accommodate E . It can. The problem is that accommodation is cheap where the evidence is universal. A worldview that could not explain suffering would be unserious; explaining suffering at some level is a low bar. The apologist must show not merely that Christianity has a broken-world story, but that the specific Christian story predicts the pattern of brokenness better than alternatives.

This formalization also exposes a common shift. The apologist begins with a generic datum E and concludes a thick doctrine C . But the most E can plausibly support by itself is something thinner: perhaps that human beings are vulnerable, that we experience moral aspiration, or that some account of suffering is needed. Moving from that thin conclusion to incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and eschatological restoration requires further premises.

Objections and Clarifications

One objection says that Christianity does not infer the Fall from discontent alone; it presents discontent as part of a cumulative case. That may be true in more careful treatments. But then brokenness should be described modestly as one psychologically resonant consideration, not as a decisive clue. It cannot carry the doctrinal load often placed on it.

A second objection says that secular accounts explain only the mechanism of discontent, not its normativity. But mechanisms and norms are not mutually exclusive. A social and biological account of empathy does not make empathy normatively empty. Human vulnerability can ground reasons for care without needing to be a coded message from a designer.

A third objection says that Christian doctrine uniquely explains why we expect goodness at all. Yet expectation of goodness can arise from attachment, cooperation,

social learning, imagination, and the practical demands of living together. Children expect care before they can formulate metaphysics. Communities develop norms because coordination and harm matter. Moral hope does not need to be imported from Eden.

A fourth objection appeals to the problem of evil: if one rejects God because the world is broken, one still must explain brokenness. That reply misunderstands the dialectic. A skeptic need not have a complete theory of suffering to deny that the Christian explanation has been established. Rejecting a diagnosis is rational when the evidence underdetermines it, even before a full alternative is complete.

The most important clarification is this: the critique does not sneer at people who find Christian language healing. If fall and redemption help a person narrate pain, that is a pastoral fact. The question is whether that narration becomes public evidence for Christian truth. The answer is no, not without further discriminating argument.

Existential Friction Without Theological Capture

There is a better vocabulary than brokenness rhetoric. We can speak of existential friction: the resistance finite agents encounter when desire, value, imagination, embodiment, and social reality rub against the world as it is. Friction is not automatically evidence of cosmic damage. It is the condition of creatures who can care, anticipate, remember, and compare.

This vocabulary preserves the seriousness of suffering without prematurely assigning ownership to theology. It allows grief to be grief, injustice to be injustice, longing to be longing, and moral aspiration to be moral aspiration. It does not turn every ache into a recruiting instrument.

Existential friction can also support a more pluralistic inquiry. Different traditions and disciplines may illuminate different aspects: psychology explains comparison

and bias; sociology explains meaning-systems; politics explains institutional harm; medicine explains bodily vulnerability; philosophy clarifies absurdity, value, and finitude. No single frame gets automatic possession of the data.

For apologetics to become intellectually responsible here, it would need to stop leaning on mood and start making contrastive predictions. What pattern of discontent should we expect if Christianity is true rather than Buddhism, naturalism, Islam, tragic humanism, or social construction? What features of brokenness are not merely compatible with Christianity but specifically confirm it? Where the answers are thin, humility should replace recruitment.

The broken-world lever works because it meets people where they hurt. That is precisely why it requires discipline. Pain should not be converted into doctrine by rhetorical momentum. If Christianity is true, it should not need to hijack human discontent before the differential diagnosis has begun.

Conclusion

The sense that the world is broken is psychologically powerful and ethically important. It can motivate compassion, reform, protest, art, healing, and philosophical inquiry. But it does not by itself support the Christian story of fall and redemption. It is too general, too human, and too multiply interpretable to carry that weight.

I have argued that broken-world apologetics confuses diagnostic resonance with evidential discrimination. It takes a universal experience and moves too quickly to a specific theology. The move is emotionally effective because it begins with real pain. It is epistemically weak because many rival accounts expect the same pain.

The honest conclusion is not that human discontent means nothing. It means many things. That is exactly why it cannot be owned by one doctrine without further argument.

References

- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Doubleday.
- Camus, A. (1991). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Vintage. Original work published 1942.
- Draper, P. (1989). Pain and pleasure: An evidential problem for theists. *Nous*, 23(3), 331–350.
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Pantheon.
- Howson, C., and Urbach, P. (2006). *Scientific Reasoning: The Bayesian Approach* (3rd ed.). Open Court.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Nagel, T. (1971). The absurd. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(20), 716–727.
- Sober, E. (2008). *Evidence and Evolution: The Logic Behind the Science*. Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, R. (1970). *Good and Evil*. Macmillan.
- Tversky, A., and Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124–1131.