

# The Problem of Evil for Atheists

Yujin Nagasawa

## 1. Introduction

Atheists often claim that the problem of evil constitutes the most powerful argument against theism. In fact, many of them reject theism and subscribe to atheism precisely because they do not think that theism can successfully respond to this problem. I argue, however, that the problem of evil is not a problem only for theists. In what follows, I try to show that there is a version of the problem of evil—the ‘existential problem of systemic evil’, as I call it—that applies to both theism *and* atheism. Moreover, I argue that it is particularly forceful against atheism because atheism faces a significant disadvantage compared with theism in responding to this version of the problem.

This essay has the following structure. In Section 2, I introduce the ‘problem of systemic evil’. This problem initially raises a challenge for theism by showing not only that specific events or specific types of events in the world are evil but also that the entire biological *system* on which human existence is based is evil. I explain why this problem is more powerful than the standard problem of evil. In Section 3, I explain that both theists and atheists typically embrace ‘existential optimism’, which affirms that the world is generally good and that we should be happy and grateful to live in it. In Section 4, I argue that, by incorporating existential optimism into the problem of systemic evil, we can develop the ‘existential problem of systemic evil’, which applies to both theism and atheism. In order to show the strength of the problem I contrast it with Janna Thompson’s ‘apology paradox’. In Section 5, I argue that the existential problem of systemic evil can be considered a version of the problem of evil especially for *atheists* because it is significantly more forceful against atheism than it is against theism. Section 6 concludes.

## 2. The Problem of Systemic Evil for Theists

Nature is governed by natural selection, which involves competition for survival. For approximately four billion years, uncountably many organisms have competed and struggled for survival. In this cruel, blind system, the weaker are eliminated, and even the survivors will eventually die, often painfully and miserably. This fact raises a significant challenge for theism because the evil of the biological system seems to be incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect God.<sup>1</sup> One might

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I use the terms ‘compatibility’ and ‘incompatibility’ in a broad sense. The problem of evil can be formulated in terms of logical consistency between the existence of God and the existence of evil (the logical problem of evil), or in terms of the evidential value of evil against the existence of God (the evidential problem of evil). When I talk about the compatibility and incompatibility between God and evil in

claim that nature cannot be good or evil because these properties apply only to moral agents. I can safely set this point aside because what I say in this essay can be formulated without using the term ‘evil’. For example, we can describe nature as a system that involves intense, undesired pain and suffering rather than a system that is evil. I use the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ simply for the sake of simplicity.

The claim that pain and suffering in nature raise a challenge for theism is not new. In fact, Charles Darwin himself expressed his perplexity about the cruelty of nature when he introduced the theory of evolution. Darwin considers this problem explicitly regarding the Ichneumonidae, a family of parasitic wasps. These wasps paralyse grasshoppers and caterpillars without killing them. They take the prey into their nests and deposit eggs into the bodies in such a way that the hatchlings can feed on the live bodies of the prey. Darwin finds it difficult to reconcile such cruelty in nature with the theistic worldview. In his letter to Asa Gray dated on 22 May 1860 Darwin writes:

With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. 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. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.<sup>2</sup>

One might claim that grasshoppers and caterpillars do not suffer or at least that their suffering is minimal because their cognitive and sensory systems are not sophisticated enough. Even if that is true, there are many other examples of cruelty in nature that involve sentient animals. For example, as Darwin mentions in the quote above, there have been and there will be uncountably many mice that are severely injured and die slowly and painfully as cats play with them.

In an earlier letter to J. D. Hooker dated 13 July 1856, Darwin writes: “What a book a Devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low & horridly cruel works of nature!”<sup>3</sup> It might be no exaggeration to compare nature with a small cage in which many animals are placed together so that they desperately fight and kill each other for limited resources until a handful survive. In fact, Darwin’s theory of evolution was inspired by Thomas Malthus’ book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), in which Malthus argues that the human population would cease growing exponentially after reaching a certain number because the propensity of populations to produce more offspring than can possibly survive with the limited resources available to them causes war, famine and disease, which would effectively reduce population size. Darwin applies Malthus’ insight to the larger domain of biology.

