

Response to Graham Oppy’s Review of *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*

YUJIN NAGASAWA

University of Oklahoma

ABSTRACT: In this brief piece I respond to Graham Oppy’s recent review of my book, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*. While his criticisms are careful and thought-provoking, I argue that they ultimately leave the core of my argument intact.

I would like to thank Professor Graham Oppy for his careful reading of my book *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* and for writing such a thoughtful review.¹ Before offering a response, let me briefly summarize the central idea he engages with.

In the book I develop what I call the “problem of systemic evil”—a distinctive formulation of the problem of evil that centers on the evolutionary process. This process, driven by natural selection, inevitably entails widespread pain and suffering for uncountably many organisms.

I argue, first, that this version of the problem of evil presents a greater challenge for theists than familiar versions, because it targets the fundamental biological system itself rather than specific events (e.g., World War II, the Holocaust, the Boxing Day Tsunami) or specific types of events (e.g., crime, wars, earthquakes) typically regarded as evil.

Second, I argue that systemic evil poses a challenge not only for theists but also for many atheists—specifically those who hold at least a modestly optimistic view of the world’s axiological status. Such “modest optimists” expect, at a minimum, that, overall and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not bad. Empirical research suggests that this kind of optimism is widely held, regardless of one’s religious or spiritual affiliation. Yet the reality of systemic evil suggests that this optimistic expectation is unmet. I call this an axiological expectation mismatch—a dissonance that can trouble both theists and atheists alike.

Third, I argue that once the strength and scope of the problem of systemic evil are acknowledged, theists are in a comparatively stronger position to respond, as they can draw on

¹ Yujin Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* (Oxford University Press, 2024). Graham Oppy, review of *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, by Yujin Nagasawa, *Philosophia Christi* 26 (2024): 343–7.

supernaturalist resources that are unavailable to atheists. Conversely, if atheists succeed in developing a satisfactory naturalistic response, theists can adopt that response, as theists' supernaturalist ontology subsumes atheists' naturalist ontology. In this sense, theists can either "win or draw" while atheists can only "draw or lose" when addressing the problem of systemic evil. I believe this is a significant observation, given that the problem of evil is typically regarded as an argument against theism or for atheism. Let me now turn to Oppy's criticisms of my argument.

Oppy begins his assessment by questioning whether it is helpful to frame the problem of evil in terms of an axiological expectation mismatch. He notes that, for example, Mackie's logical problem of evil does not depend on such a concept. As Oppy rightly observes, Mackie's formulation focuses on an alleged logical inconsistency between the existence of evil and the existence of an omnipotent and wholly good God—where God's omnipotence is understood to entail the power to eliminate all evil and God's perfect goodness is understood to entail the elimination of all evil that can be eliminated. This version of the problem does not seem to involve any axiological expectation mismatch.

Oppy's observation, while noteworthy, is not directly pertinent to the argument I am making. On pages 20–21 of the book, I distinguish between the deontological and axiological versions of the problem of evil and clarify that I focus on the axiological version. Mackie's logical problem of evil naturally falls into the deontological category, whereas the problem of systemic evil that I mainly focus on is more visibly axiological in nature. It is worth noting, however, that Mackie's problem can be construed in an axiological way too: God's omnipotence entails the power to eliminate all evil and God's perfect goodness entails the elimination of all evil that can be eliminated; hence, theists, who believe in an omnipotent and wholly good God, should have a high axiological expectation. The problem of evil arises because this axiological expectation is not met by our observation that there is evil in the world. Of course, Mackie does not explicitly present his problem in terms of the tension between theists' axiological expectations and observations, but that is beside the point. In either way, even if Oppy is right that Mackie's problem is not axiological in nature, it does not affect my argument as my project does not focus on his argument.

Oppy also notes that there are other versions of the problem of evil—for example, versions that question how imperfection can arise from a perfect being (God), or how God's attributes can be reconciled with the existence of hell. As he writes, "these [problems] have nothing to do with 'the problem of systemic evil'; there is no sense in which they constitute problems for naturalists,

atheists and nontheists.”² I find this remark puzzling, as I make no claim in the book that all versions of the problem of evil are subsumed under the problem of systemic evil or that all versions of the problem arise for naturalists, atheists, and nontheists. Moreover, I am not convinced that the problems Oppy raises—such as the origin of imperfection or the doctrine of hell—are best understood as versions of the problem of evil in the first place.

Let us move on to Oppy’s more substantial criticisms. Again, my argument is based on the claim that many atheists—as well as many theists and nontheists—accept at least the modest version of optimism, according to which, overall, and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not bad. Regarding this point, Oppy writes:

My own inclination is to opt for an even more modest optimism than Nagasawa proposes: *overall, and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not too bad*. As Nagasawa himself insists—as part of his reply to Kahane—it is “practically impossible to calculate precisely the overall axiological value of our environment” (181). I would add to this that it is practically impossible to calculate precisely the cutoff below which overall axiological value would be “too bad.” Nonetheless, I expect that many people will concur with my judgment that, overall, and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not too bad. Moreover, I might add to this that I am simply undecided about whether, overall, and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is bad. So long as I do not *accept* the claim that, overall, and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is bad, there is an additional smudge of optimism in my approach. And, importantly, there is no mismatch of axiological expectation in my view: the world is not too bad, and I expect it to be not too bad.³

First, in response to Oppy’s reluctance to affirm that, overall and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is (too) bad, I adopt the typical strategy employed by atheists in formulating the problem of evil: namely, to argue that the world does in fact appear to be (too) bad, rather than merely not bad or not too bad. I argue that this view is especially plausible when we consider both

² Oppy, review of *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 345–6.

