Selfish Comparative Optimism: A Rejoinder to Nagasawa's *Problem of Evil for Atheists*

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Yujin Nagasawa's problem of systemic evil (POSE) argues that systemic evils like natural selection pose a greater challenge to atheism/non-theism than to theism, as they conflict with "modest optimism": the view that the world is fundamentally "not bad." Nagasawa suggests theism resolves this by appealing to a heavenly bliss, offsetting natural evils, a strategy unavailable to atheists/non-theists. However, I argue that atheists/non-theists are better equipped to address POSE because they are not constrained by the theistic commitment to a categorically good world.

In Section 1, I critique two theistic approaches to POSE. Extreme optimism defends the actual world as the best possible one, requiring problematic justifications such as free-will and "only-way" theodicies to explain systemic evils as necessary. Neutral optimism, while allowing for multiple good worlds, still struggles to reconcile systemic evils with a benevolent God, merely shifting the problem to other possible worlds.

In Section 2, I explore how atheists/non-theists can bypass POSE. They can adopt personal, rather than cosmic, optimism, valuing their own existence without affirming the world's overall goodness. Alternatively, they can embrace comparative optimism, viewing existence as better than non-existence without attributing intrinsic value to natural processes like evolution. These flexible approaches free non-theists from the philosophical burdens tied to systemic evils.

In Section 3, I argue that even if POSE persists, atheists/non-theists can "borrow" theists' theodicies without committing to their metaphysical assumptions. By adopting naturalistic or subjective frameworks, non-theists can justify their modest optimism without the theological constraints imposed by theism. This demonstrates that POSE ultimately challenges theistic frameworks more than atheistic ones.

Introduction

In *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* Yujin Nagasawa develops a problem of systemic evil (POSE) that he claims challenges both atheists/non-theists and theists alike.[1] He identifies a tension between two widely held theses:

(1) Systemic evil: The process of natural selection necessitates significant suffering and pain for countless sentient animals.

(2) Modest optimism: Overall and fundamentally, the environment in which we exist is not bad.[2]

While theists naturally affirm modest optimism due to their belief in a benevolent creator God, Nagasawa observes that atheists/non-theists are also generally grateful for their existence.[3] For instance, popular atheist Richard Dawkins suggests that contemplation of the law-like evolutionary processes behind our existence

[1] When I say, "God" and "Theism" in this paper, I assume an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent singular/simple creator.

[2] Yujin Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 133, 140.

[3] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 161.

puts us "in a position to give thanks for our luck in being here"—not a gratitude directed towards any agent or being, but rather a "gratitude in a vacuum."[4] Nagasawa sees this as inconsistent: expressing existential gratitude without acknowledging the systemic evils underpinning it implies a tacit endorsement of these evils.

To illustrate this tension, Nagasawa adapts Janna Thompson's apology paradox, which holds that regretting an unjust historical event can be problematic if one's existence depends on that event. For example, a Jew whose grandparents met during the Holocaust faces a paradox: to regret the Holocaust may seem to imply regretting her own existence.[5] Thompson resolves this by distinguishing between regretting *how* one came to exist and *that* one exists—the Jew can regret *how* her grandparents met, without regretting *that* they met at all.[6] Applied to POSE, this seems to suggest that one can regret the mechanisms of natural selection without regretting the outcome of our existence.

However, Nagasawa argues that this resolution fails in the context of POSE. Unlike historical events, natural selection is not a contingent circumstance but a fundamental feature of the natural world.[7] To reject it is not to regret a particular pathway to existence, but to undermine the very conditions that make existence possible. That is, there is no possible world where natural selection does not govern nature and beings like us still exist.

Theists, Nagasawa argues, are better positioned to defend modest optimism, drawing on "heavenly bliss" theodicies that justify or outweigh earthly suffering with the promise of an afterlife. These come in two forms: (1) as a deferred justification, where evolution is acceptable because it leads to eternal reward, and (2) as a utilitarian offset, where infinite heavenly bliss outweighs finite worldly suffering. Because atheists cannot appeal to such concepts, POSE, he claims, presents a more serious problem for atheists.

