

The Secular Problem of Evil

Paul Prescott
Syracuse University
papresco@syr.edu

Working draft; please do not cite or circulate without permission.

Abstract: The existence of evil is held to pose philosophical problems only for theists. I argue that the existence of evil gives rise to a philosophical problem which confronts theist and atheist alike. The problem is constituted by the following claims: (1) a good-enough world as a necessary condition of mental health for human beings; (2) the world is not a good-enough world (i.e., sufficient evil exists). It follows that human beings must either abandon mental health, or maintain a state of epistemic ignorance regarding their existential condition. Theists resolve this problem by rejecting (2), only to confront the problem of evil as traditionally understood. Atheists also reject (2), but without adequate grounds for doing so.

We have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is in much more danger than our life; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us 'remember that you must die', would have done much better to remind us of this greater danger that threatens us.

Primo Levi (1958)

My life consists in my being content to accept many things.

Wittgenstein (1951)

Traditionally, the **problem of evil** is the problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the purported existence of God. On some versions of the problem, the existence of evil is held to be logically incompatible with the existence of God (Mackie 1955); on others, it is held to be evidence against the existence of God (Rowe 1979). On all versions, the problem of evil begins and ends with a commitment to theism. Reject theism and all that remains of the problem of evil

is a practical task of reconciling oneself to the unpleasant realities of adversity, brutality, and misfortune.¹

While this assessment is common, I believe it is mistaken. The **traditional problem of evil** is strictly a problem for theism. The philosophical problem posed by the existence of evil is not. As I aim to show, the existence of evil gives rise to a philosophical problem that is both logically prior to and distinct from the traditional problem.

The problem is as follows. On the one hand, there is a basic psychological fact about human beings:

- (1) A good-enough world as a necessary condition of mental health for human beings.

On the other hand, there is a claim that everyone—theist and atheist alike—should grant: evil exists. With the existence of evil comes a live possibility:

- (2) The world is not a good-enough world.

Let us call these two claims held in conjunction **traumatic realism**. According to the traumatic realist, the world is not good-enough relative to the psychological needs and capacities of human beings. By ‘world’ I mean everything that is, both natural and supernatural, including that which is social.² By ‘not good-enough,’ I mean that the conditions that obtain in the world are incompatible with the psychological requirements of human existence. When squarely faced,

¹ There are exceptions to this view. For example, Susan Neiman has written extensively on the problem of evil from a secular point of view (see Neiman 2002). I consider her work foundational for this paper.

² Thus “two-world” views like those found in Christian literature comprise a single world as understood here.

they do not support the essential confidence in the world upon which mental health depends. Hence, should traumatic realism be true, there are only two unpalatable options: (i) abandon mental health, or (ii) live life in a radical—albeit self-preserving—state of epistemic ignorance regarding the nature of the world in which one must live.

The immediate response to traumatic realism is theism, which guarantees that the world is good-enough. According to the theist, (2) is false. God exists, and is hospitable to us. Hence, the world is hospitable to us. For many today, however, theism is untenable. Barring theism one is left with a remainder, which I call the **secular problem of evil**.

I approach the problem in four stages. In Part 1, I explicate the central notion of a good-enough world. In Part 2, I make the case that mentally healthy human beings require a good-enough world if they are to confront the world unbenighted. In Part 3, I consider and reject an *a priori* argument that the actual world is good-enough. For reasons that become apparent, one cannot provide a conclusive argument that the actual world is not good-enough. However, one can show that atheists are deeply committed to a strong possibility that it isn't. Arguments to this effect are made in Part 4. Part 5 provides a brief conclusion. My aim throughout is to show that the philosophical problems posed by the existence of evil cannot be escaped by rejecting a theistic worldview.

Let us now turn to the concept of a good-enough world.

The Concept of a Good-enough World

The concept of a good-enough world stands on two assumptions.³

³ I am indebted to the psychoanalytic theorist D. W. Winnicott for the notion of a 'good-enough world.' Winnicott is perhaps best known for the concept of the "good-enough mother." This notion, however, has its origins in the concept of a good-enough environment, first fully articulated in his 1949 paper "Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma" (Winnicott 1958: 243-254).