³ *Ibid.*, 346.

the extent and the fundamental nature of systemic evil—namely, the constant and pervasive realization of pain and suffering for uncountably many organisms. As I note in my book, Darwin famously remarked: “But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I should wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.”⁴ Darwin was reflecting on biological phenomena such as parasitic wasps that feed within the living bodies of caterpillars, or cats that toy with mice, inflicting prolonged and horrifying suffering. Natural selection and evolutionary processes guarantee billions of such instances as a matter of course. Note the irony here: as a theist, I find myself trying to persuade Oppy, an atheist, of the overwhelming force of the problem of evil in light of suffering in the world—as if our roles have been reversed! This reversal alone, I hope, is a sign that my project has achieved at least some measure of success.

Second, if Oppy succeeds in establishing his claim—“there is no mismatch of axiological expectation in my view: the world is not too bad, and I expect it to be not too bad”—then he may be off the hook, but so too are theists. If the world is not too bad, then there is no axiological expectation mismatch for theists either, inasmuch as, like Oppy, they do not expect it to be too bad in the first place. Oppy might argue at this point that while the environment is not bad enough to undermine atheism it is bad enough to pose a problem for theism. In that case, he might suggest that atheists are off the hook but theists are not. However, such a move requires substantial argumentation. The burden of proof would be on Oppy to demonstrate that the axiological level of the environment is finely balanced: low enough to challenge theism but not so low as to undermine his judgment. I am not sure he can make that case—especially given his own admission that “it is practically impossible to calculate precisely the cutoff below which overall axiological value would be ‘too bad’” and that he is “undecided about whether, overall and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is bad.”⁵

Moving on to the next, though related, point, Oppy contends as follows:

⁴ Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 119; quotation from Francis Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, vol. 2 (John Murray, 1887), 311.

⁵ Oppy, review of *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 346.

[I]t is fine if theists have some alternative way of aligning their axiological judgments and axiological expectations: that is just a different way of bringing about that we draw. However, so long as we draw with respect to the problem of systemic evil, we do not draw with respect to the full suite of problems of evil, because the problems of evil in the full suite of problems of evil that are not subsumed under the problem of systemic evil are not problems for atheists and nontheists.”⁶

What Oppy seems to be saying here is this: theists might avoid the problem of systemic evil, but this does not mean that they are better off than atheists overall, as they still face other versions of the problem of evil. While this is a fair observation, I do not find it dialectically effective from an atheistic perspective. In effect, Oppy appears willing to concede my central point about the problem of systemic evil, only to redirect the focus to other versions of the problem of evil that apply exclusively to theism. This move does not challenge my project, as my aim is not to defend the overall plausibility of theism over atheism.

Toward the end of his review, Oppy addresses my claim that the fundamental nature of natural selection nomologically necessitates, over a long period of time, the presence of pain and suffering for a large number of sentient animals. He writes, “This is not quite right. While natural selection has been in operation for more than three billion years—beginning with a long period in which there was flora but no fauna—sentience is unlikely to have appeared before about 600 million years ago. Consequently, there is no lawlike connection between natural selection and the presence of pain and suffering. It is only when natural selection operates over sentient fauna that we get pain and suffering.”⁷

I do not intend to suggest that natural selection necessitates pain and suffering in the sense that they are present at all times and under all possible conditions. Clearly, such experiences were absent prior to the emergence of sentient animals. To avoid any ambiguity, I am happy to accept Oppy’s clarification and restate my point more precisely: once the relevant conditions are in place, the lawlike process renders the occurrence of pain and suffering inevitable. In any case, this clarification does not affect the force of my argument, which concerns the presence of pain and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 346–7.

suffering in relation to the axiological claim that, overall and fundamentally, *the environment in which we exist* is not bad. As I note in the book, the spatial and temporal scope of my argument is explicitly limited to “the past, the present, and the foreseeable future in Earth’s natural history”—not the entire cosmic timeline spanning billions of years.⁸

Oppy also writes:

Consider a much longer period of time. The characteristics of populations of faunae vary over time as a result of a range of factors, including environmental changes, migration, mutation, genetic drift, and natural selection. Natural selection is the differential survival and reproduction of individuals due to differences in phenotype. You can observe natural selection in action in the laboratory in fruit flies. While it is true that natural selection “involves” competition, it is not true that it necessarily involves pain and suffering, even for sentient faunae.⁹

Once again, I am not sure how this criticism undermines the force of my core argument. One might argue, as Oppy does, that natural selection does not *necessarily* entail the existence of pain and suffering—for instance, in cases where competition for survival involves only organisms that are plausibly assumed to be non-sentient, such as fruit flies. However, the problem of systemic evil does not depend on such a strong notion of necessity. Rather, it relies on the existence of a robust, law-like systemic connection between the operation of natural selection (in conjunction with relevant contingent facts) and the experience of pain and suffering in sentient life.

Despite the above points of disagreement, I am grateful to Professor Oppy for his thoughtful criticisms, which help clarify and refine the central claims of my argument.

⁸ Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 179.

⁹ Oppy, review of *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 347.