Contrary to Nagasawa, I argue that atheists and non-theists are better positioned to address POSE because they are not constrained by the theistic requirement to see the world as overall categorically good. To support this claim, I first critique two theistic attempts at resolving systemic evil, namely extreme and neutral optimism, illustrating their shortcomings. Subsequently, I explore how atheists/non-theists might effectively sidestep POSE by adopting personal rather than cosmic optimism, or by embracing a comparative optimism which sees existence as preferable to non-existence without categorically endorsing the systems that facilitated it. Finally, I turn Nagasawa's borrowing argument around to propose that, even if POSE remains challenging, atheists/non-theists can strategically adopt theistic theodicies without their accompanying metaphysical assumptions, thereby reducing POSE's impact and revealing it to be ultimately a greater challenge for theistic frameworks than for atheistic or non-theistic ones.

Section 1: Two Theist Modest Optimists

1.1 Extreme optimism

The first theist modest optimists—extreme optimists—claim that because God actualised the best among all possible worlds, systemic evil must necessarily exist in all good worlds. Although Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz does not himself discuss systemic evil and predates evolution, his *Theodicy* (1710) presents a system where given God's omnibenevolence and omniscience—if a possible world is better than the actual, then God would either not be good enough to desire the best for the world, or ignorant in not knowing which world is the best.[8]

As an implication, extreme optimists must affirm Nagasawa's claim that no possible world exists in which natural selection does not govern nature; for if God is necessary, then no other world is possible. Natural selection must therefore serve an instrumental role in the world's goodness. Building on this system, Austin Farrer argues that the removal of any such purported evil systems will undermine God's mechanism for bringing about the best world. The goodness of a physical system, for instance, inherently includes

[4] Richard Dawkins, "The Greatest Show on Earth Live" (lecture, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, 13 March 2010).

[5] Janna Thompson, "The Apology Paradox," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50, No. 201 (2000): 471.

[6] Janna Thompson, "The Apology Paradox," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50, No. 201 (2000): 475.

[7] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, 167.

[8] G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy,* edited by Austin Farrer, translated by E. M. Huggard (Open Court Publishing Company, 1985), 249.

the potential for mutual interference, leading to evils like predation. Without this interference—if this world were a "magically self-arranged garden" free of competition for space or resources—physicality itself ceases to exist.[9] Removing such systems would be akin to relieving an animal's pain "by the removal of its nervous system; that is to say, of its animality."[10] Regretting natural selection thus implicitly challenges God's rationality and goodness in creating us as physical beings rather than spiritual entities.[11]

An immediate difficulty with extreme optimism is that claiming this world to be the best possible one is hard to reconcile with the presence of seemingly avoidable evils observed throughout nature. This tension is captured ironically in the eponymous character of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) who insists that this is the best possible world as he faces a world plagued with wars, earthquakes, and slavery.[12] Or when Darwin questions why God permitted the creation of the Ichneumonidae who brutally feeds inside the living bodies of caterpillars.[13] This presents a major challenge: extreme optimism struggles to align with observable, avoidable evils unless it denies these empirical observations—as some Creationists do—or reinterprets such systemic evils as necessary.[14]

Granting natural selection's empirical truth, theists generally present two kinds of theodicies for *why* God actualised natural selection. Firstly, theists have adapted the free-will theodicy to address some non-agential non-human suffering. In traditional free-will theodicies, God permits agents the capacity to choose evil over good as the goodness of human agency outweighs the risks of their choosing evil. In one adaptation, Richard Swinburne argues that animal pain and suffering exists as examples of evil actions humans can inflict on each other. Predation therefore exists as an educational tool for humans to observe and understand how to commit evil, thereby enabling their capacity for moral choice.[15]

Secondly, theists have adapted a variation of the soul-making theodicy known as the "only-way" theodicy, arguing that certain natural goods can only develop through natural selection. Holmes Rolston observes that the predator-prey cycle is instrumental to the beautiful diversity of animals, where "The cougar's fang has carved the limbs of the fleet-footed deer, and vice versa."[16] While Young-Earth Creationism may have created this diversity instantaneously, Christopher Southgate argues that natural selection is the only way creatures can develop into biological "selves" with their own interests and behaviours.[17] This offsets any evolutionary evils for it culminates into complex "selves" that conform to God's image.[18] This "selving" must come independently, for Peter van Inwagen argues that an irregular world is a defect: God who constantly intervenes and violates his own laws is either a irrational or evil.[19] So, common to both free-will and "only-way" theodicies is a notion that some ultimate good offsets the evils of natural selection as an instrument.