The first assumption is that the personality is fragile. By ‘the personality,’ I mean the integrated features of a person—including traits of character—that are typical of that person as an individual. By ‘fragile,’ I mean that the personality is existentially vulnerable to a world which it inhabits, and within which it resides. Much as the human organism depends upon the world to provide adequate food, shelter, and atmospheric pressure (for example), so the human personality depends upon the world to provide the conditions necessary for its ongoing integration and survival. Perhaps foremost among these conditions is **trust**. When thinking about the world, and acting within the world, we must trust the world—and do trust the world—to be sufficiently conducive to us.

The second assumption on which the concept of a good-enough world stands is what Hume once called the “great and melancholy truth:” evil exists (1779: 68). I will understand evil as that which threatens to undermine our personalities, by undermining our essential confidence in the world.

Here, a clarificatory note is in order: the concept of a good-enough world does not stand on intellectualist assumptions. In speaking of ‘trust’ and ‘essential confidence,’ it is not my intention to indicate that one must *believe* that the world is good-enough (on an intellectualist understanding of ‘belief’). Trust in the world is not necessarily seen in one’s cognitive attitudes, much less in the propositions one endorses. Rather, it is seen in one’s integrated modes of thought and action. Hence, one can trust the world while asserting, and believing, that one doesn’t. Indeed, I suspect this is not uncommon. We inhabit a “climate of trust” that, as Annette Baier once observed, typically goes unnoticed unless compromised or absent (Baier 1986: 234).

Let us say that a world is good-enough if and only if it is capable of underwriting our essential confidence in the face of the evils that threaten to undermine it. What makes for a good-

enough world? As means of approach, several distinctions will give the concept a thicker and more tractable definition. Here, I exposit three possibilities, which are intended to be exhaustive. The world can be **karmic/enabling**; it can be **nonkarmic/enabling**, or it can be **disabling** (i.e., nonkarmic/nonenabling). Worlds that are enabling are good-enough. Worlds that are disabling are not.

As I argue in Part 2, should the world be disabling, the health and integrity of the personality cannot be maintained without recourse to robust epistemic ignorance.

Karmic/Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is intrinsically trustworthy a **karmic/enabling world**. Karmic/enabling worlds provide reliable, supportive environments for us. They provide this because they are morally ordered and immanently just.

To say that a karmic/enabling world is morally ordered is to say that, in such a world, there is a causal connection between outcome and desert: good things (ultimately) happen to good people, and bad things (ultimately) happen to bad people. It matters little whether this causal connection is naturally or supernaturally imposed. However it comes about, in a karmic world people deserve what they (ultimately) get, and (ultimately) get what they deserve. That being the case, in a karmic/enabling world one can rationally anticipate outcomes and plan for the future.

That the world is karmic is the default conviction of children. And this is no accident. It is safe to be fragile and dependent in such a world. Misfortunes, when they occur, are met with a response. Nothing that really matters is lost, for there is no possibility of loss that is not (ultimately) constructive and deserved. Hence, in a karmic/enabling world, our essential

confidence is secure. Evil may exist in such a world. But its existence does not define the nature of the world. Rather, the existence of evil is subsumed under a larger order that underwrites our capacity for thought and action, and provides us with a substantial degree of control.

In the West, the belief that the world is karmic/enabling is exemplified by theism. The god of monotheism, by His very existence as God, guarantees such a world. A karmic/enabling world is also presupposed by Buddhist nontheism, Hindu henotheism, as well as by some philosophers; for example, Plato in the *Republic*, and arguably Kant.

Now, it is probably not the case that human beings *per se* need the world to be karmic/enabling in order to find it sufficiently trustworthy. The importance of a *morally* hospitable world should not be underestimated. Human beings have a powerful tendency to posit such a world, as Lerner (1980), among others, has shown. And it is likely that many human personalities need the world to be karmic if they are to maintain their essential confidence. Nevertheless, many others seem to live, and live well, in the absence of any conviction of immanent justice. Of greater concern for these others is whether the world remains sufficiently conducive to us.

Nonkarmic/Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is not morally ordered but remains sufficiently conducive to us a **nonkarmic/enabling world**. Nonkarmic/enabling worlds provide an indifferent, but not necessarily hostile, environment for us. Here, for example, we find the world presupposed by Confucius in the *Analects*; Hegel in the *Phenomenology*; the Stoics with their *logos*, and many

modern and contemporary secular Western philosophers—including Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill.⁴

Nonkarmic/enabling worlds are not immanently just. They are not responsive to our moral qualities as agents. And so, they are not fully conducive to us. This is not to say, however, that nonkarmic/enabling worlds cannot be trusted. Meaningful human agency in response to evil is *prima facie* possible in a nonkarmic/enabling world, for such a world shares a feature with a karmic world that is critically important: it allows for reliable expectation.