---

this essay I have in mind both the logical and evidential problems. The distinction between the two problems is not crucial here because what I say applies equally to both.

<sup>2</sup> The full texts of more than 7500 letters of Charles Darwin, including ones quoted in this paper, are available on the web site of the Darwin Correspondence Project (<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk>).

<sup>3</sup> See Draper (2012) for a detailed discussion of Darwin’s view on pain and suffering in nature.

Contemporary scholars share Darwin's sentiment regarding the cruelty of nature. The philosopher Holmes Rolston III, for example, writes, "Though there is no sin in amoral nature, there is quite a list of candidate evils from which nature might need to be redeemed: predation, parasitism, selfishness, randomness, blindness, disaster, indifference, waste, struggle, suffering, death" (1994: 212). Similarly, in an interview with Frank Miele, Richard Dawkins, one of the best-known contemporary champions of the theory of evolution, says:

[N]atural selection is out there and it is a very unpleasant process. Nature is red in tooth and claw. But I don't want to live in that kind of a world. I want to change the world in which I live in such a way that natural selection no longer applies. (Miele 1995)

Dawkins' claim that he does not want to live in a world governed by natural selection is illuminating because it makes us realise vividly how cruel nature is. Imagine a society which involves extreme competition for survival all the time. People in this society constantly fight for limited resources, assaulting and killing each other in order to steal food and other goods. Those who survive are the selfish and physically strong ones whose main concern is their own survival. Those who are disadvantaged, such as the elderly, the poor and the handicapped, have no hope for survival. Nature seems to be comparable to this kind of society, in which few would wish to live. One might think that these descriptions of nature are exaggerated because even in the worst cases humans have never lived in such a cruel survival game of beasts. Even if that is true, it should still be acknowledged that billions of other sentient animals have lived and will live in such conditions and that our human existence depends on it. Moreover, from a larger historical point of view, humans *are* products of a long evolutionary process, which has involved a long series of violent, cruel and unfair competitions among our animal ancestors.

Contemporary philosophers, such as Quentin Smith (1991) and Paul Draper (1989, 2012), have also developed and defended the use of natural selection as an argument against theism, and such theistic philosophers as Trent Dougherty (2014), Michael J. Murray (2008) and Christopher Southgate (2008) have tried to respond to them. But I want to emphasise an important point that is often overlooked in the literature. That is, the cruelty of nature raises a form of the problem of evil that is fundamentally different from other forms of the problem. The problem of evil standardly focuses on specific *events* that are considered evil (e.g., the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, the Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia, etc.) or specific *types of events* (e.g., wars, murders, rapes, earthquakes, floods, etc.). But the problem in question suggests not only that specific events or specific types of events are evil but also that the entire biological *system* on which nature is based is fundamentally evil. Hence, I call it the 'problem of systemic evil'. The problem of systemic evil is more forceful than the standard problem of evil because, again, it focuses on something more fundamental than specific events or types of events that are deemed evil. Even if theodicies successfully undermine the standard problem of evil by explaining away the evil of specific events or specific types of events, the underlying systemic evil remains.

### **3. Existential Optimism**

Let us set aside the problem of systemic evil for the moment and consider what I call 'existential optimism'. Existential optimism is the thesis according to which the world is overall a good place and that we should be grateful for our existence in it.

The first chapter of the Book of Genesis describes God's creation of humans and animals and reports, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Leibniz's well-known claim that this is the best of all possible worlds might be too extreme but virtually all theists agree that *overall* this is a good world, indeed a very good world. Happiness and gratitude therefore seem to be natural reactions from a theistic perspective. The Bible is indeed filled with expressions of thanks to God:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. (Psalm 118:1)

Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:20)

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

Theistic philosophers commonly echo these expressions and thereby embrace existential optimism. They think that we owe thanks and worship to God for creating and sustaining our existence. Thomas V. Morris, for example, endorses existential optimism by contending that "We . . . have a duty to worship God and be thankful for his benefits" (Morris 1984: 261). In a similar vein Robert Merrihew Adams writes, "People who worship God do not normally praise him for his moral rectitude and good judgment in creating *us*. They thank God for their existence as for an undeserved personal favor" (Adams 1972: 324, emphasis in the original). Richard Swinburne even goes as far as to say that worship is not only an appropriate expression of existential optimism but an obligatory reaction to God: "Worship is obligatory—it is the proper response of respect by man to his creator" (Swinburne 1981: 126).