However, these two theodicies only defer the problem of evil to another system underlying the challenged system. For instance, free-will theodicies must still address Pierre Bayle's objection: If God's omniscience foresees that giving humanity free will inevitably results in unrighteousness, then God is either reckless or cruel to "gift" humanity agency, knowing it would lead to their harm and judgment under his wrath.[20] Echoing Bayle, Robert John Russell questions, "Why did God choose to create *this* universe with *these* laws of physics knowing that they would not only make Darwinian evolution unavoidable, and with it the sweep of natural evil in the biological realm?".[21] It appears, then, that extreme optimism is burdened with regressive manifestations of the problem of evil.

[9] Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (Collins, 1962), 53-54.

[10] Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (Collins, 1962), 51.

[11] Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (Collins, 1962), 67.

[12] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* 129.

[13] Charles Darwin, "22 May 1860 Letter to Asa Gray," Darwin Correspondence Project, accessed on 5 December 2024, https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2814.xml.

[14] Paul Prescott, "The Secular Problem of Evil: An Essay in Analytic Existentialism," *Religious Studies* 57 (2021): 102.

[15] Richard Swinburne, "Natural Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, No. 4 (1978): 299.

[16] Holmes Rolston III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (London: Templeton Foundation press, 2006), 134.

[17] Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 58.

[18] Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation*, 72.

[19] Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 143-45.

[20] Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections,* translated by Richard H. Popkin and Craig Brush (Hackett, 1991), 177.

[21] Robert John Russell, "Natural Theodicy in an Evolutionary Context," in *Cosmology: From Alpha to Omega* (Fortress Press, 2008), 259.

In sum, while extreme optimists attempt to reconcile systemic evil with the claim that this is the best possible world through the use of free-will and "only-way" theodicies, such strategies ultimately defer rather than resolve the problem. Faced with empirical evidence of seemingly gratuitous suffering, they must either deny these realities or accept increasingly speculative theological explanations. While extreme optimism may appeal to the heavenly bliss defence, it still does not explain *why* natural selection is the best possible means towards that end without returning to this regress or begging the question. As such, extreme optimism appears ill-equipped to resolve the tension Nagasawa identifies between systemic evil and modest optimism. So, theists must either concede that natural selection is not the best necessary instrument in the best possible world, or following Bayle and Russell accept the former's pessimism or latter's "agnostic cosmic theodicy" in accepting that POSE cannot be answered.[22]

1.2 **Neutral optimism**

The second theist modest optimists, the neutral optimists, reject that the actual world is necessarily the best, but rather affirms that God actualised one of many possible overall good worlds. For instance, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that extreme optimism inappropriately imposes a utilitarian standard of moral goodness to God's omnibenevolence. Instead, he argues that traditional Judeo-Christian ethics account for God's goodness in terms of his grace—an inclination to love that is not based on the merit of the one being loved.[23] Indeed, core to Abrahamic monotheism is an affirmation of God's aseity, his self-sufficiency and independence from any external cause or necessity. [24] If God were obligated to create the best possible world in order to express his power or love, then his omnipotence and omnibenevolence would become contingent on something external—namely, the existence of that world—thereby undermining his aseity. It follows, therefore, that a being who never exists is not wronged by not being created, since existence itself is not owed to any potential being.[25] Furthermore, beings in the actual but not best world have no right to complain, lest they express an unmerited claim for special treatment or violate modest optimism.[26] God's omnibenevolence, therefore, does not demand that he create the best world possible.

As an implication, neutral optimists can entertain that there is a possible world without natural selection where we exist. However, two considerations may constrain this possibility. Firstly, this possible world must be logically coherent. Thomas Morris argues that if God's omnipotence is committed to what is logically and semantically possible, God becomes a "delimiter of possibilities."[27] That is, as God's existence is necessary in all possible worlds, those worlds must reflect his omnipotence by being logically coherent and his omnibenevolence by being overall good. This means that if a world without natural selection either fails to be logically coherent or cannot sustain overall goodness without introducing other systemic evils, it may not be a genuine possibility after all. Secondly, this limitation implies that a possible world without natural selection where we exist is not necessarily better or worse than the actual world. It could very well be that following the "only-way" theodicies, the goodness of true biological selves must necessarily come through natural selection and that this outweighs the evil of natural selection. Regardless, the neutral optimist is distinct in that they can be grateful for their existence without necessarily implying that natural selection is instrumentally good.