A world that allows for reliable expectation is one that has an intelligible order from a human perspective sufficient to allow for meaningful thought and action. As we have seen, a karmic world allows for reliable expectation by linking outcome to desert. But nonkarmic worlds can allow for reliable expectation also. Any intelligible order sufficient to allow for a constructive human response to the existence of evil will do. There need only be a way through such a world (a *dao*), or a way to ground oneself within one (a *logos*). The world thus constituted may not always be conducive to us. And the requisite degree of control may not be guaranteed (as it is in a karmic world). But it is not illusory, either. And so, confronted with the fact of evil, it remains possible for us to provide for ourselves.

There is, however, a third option.

Disabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is not sufficiently conducive to reliable expectation a **disabling world**. Disabling worlds are neither karmic nor enabling, and so cannot be trusted. Not only is a

⁴ For an admirable attempt to secure Kantianism in a nonkarmic world, see Baier (1980). Baier's thesis is that "the secular equivalent of faith in God . . . is faith in the human community" (##). "[T]he just must live by faith, faith in a community of just persons" (##).

disabling world indifferent to human concerns, but the manner in which it is organized is fundamentally incompatible with the conditions upon which we depend. Should the world be disabling, human aspirations are without rational basis. There is no intelligible order. Control is an illusion. Our requirements will not be met. Should the world be disabling, as Joseph Conrad once suggested, there is nothing but “the horror” (1899: 68).

It is at this point that philosophers typically part ways with tragic poets. For philosophers, the world may or may not be karmic. But it is conducive to reliable expectation. For the tragic poets, the world is not. Not only is the world portrayed by the tragic poets nonkarmic, but it utterly outstrips the finite capacities of human beings to meaningfully compensate or respond. Here, for example, we find the world portrayed by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and by Shakespeare in *King Lear*.

At this point, another clarificatory note is in order: When considering the possibility of a disabling world, it is important to bear in mind that such a world need not be bad in every particular. Indeed, a disabling world can contain a great deal of good fortune. There can be good-enough environments within it—*islands of comparative enablement*—capable of underwriting the personality. Within such environments individuals can exist in relative privilege and comfort. Hence, it is possible to live in in a disabling world without ever encountering its tragic order. This point will be critically important for much that follows.

For the sake of clarity, let us call the view that the actual world is disabling **tragic** (as opposed to traumatic) **realism**. Tragic realism is the view that the world is *essentially* tragic. It is neither morally ordered nor otherwise conducive to reliable expectation. In short, it is not a good-enough world.

As I now aim to show, only a god is psychologically equipped to embrace tragic realism. For human beings as they are, traumatic realism is the only option.

Traumatic Realism

Traumatic realism is the view that the conditions that obtain in the world are such that human beings cannot maintain their mental and emotional health in a full appreciation of them.

As noted in the introduction, traumatic realism decomposes into two distinct claims:

- (1) Human beings require a good-enough world as a necessary condition of mental health.
- (2) The world is not good-enough (i.e., tragic realism).

In the previous section, I unpacked the second claim: A world that is not good-enough is a world that is not conducive to reliable expectation in any form. In this section, I focus on the first claim, which I will call the “key assumption” of traumatic realism. The key assumption is key because it marks the distinction between realism which is traumatic, and that which is merely tragic.

According to the key assumption of traumatic realism, there is a critical range of fit between the human personality and the world that sustains it, and in which it resides. Within this range of fit, the the personality can be maintained, in principle, in a full apprehension of its existential condition. Outside that range, it cannot.

If tragic realism is true, the necessary conditions specified by this range of fit are unsatisfied by the world as it is. From this premise and the key assumption, the traumatic realist

draws the conclusion: Grant the truth of tragic realism, and mental health is possible only under conditions of epistemic ignorance.

So, why accept the key assumption?

Let us begin with a prior observation: children need the world to be good-enough as a necessary condition for mental and emotional development. The key assumption of traumatic realism may or may not be an essential feature of the human condition. But it is an essential feature of childhood.

Consider the following: Children are oblivious to many—perhaps most—of the existential dangers that surround them. That their parents are good people who love them, for example, is a given (whether or not their parents are, or do). That the world is a safe place to grow and explore is a given also (whether or not the world is). These and similar confidences are the bedrock of childhood. For a child, the possible contraries to such articles of faith are simply too terrifying to endure.