Existential optimism, however, is not just for theists. Atheists can in principle also endorse it because it does not require any commitment to theism. And, as a matter of fact, most atheists do endorse it.

Atheists are often caricatured as negative, nihilistic, pessimistic people who think that life is miserable or absurd. Their ontology is limited to the material universe and, according to the caricature, they think that there is nothing about our mortal existence that we should feel happy or grateful about. There certainly are atheists of this kind. David Benatar, for example, holds that coming into existence is always a serious harm. He writes:

Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence. (Benatar 2006: 1)

Benatar derives from this observation the proposition that it is morally wrong to procreate and, hence, that the optimal number of humans is exactly zero. It would be better, he says, all things being equal, if human extinction were to happen sooner rather than later.

There are, however, very few atheists who are so pessimistic and nihilistic. As far as I know, many, if not most, atheists think that we have good reason to think that the world is generally good and that we should be happy and grateful that we live in it. Atheist optimists maintain that even though they do not believe in the existence of God or the afterlife it is still rational for them to be happy and grateful that they are alive. For instance, Paul Kurtz, an American philosopher who is regarded as the father of contemporary secular humanism, argues that one can have a happy, fulfilling life while accepting a naturalistic worldview (Kurtz 2006). Dawkins, another prominent secular humanist, also expresses his gratitude for being alive, which he feels when he sees the magnificence of nature. In a 2009 debate entitled ‘Atheism is the New Fundamentalism’, sponsored by Intelligence Squared, he said:

When I lie on my back and look up at the Milky Way on a clear night and see the vast distances of space and reflect that these are also vast differences of time as well, when I look at the Grand Canyon and see the strata going down, down, down, through periods of time when the human mind can’t comprehend, I’m overwhelmingly filled with a sense of, almost worship . . . it’s a feeling of sort of an abstract gratitude that I am alive to appreciate these wonders. When I look down a microscope it’s the same feeling: I am grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders. (Dawkins 2009)

Dawkins also remarked in his lecture ‘The Greatest Show on Earth’, delivered at the University Auckland in 2010, that “We have cause to give thanks for our highly improbable existence, and the law-like evolutionary processes that gave rise to it. Such gratitude is not owed to, or to be directed towards, anyone or anything.” Another atheist, Greta Christina, writes:

I have a strong awareness of having good things in my life that I didn’t earn. Including, most importantly, my very existence. And it feels wrong to not express this awareness in some way. It feels churlish, or entitled, or self-absorbed. I don’t like treating my good fortune as if it’s just my due. I think gratitude is a good thing. (Christina 2011)

It seems reasonable to construe these quotes as expressions of existential optimism. Dawkins and Christina present their existential optimism in terms of ‘I’, but on a charitable interpretation they are not simply saying that they are among the exceptional people who are happy and grateful to be alive. Otherwise, their view would be a form of pessimism except about themselves; existential optimism is a worldview rather than the plain assertion that ‘I am happy and grateful to be alive (but I do not know about others)’. Atheists do not direct their gratitude towards God because, of course, they do not believe in the existence of God. Instead, they present their gratitude in terms of how wonderful the world is and how improbable their existence is. Whether or not atheists can express gratitude without assuming any agent, such as God, to whom to direct their gratitude is an important question but I do not address it in this essay.<sup>4</sup> What is important for our purposes here is that existential optimism is widely embraced not only by theists but also by atheists.

#### **4. The Existential Problem of Systemic Evil for Theists and Atheists**

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bishop (2010), Colledge (2013) and Lacewing (2015).

Let us now apply our discussion of existential optimism to the problem of systemic evil.