One obvious challenge against neutral optimism is its shifting definition of God's omnibenevolence may not be intuitively satisfying. For instance, Adams's definition of God's "grace", which does not require universal benevolence to all creatures, may only be satisfactory to some Calvinists or those within certain theological traditions. While this conception asserts that natural selection does not need to be justified as instrumentally good, the reality and impact of systemic evil make it difficult for suffering beings to reconcile that God's omnibenevolence does not require him to show grace to them, in tension with their own intuitions about what it means to be loving. However, as this critique may hold less weight for those

[22] Robert John Russell, "Natural Theodicy in an Evolutionary Context," in *Cosmology: From Alpha to Omega* (Fortress Press, 2008), 255.

[23] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Must God Create the Best?", *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972): 324.

[24] Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 61.

[25] Adams, "Must God Create the Best? 319-20.

[26] Adams, "Must God Create the Best? 319-20.

[27] Thomas V. Morris, "The Necessity of God's Goodness," *New Scholasticism* 59 (1985): 425.

aligned with certain Calvinist doctrines, where such a conception of grace is more readily accepted, it will be set aside as a doctrinal matter.

A more universal challenge is that even if a neutral optimist can maintain modest optimism about their existence while affirming systemic evil through yearning for another possible world, logical constraints on such worlds mean that regretting the evils of the actual world may require relinquishing goods unique to its constitution. For example, recalling Swinburne's free-will theodicy, a possible world without natural selection might lead to it not having human agency. Similarly, recalling Southgate's "only-way" theodicy, a world without natural selection could lack independent selves. If the existence of goods like human agency or autonomous selves carry significant moral weight, then removing the conditions that produce them (i.e., natural selection) may render the alternative world no longer overall good—and thus not genuinely possible. At best, such possible worlds without natural selection might not involve a loss of goods significant enough to undermine modest optimism. At worst, the trade-offs could introduce greater problems of evil. A creationist world, for instance, implies that God played a direct role in designing cruel beings like the Ichneumonidae than if they developed independently through evolution.

Comparing extreme and neutral theistic optimism, both conceptions of modest optimism requires that the world is overall good. This is because evidence of systemic evils must be outweighed by some other goodness or burdened with a theodicy. This, however, is not a requirement for atheist/non-theist optimism.

Section 2: Two atheist/non-theist modest optimists

2.1 Personal optimism

The first atheist/non-theist modest optimist approach argues that the scope of existential gratitude can be limited to the personal level without axiologically considering the world as an aggregate. While Dawkins expresses his gratitude for existing despite unfavourable odds, he regrets that, "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."[28] However, we can resolve Dawkins' apparent disjunct by affirming *personal* existential optimism directed at one's own existence while rejecting *cosmic* existential optimism that the world is overall good. This is not methodologically novel; Asha Lancaster-Thomas observes that even within individuals' lifetimes, we are grateful for some parts of our lives, but not parts characterised by pain and suffering such as a painful chronic illness.[29]

An implication of personal, but not cosmic, optimism is that their existential gratitude does not need to consider the axiology of natural selection. One could remain axiologically agnostic towards the instruments of their existence, while valuing the goodness of their personal existence. Guy Kahane emphasises this distinction by arguing that even if natural selection is a causally fundamental instrument to our existence, it is axiologically irrelevant as instrumental value alone does not add any overall value to the world.[30] Under this conception, one could even be cosmically pessimistic but still be optimistic about their personal life as they experience it. Modest optimism is thus reinterpreted to affirm attitudinal optimism, that we are grateful to exist in this world; but not axiological optimism, that the world is overall good.[31]

However, after disregarding pessimism, personal optimism appears empirically challenged as most personal optimists are often implicitly also cosmic optimists. Responding to Kahane, Nagasawa grants that personal optimism does not necessarily entail cosmic optimism. However, he argues that this reformulation of modest optimism changes the target of POSE, which defines modest optimism as affirming both attitudinal and axiological optimism.[32] For he argues that rational personal optimists who procreate implicitly believe that the world they are bringing their child into is overall a good place.[33] The personal, but not cosmic,

[28] Frank Miele, "Darwin's Dangerous Disciple: An Interview with Richard Dawkins," *The Skeptic*, 27 October 2010, https://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/10-10-27/.