The key assumption of traumatic realism is thus satisfied in the case of children. Children need the world to meet certain psychological requirements. And they will trust that the world meets those requirements regardless of whether or not the world does. Possessed of an instinctual optimism, their developing minds are protected—to some degree, and to some extent—from the vicissitudes of life, including the life which they in fact live.

Now, many of us tacitly assume that this state of affairs comes to an end with the advent of adulthood. But does it?

The traumatic realist maintains it does not.

According to the traumatic realist, adults, like children, need the world to be good-enough as a necessary condition for mental and emotional health. In support of this claim, the

traumatic realist points to cases where trust in the world has been forceably broken. As the foregoing suggests, this is not readily accomplished. But it can be done, either by accident or by intent. Accidentally, trust in the world can be compromised by catastrophic misfortune (traditionally known as ‘natural evil’). By intent, it can be undermined by severe abuse or psychophysical torture (traditionally known as ‘moral evil’). In both cases, trust in the world will be compromised as our basic psychological needs fail to be met.

The current clinical term for what transpires when trust in the world has been broken is ‘posttraumatic stress disorder.’ And my account is intended to be consistent with the extensive clinical literature on posttraumatic stress.⁵ However, in order to focus attention on the philosophical implications which arise at the more extreme end of this clinical spectrum, I will refer to the relevant condition as ‘the decomposition of the personality.’ Central to both my thesis and the literature on posttraumatic stress is a claim which Primo Levi makes in the quote at the outset of this paper: “the personality is fragile” (Levi 1958: 55). As previously noted, the integrity of the personality is fundamentally dependant upon a sustaining environment. Deprived of that sustaining environment—i.e., placed under sufficient duress—the personality will decompose.

When the personality decomposes, one encounters a catastrophic disorganization of otherwise stable psychic capacities, including capacities for thought and action. A sense of self which was previously coherent is fractured. Character traits which were previously stable are compromised. Basic cognitive capacities—including capacities for reasoning, memory, and agency—fail. Who one is, and whether one is at all, can be lost. This possibility, I take it, is what Primo Levi characterized in the opening quotation as the “greater danger” than death. Where our

⁵ For canonical treatments, see Figley 1985; Herman 1992; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weiseth 1996; and Horowitz 1999. Space prohibits providing a more substantive overview of this literature here.

basic psychological requirements fail to be met, we come up against what Jean Améry once called “the mind’s limits” (Améry 1980); and what Elaine Scarry—speaking inversely—termed “the unmaking of the world” (Scarry 1985).⁶

Now, as previously noted, the precise content of our essential confidence appears to vary. For some, maintaining mental health appears to require trust that the world is karmic/enabling. Such individuals require a world that is morally ordered at a fundamental level, and find a world lacking such order unintelligible.⁷ For others, it appears to require trust that the world is nonkarmic/enabling. Such individuals require a world that is, if not morally ordered, at least sufficiently conducive to reliable expectation to make sense from a human perspective. For no one, however, can the world be disabling. Tragic realism is simply not a psychologically viable option. That the world is disabling is a logical and empirical possibility. But insofar as one wishes to maintain one’s mental health, it is not a psychological one. In this respect, and to this extent, we are deeply and irrevocably committed to the essential confidence upon which our personalities depend.

Having made a case for the key assumption of traumatic realism, I now turn my attention to an important and informative objection.

An Opposing View

In *Love and Its Place in Nature*, Jonathan Lear affirms the key assumption of traumatic realism. There is, for Lear, a critical range of fit between the personality and the world that it inhabits, and in which it resides. Within this range of fit, the personality is sustainable, in principle, in full apprehension of its existential condition. Outside that range, it is not. This is not

⁶ For a comprehensive survey of the empirical support for claims made in this paragraph, see Howell 2005.

⁷ For a theory of psychological trauma premised on the view that this is true of all persons, see Janoff-Bulman 1992.

a problem for Lear, however, because on Lear's account the world is good-enough. Indeed, on Lear's account we can know *a priori* that the world is good-enough, for a world that is not good-enough "is not a possible world" (Lear 1990: 140).⁸

The argument is as follows.