The problem of systemic evil arises for theism initially because the biological system, which guarantees pain and suffering for uncountably many sentient animals that evolve through natural selection, seems incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and morally perfect God. The problem evokes the question: Why does God create such a violent, cruel and unfair biological system if his nature is such that he is powerful enough and benevolent enough to avoid it? Yet we can also formulate the problem of systemic evil in terms of existential optimism rather than by way of an omnipotent and morally perfect God – call it the ‘existential problem of systemic evil’. The thrust of the problem can be presented as the following question: Why should we think that the world is overall good and that we should be happy and grateful to be alive in it if our existence depends fundamentally on a violent, cruel and unfair biological system which guarantees pain and suffering for uncountably many sentient animals?

What is unique about the existential problem of systemic evil is that it does not mention God; it is based solely on the conflict between systemic evil and existential optimism. This means that the problem raises a challenge not only for theists but also for *atheists* who embrace existential optimism. Recall Dawkins’ claim that, “We have cause to give thanks for our highly improbable existence, and the law-like evolutionary processes that gave rise to it.” If the “law-like evolutionary processes” guarantee pain and suffering for uncountably many humans and other sentient animals it seems impossible for atheists like Dawkins to consistently defend existential optimism.

Let us analyse the formulation of the existential problem of systemic evil more closely. The core of the problem is the apparent incompatibility between the following two points: (i) the scientific fact that our existence depends fundamentally on a violent, cruel and unfair biological system which guarantees pain and suffering for many people and other sentient animals; and (ii) existential optimism, according to which the world is overall a good place and we should be grateful for our existence in it. Holding (ii) while acknowledging (i) is like expressing our happiness about and gratitude for living with smiley faces while, at the same time, recognising that we are standing on the corpses of countless people and sentient animals that have died painfully and miserably, allowing us to survive. The quantity and quality of the costs that these people and animals had to pay for our survival seem unjustifiably high.

One might think that the existential problem of systemic evil is a version of the ‘apology paradox’, which Janna Thompson (2003) introduces in another context.<sup>5</sup> Thompson formulates this paradox as a challenge for people who sincerely wish to express apology for or regret about the fact that historical injustices, such as slavery and the dispossession of indigenous people, have taken place while acknowledging that we benefit from them.

Suppose, for example, that your grandparents met in Poland during World War II. Suppose further that, given their circumstances, they would not have met had the Holocaust not occurred. This means that, as their descendant, you would not have existed had the Holocaust not occurred. That is, your existence depends causally on the Holocaust. At the same time, you hold that the Holocaust is an awful thing which should have never taken place. If you are a political leader you might wish not only to express regret but also to apologise for the historical injustice. At the same time, you also want to affirm that you are glad to be alive. Yet, given the causal link between the Holocaust

---

<sup>5</sup> According to Neil Levy (2002), the apology paradox itself is a version of the so-called non-identity problem originally introduced by Derek Parfit (1984).

and your existence, it seems inconsistent to maintain existential optimism while regretting or apologising for the fact that the Holocaust took place.

However, there are many reasons to think that the existential problem of systemic evil is not a version of the apology paradox. I submit that the challenge that the existential problem of systemic evil raises is more fundamental than the challenge that the apology paradox raises. First, like the traditional problem of evil, the apology paradox focuses on specific historical *events* such as the Holocaust (or specific types of historical event, such as genocide) that are deemed evil or morally wrong, while the existential problem of systemic evil focuses on the entire biological *system*, such as natural selection, that is deemed evil. Needless to say, the biological system is more fundamental than historical events that take place within the system. Second, the apology paradox focuses on a *causally sufficient* link between a specific historical event and our existence, while the existential problem of systemic evil focuses on a *nomologically necessary* link between the biological system and our existence. Needless to say, nomological necessity is stronger than causal sufficiency. (I will explain this point in greater detail below.) Third, the apology paradox focuses on historical injustices for which free humans are responsible, while the existential problem of systemic evil focuses on the biological system for which humans are not responsible. Fourth, the apology paradox is concerned with the existence of specific individuals, while the existential problem of systemic evil is concerned with the existence of the world and humanity as a whole.