[29] Asha Lancaster-Thomas, "Can Heaven Justify Horrendous Moral Evils? A Postmortem Autopsy," *Religions* 14, No. 296 (2023): 6.

[30] Guy Kahane, "Optimism without theism? Nagasawa on Atheism, Evolution, and Evil," *Religious Studies* 58 (2022): 706.

[31] Guy Kahane, "Optimism without theism? Nagasawa on Atheism, Evolution, and Evil," *Religious Studies* 58 (2022): 702.

[32] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* 184.

[33] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* 184.

reformulation of modest optimism, therefore, seemingly misses the original target of POSE and is only applicable to a minority of anti-natalist pessimists like David Benatar.

Responding to this, Nagasawa's formulation of modest optimism is already limited to the scope of"the environment in which we exist." The specific environment of individual experiences does not necessarily include the predation experienced by other preyed beings. Indeed, this does not preclude the modest optimist from being selfish for bringing a child into the world. Or disregarding the pains of the world, a personally optimistic individual can choose to be ignorant of the world's plights by never contributing to charitable causes to use the money to instead maximise personal pleasures. It is not evident, therefore, that most personal optimists must also be cosmic optimists.

2.2 **Comparative optimism**

The second atheist/non-theist modest optimist approach argues that modest optimism only views the world as *comparatively* good, but not necessarily *categorically* good. That is, the world must only be *comparatively* better than non-existence, rather than positively good. This distinction is significant, as Nagasawa's comparative argument for theism seems to present the axiology of the world in binary categorical terms. Theism's appeal to a heavenly bliss allows for a world with more goodness rather than evil.[34] But because atheists/non-theists are not committed to affirming an omnibenevolent God, Kahane argues that they are not obliged to claim that their existence is categorically good, or that the world contains more goodness than evil. Indeed, even under Leibniz's extreme optimism, the world is not necessarily categorically good, just that it is comparatively the best of all possible worlds.[35]

An implication of a comparatively better, but not categorically good, optimism is that natural selection does not have to be categorically good. Assuming that existence in itself is a good greater than all kinds of non-existence, an actual world with systemic evil is better than any unactualised world. So, modest optimism's "not bad" is equated to being comparatively better than non-existence. Opposing theism's appeal to the supernatural, this essentially lowers the requirement for modest optimism.

One major challenge is that this comparative-goodness version of modest optimism closely borders on pessimism, and therefore demands an account of why existence, despite systemic evils, is fundamentally and overall better than non-existence. The pessimist Benatar, for instance, argues that the absence of pain is always good, even if no one benefits, whereas the absence of pleasure is only bad if someone is deprived by it. This asymmetry supports his claim that existence, with its inevitable suffering, may be worse than non-existence, which guarantees goodness with no badness.[36]

Responding to Benatar, the optimist can follow Thaddeus Metz's argument against Benatar's claim that the absence of pain is good, describing the absence of pain as *not bad* rather than *good*.[37] Otherwise, the atheist/non-theist modest optimist can simply appeal to the previously-discussed personal, rather than cosmic, optimism. All modest optimism demands is that according to myself, it is better for me to exist than for me not to exist. Indeed, Benetar seems to grant this notion, as he distinguishes a present-tense "life worth continuing" and future-tense "life worth starting."[38] Personal optimists often experience instances where the goods of actualised pleasure outweigh the evils of pain, resulting in a net utility that makes existence preferable to non-existence. So, unless one is personally pessimistic, there is nothing paradoxical about claiming one's personal life is better to exist than not exist.

Combining these two approaches, the atheist/non-theist, can commit to a personal and comparative form of modest optimism that still accounts for the categorically systemic evil of the cosmos. Unlike theistic extreme optimism's commitment to the instrumental value of natural selection as a part of God's providence, personal optimists can simply remain agnostic about natural systems' axiological value. But while theistic neutral optimists can adopt a similar approach to the atheism/non-theism's comparative (not categorical) goodness, they remain committed to both that possible worlds must overall be good, and that God's creative ability is bound to logical laws, so that the possible worlds they yearn for must necessarily contain some

[34] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* 171.
[35] Kahane, "Optimism Without Theism," 713.
[36] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.
[37] Thaddeus Metz, "Are Lives Worth Creating?", *Philosophical Papers* 40, No. 2 (2011): 241-45
[38] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been,* 22-23.

other kind of systemic evil that requires a theodicy . The personal optimist on the other hand need not make this consideration of the overall goodness of other possible worlds. So, whilst theism can appeal to the heavenly bliss, the non-theist can simply bypass POSE without needing to address it.

Section 3: **Borrowing Theism's Optimism Without its Metaphysics**

But even if atheists/non-theists remain burdened by POSE due to perhaps their cosmic or even categorical optimism, I propose that they can "borrow" the theodicies used by theists to justify their modest optimism. This reverses Nagasawa's theistic strategy, which claims that theism's supernaturalist ontology (encompassing both natural and supernatural realms) subsumes the atheist/non-theist's naturalist ontology (limited to the natural world), thus allowing theists to "borrow" atheist/non-theist responses to POSE.[39] However, Nagasawa does not address the fact that supernaturalist ontologies bring additional axiological presuppositions—namely, that an omnibenevolent God exists and that his creation must necessarily be overall and categorically good. Non-theists, by contrast, can adopt the theist's belief that the world is overall good using the theist's rationalisations, without committing to these broader metaphysical claims about God. In essence, atheists/non-theists can justify their optimism in the face of POSE without having to commit to the theist's wider ontological framework.

Borrowing from extreme theistic optimism, the atheist/non-theist can still view natural selection as categorically good by appealing to the same free-will and "only-way" theodicies—without relying on theological assumptions. For instance, they may regard natural selection as instrumentally necessary for the emergence of goods like human free-will or biological selves and affirm these outcomes as categorically valuable in themselves. There is nothing inherently theological in valuing such features of natural history. While theists might argue that moral value requires an objective grounding in God, the atheist can respond in two ways: either by offering a naturalistic foundation for moral value, or by treating such value judgements—and the modest optimism they support—as subjective, grounded in personal or shared human perspectives. On this view, modest optimism need not depend on the objective truth of its content but rather functions as an attitudinal stance. Accordingly, theist theodicies can be borrowed by non-theists as explanatory tools, enabling them to affirm the world's overall goodness without committing to metaphysical claims that theists traditionally used to justify them.

Borrowing from neutral theistic optimism, the atheist/non-theist can still affirm that the actual world is not necessarily the best possible world, but still trust that it is better to exist than not to exist. The lack of a requirement for atheists/non-theists to commit to the idea that the world is categorically good allows for a more flexible position. Even if systemic evils suggest that the world is not fundamentally good, the personal optimist can still maintain a stance of cosmic neutrality. They can accept the world as it is—flawed, but not necessarily bad in a way that undermines their gratitude for existing. Indeed, without a commitment to an omnibenevolent God who governs over all creation's actions, the non-theist can simply adopt a position of gratitude for the outcomes of those processes without ascribing moral or intrinsic value to these violent/harsh (but not immoral) systemic processes themselves.

This strategic borrowing highlights a key asymmetry: while theists must reconcile systemic evil with a metaphysical commitment to a categorically good creation, non-theists can adopt similar explanatory frameworks without such constraints. In doing so, they preserve the practical benefits of modest optimism without incurring the theological debts that weigh down the theistic response to POSE.

Conclusion

POSE, therefore, remains a problem only for theists as their conception of modest theism must commit to the belief that a good God would create a categorically good world. This commitment imposes significant burdens ontheist extreme optimists, whose belief that the actual world is the best possible world obliges them either to embrace pessimism, appeal to mystery, or present a theodicy for systemic evils. And while responses like the free-will and "only-way" theodicies may present *prima facie* defences to POSE, they only

[39] Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists,* 173.

regress into deeper manifestations of the problem of evil unless the theist begs the question or makes an appeal to mystery. Likewise, theist neutral optimists, who holds that the actual world is only one of many possible worlds that are not necessarily the best ones, remain committed to asserting that world is overall good—which is still difficult to reconcile with or even amplifies the existence of systemic evils.

In contrast, the atheist/non-theist can either borrow the theist's theodicies, or maintain a personal comparative optimistic stance that disregards POSE overall. By selfishly narrowing modest optimism to the personal level, the atheist/non-theist can disregard systemic evils while remaining grateful for their own lives as they experience it. Furthermore, their non-commitment to categorical goodness allows them to value comparatively their personal lives as better than non-existence, even if by borrowing neutral optimism, they accept the world as it is and appreciate the outcomes of systemic processes like natural selection without assigning moral or intrinsic value to them.

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