We can also see that the existential problem of systemic evil is more fundamental and more forceful than the apology paradox by applying Thompson's solution to the apology paradox to the existential problem of systemic evil. Thompson describes her 'best solution' to the apology paradox as follows:

Many people feel uncomfortable or even apologetic about benefiting from an injustice even when they had no responsibility for it. They are sorry that the good things that they now possess came to them because of a past injustice. They do not regret that they have these things, but that they came to have them in the way they did. An apology could be interpreted as an expression of this kind of regret. So interpreted it is not, strictly speaking, an apology *for* the deeds of our ancestors or an expression of regret that they happened. Rather it is an apology *concerning* deeds of the past, and the regret expressed is that we owe our existence and other things we enjoy to the injustices of our ancestors. *Our preference is for a possible world in which our existence did not depend on these deeds.* (Thompson 2000: 475, emphasis added to the last sentence)

Thompson's point is this: we can consistently say that we are glad to be alive while regretting or apologising for the fact that a historical injustice, which is causally linked with our existence, took place because it is coherent to wish that our existence had been realised through some other causal link. This point can be clarified by analysing it in terms of possible worlds. The apology paradox is based on the following assumption:

- (1) If a certain historical event, say, the Holocaust, had not taken place, then we would not have existed.

According to possible world semantics, this does *not* entail the following:

- (2) There is no possible world in which the Holocaust did not take place and we exist.

Instead, (1) entails the following:

- (3) In the closest possible world to the actual world in which the Holocaust did not take place we do not exist.

And this is compatible with the following:

- (4) There is a possible world in which the Holocaust did not take place and we exist.

Such a world might be quite different from the actual world because it is not the *closest* possible world to the actual world in which the Holocaust did not take place. But the consistency of (1) (and equivalently (3)) with (4) shows that one can coherently wish that we had existed without the Holocaust. So, according to Thompson, what we do when we wish that the Holocaust had not taken place while holding existential optimism is to express our preference for a world described in (4) rather than the actual world.

I submit, however, that Thompson's response to the apology paradox does not apply to the existential problem of systemic evil and that this indeed highlights the strength of the problem.

The existential problem of systemic evil is based on the following assumption:

- (1') If natural selection had not governed nature, then we would not have existed.

This does not entail the following:

- (2') There is no possible world in which natural selection does not govern nature and we exist.

Instead, (1') entails the following:

- (3') In the closest possible world to the actual world in which natural selection does not govern nature we do not exist.

And this is compatible with the following:

- (4') There is a possible world in which natural selection does not govern nature and we exist.

But a world described in (4') is very different from the actual world because the laws of nature in such a world differ from those that apply to the actual world. Changing the laws of nature is much more radical than, for example, removing a certain historical injustice from the actual world. Wishing that the laws of nature were different is so fundamental that it would undermine existential optimism, according to which the world is generally good and we should be happy and grateful to be alive in it. What sort of world is it in which we exist without natural selection? Perhaps it is a world in which we (or our counterparts) are silicon-based beings created by a higher intelligence, or immaterial spirits that do not arise through evolution. But wishing that such a world,



instead of *our* world, was actual, and wishing that we lived in such a world, would mean that we think neither that our world is good nor that we are happy and grateful to live in it.

## 5. The Disadvantage of Atheism

The apology paradox arises even if I am the only person in the actual world who is happy: How can I consistently say that I am glad to be alive while also acknowledging that my existence depends on a historical injustice which I think should never have happened? On the other hand, as mentioned above, existential optimism, which creates the existential problem of systemic evil, is not concerned with the happiness and gratitude of an individual. It is rather concerned with the world and humanity as a whole. Of course, existential optimism does not suggest that the world is thoroughly and entirely good or that the life of every single person in the world is good. It allows that certain parts of the world are not good and that there are miserable lives that do not demand expressions of happiness or gratitude. Existential optimism says instead that the world is overall good and that we should be happy and grateful to live in it.

Here is an illustration of existential optimism: Suppose that positive things in the world and life are painted yellow while negative things in the world and life are painted grey. Existential optimism says that although there might be parts of the world and people's lives that are painted mostly grey, overall the whole picture is painted mostly yellow. Existential optimism is not the view that only a part of the world which I inhabit is yellow or that only my life is painted yellow. It holds that many other parts of the world and many other people's lives are also painted yellow. Now, the existence of natural selection suggests that this perception of life and the world is inaccurate. If we peel off the yellow surface there is an enormously large grey underlying part which is linked to the violent, cruel and unfair biological system. That is, a large part of the material universe, including many lives in it, is – contrary to the initial perception – painted grey.

I have argued that the existential problem of systemic evil applies to both theism and atheism because existential optimism is independent of belief in the existence of God. Hence, the problem of evil—or more precisely, the existential problem of systemic evil—is no longer a problem exclusively for theists. It is interesting to see that there is a version of the problem that can be raised against atheists as well as theists. But what is more interesting is that theists are significantly better situated to address it than atheists are. Atheists commonly think that the material universe is all there is, so the range of their ontology is quite limited. On the other hand, theists commonly think that the material universe is not all there is. For example, they think that there is a God, an immaterial being that exists beyond our material universe, and that there is also an afterlife which is beyond our life in the material universe. The range of their ontology is, therefore, significantly, and possibly infinitely, wider than that of atheists.

Let us return to the painting illustration. If a large part of the material universe and a large part of life in it are painted grey, atheists have to give up existential optimism, which entails that these components are painted mostly yellow. Yet theists, who do not believe that the material universe or life in it represent all there is, can still hold that the world and life in it are *generally* good and painted mostly yellow because the material universe and life in it are only small segments of the whole of reality.

Let us strengthen the above point in relation to existing theistic responses to the standard problem of evil against theism. The soul-making response, for example, says that pain and suffering are compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and morally

perfect God because they are necessary for us to grow spiritually. Spiritual growth of this kind is useful even for people who die young because, according to this response, life is not limited to this material universe; there may be an afterlife or reincarnation. The sceptical theistic response, to take another example, says that we cannot fully comprehend why God allows pain and suffering in the world. This does not mean that God does not have any good reason for doing so; it simply means that we are cognitively or morally significantly more limited than God. To take yet another example, Marilyn McCord Adams' response to the problem of evil says that intimacy with God would engulf even the most horrendous forms of evil and overcome any *prima facie* reasons for people to doubt the value of their lives (Adams 1989). Using Adams' term, God 'defeats' evil even if there might not be a humanly accessible answer to the question why there has to be evil. These theistic responses can be applied with necessary adjustments to the existential problem of systemic evil. Such an approach suggests that even if a large part of the material universe and life in it are painted grey, theists have resources with which they can show that the overall picture can well be painted mostly yellow. None of these responses is available to atheists because, again, atheistic ontology is limited to the material universe. Conversely, any response that atheists can put forward is available to theists as well because theistic ontology includes the material universe.<sup>6</sup>

I do not have space to discuss whether or not any of the above theistic responses succeeds in solving the existential problem of systemic evil. What is crucial here is that whether or not any of them succeeds, theists are significantly better situated than atheists are with respect to the existential problem of systemic evil. They have in their ontology much greater, and possibly infinitely greater, resources than atheists to which they can appeal in defending theism. By appealing to items beyond the material universe, such as God and the afterlife, theists can develop numerous approaches to the problem, approaches to which atheists have no access. Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that the existential problem of systemic evil is primarily *a problem of evil for atheists*.

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to establish the following four points: First, the problem of systemic evil, which focuses on the entire biological system on which our existence is

---

<sup>6</sup> One might claim that the existential problem of systemic evil does not arise for atheists who endorse moral non-cognitivism. These atheists seem to be able to avoid the problem because they maintain, for instance, that the proposition that natural selection is evil does not express any truth-value. This claim, however, seems too strong because if non-cognitivism is true, then the existential problem of systemic evil does not arise for theists, either. One might at this point reformulate the claim in question as follows: the existential problem of systemic evil does not arise *for atheists who endorse moral non-cognitivism* while it does arise *for theists who reject moral non-cognitivism*. In order to respond to this, it seems that theists have to decide whether or not moral non-cognitivism is indeed true. However, whether or not moral non-cognitivism is true, atheists seem to remain on shaky ground because: (i) if moral non-cognitivism is true, then the existential problem of systemic evil arises for neither theists nor atheists; (ii) if moral non-cognitivism is false, then the problem arises for both theists and atheists. Thanks to Nick Trakakis for raising this potential atheistic response to the existential problem of systemic evil.

based, is stronger than the traditional problem of evil, which focuses on specific events or specific types of events. Second, both theists and atheists typically endorse existential optimism, according to which the world is generally good and we should be happy and grateful to live in it. Third, the existential problem of systemic evil, which incorporates existential optimism, can be directed against not only theists but also atheists. Fourth, as far as the existential problem of systemic evil is concerned atheists find themselves at a significant disadvantage relative to theists because their (the atheists') ontology is much more limited and there is nothing to which they can appeal beyond the material universe to solve the problem.

We normally take for granted that the problem of evil provides a reason to give up theism and a motivation to adopt atheism. Yet, if I am right, it might be the other way around. The problem of evil, or at least the existential problem of systemic evil, provides a reason to give up atheism and a motivation to adopt theism.<sup>7</sup>

## References

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1989. "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 63: 297-323.

Adams, Robert Merrehew. 1972. "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81: 317-32.

Benatar, David. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bishop, John. 2010. "Secular Spirituality and the Logic of Giving Thanks," *Sophia* 49: 523-34.

Christina, Greta. 2011. "Intransitive Gratitude: Feeling Thankful in a Godless World," <http://freethoughtblogs.com/greta/2011/11/28/intransitive-gratitude-feeling-thankful-in-a-godless-world/>.

Colledge, Richard J. 2013. "Secular Spirituality and the Hermeneutics of Ontological Gratitude," *Sophia* 52: 27-43.

Dawkins, Richard. (2009). "Atheism is the New Fundamentalism." Debate sponsored by Intelligence Squared at Wellington College on November 29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5PPIOuTBFM>

Dawkins, Richard. (2010). "The Greatest Show on Earth." Paper delivered at the University of Auckland on March 13. <https://www.alumni.auckland.ac.nz/en/photo->

---

<sup>7</sup> I read an earlier version of this paper at the 'God and Nature: The Problem of Evil' conference in Verona, which was sponsored by the Fondazione Centro Studi Campostrini, a meeting of the Open End discussion group at the University of Birmingham, a conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Uppsala and a public lecture at Auburn University. I would like to thank everyone in these audiences. I am particularly grateful to John Bishop, J. Loxley Compton, Nick Trakakis and Sami Pihlström for useful discussion, and Sofia Vescovelli for her helpful and engaging response presented at the Verona conference.

[galleries-and-video/public-lectures/richarddawkinsthegreatestshowonearthlive/richarddawkinsthegreatestshowonearthlive-1.html](http://galleries-and-video/public-lectures/richarddawkinsthegreatestshowonearthlive/richarddawkinsthegreatestshowonearthlive-1.html)

- Dougherty, Trent. 2014. *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy For All Creatures Great and Small*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Draper, Paul. 1989. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Noûs* 23: 331-50.
- Draper, Paul. 2012. "Darwin's Argument from Evil," in Yujin Nagasawa (ed.), *Scientific Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 49-70.
- Kurtz, Paul. 2006. *Affirmations: Joyful And Creative Exuberance*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Levy, Neil. 2002. "The Apology Paradox and the Non-Identity Problem," *Philosophical Quarterly* 52: 358-68.
- Lacewing, Michael. forthcoming. "Can Non-Theists Appropriately Feel Existential Gratitude?" *Religious Studies*.
- Miele, Frank. 1995. "Darwin's Dangerous Disciple: An Interview with Richard Dawkins," *Scepsis*, [https://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id\\_3.php/](https://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id_3.php/).
- Morris, Thomas V. 1984. "Duty and Divine Goodness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21: 261-68.
- Murray, Michael J. 2008. *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rolston III, Holmes. 1994. "Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?" *Zygon* 29: 205-29.
- Smith, Quentin. 1991. "An Atheological Argument from Evil Natural Laws," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29: 159-74.
- Southgate, Christopher. 2008. *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1981. *Faith and Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Thompson, Janna. 2003. "The Apology Paradox," *Philosophical Quarterly* 50: 470-75.