Lear begins, as I do, with the claim that the personality (the ego) is a psychological achievement, a condition of the possibility of which is a good-enough world. He also affirms, as I do, that this can be seen in the fact that where the world is not good-enough, the personality decomposes (and in Lear's terms, one "encounters psychosis" (1990: 139)).⁹

On Lear's account, this gives rise to a simple transcendental deduction:

1. A condition of the possibility of a successful personality is a good-enough world.
2. There are successful personalities.
3. Therefore, there is a good-enough world.

In short, Lear maintains that the fact that there are psychologically successful adults demonstrates the existence of a good-enough world.

Now, one might counter that such a deduction only secures the existence of a good-enough *environment* as a developmental condition of any given personality. And one would be correct. The argument as it stands says nothing about the conditions that obtain in the larger world. Rather, it speaks only to the conditions that obtained in the limited environment in which

⁸ Here, I take Lear to mean 'empirically possible' and not 'metaphysically possible.'

⁹ As is the case with the literature on posttraumatic stress, I intend my view to be broadly compatible with the literature on psychoanalytic theory. Where Lear speaks of a "lovable world," I speak of a 'good-enough world;' where Lear speaks of "the ego," I speak of 'the personality;' and where Lear speaks of "psychosis," I speak of 'the decomposition of the personality.' I have reconstructed Lear's arguments accordingly.

an individual developed. Clearly, for example, insofar as I am a psychologically successful adult, there was a good-enough world *for me*. But as we have seen, there is nothing in the existence of a good-enough world *for me*—an island of comparative enablement—that rules out the possibility that we live in a disabling world.

In anticipation of this objection, Lear's transcendental deduction takes on an additional level. The human personality, he points out, is not possible in social isolation. Hence, a condition of the possibility of a good-enough world *for me* is a good-enough world *for us*. We—the community of human personalities—are here. Therefore, not only is the world *for me* a good-enough world, but the world *for us* is good-enough also. Hence, at a minimum, the island of comparative enablement is quite large.

At this point, however, Lear makes an interesting move. Lear maintains that the world as appreciated “by us” psychologically successful adults simply *is* the actual world:

It is a condition of there being a world that it be lovable by beings like us. ... This is more than a psychological condition of there being a world *for us*. There is no content to the idea of a world that is not a possible world for us. And a world that is not lovable (by beings like us) is not a possible world (1990: 141-42).

On Lear's account, as I understand it, there is no conceptual space for a world above and beyond the world as we collectively encounter it.

A Response

On the view under consideration here, Lear is correct in his assessment up to (but not including) the point where the world as it is *for us* is equated with the actual world. Human beings need the world to be good-enough; and the world as it is for each individual may well be

good-enough. Lear's larger transcendental argument to the adequacy of the actual world, however, confronts a serious challenge.

The challenge is simple. It is not a necessary condition of the successful personality that the actual world be good-enough. There is another option: namely, that regardless of the conditions under which human beings exist, any mentally healthy human being will believe what they need to believe in order to understand the world as satisfying our fundamental requirements. In short, they will necessarily experience the actual world as good-enough, regardless of whether or not the world is. What has not been ruled out is the possibility that the actual world is the world experienced by the damaged personality (in Lear's terms, the psychotic). Nothing Lear says rules out the possibility that psychosis is warranted, in the sense of being the *appropriate* response to the world. He simply assumes that it isn't.

At issue here is the privileging of experience. Who counts as 'us' in Lear's "for us"? If one wants to establish that this is, in fact, a good-enough world, one cannot rule out testimony to contrary from the start. And yet this is what Lear's transcendental argument effectively does. Having identified the mentally ill as bearers of contrary experience, the testimony born of that experience is systematically excluded. As is often the case in human communities—and among human beings—those who disturb the prevailing consensus are simply not given an adequate hearing.¹⁰

Lear is surely correct that we are here, alive, in the actual world. He is also correct that some of us are psychologically successful adults. But why? Because the world, taken as a whole, is good-enough? Or because many of us possess robust (and highly advantageous) psychological defenses that limit our ability to track the tragic reality?

¹⁰ For insightful and troubling discussion of this phenomenon in relation to the reception of testimony from the Holocaust, see Langer 1991.

The Secular Problem of Evil

The pursuit of truth has always come with a shadow: the possibility that the truth, should it be known, would be unbearable. This problem is not merely a skeptical problem. It is not merely a problem about the possibility of knowledge (though it is that also). Nor is it a problem about nihilism. The problem is not the absence of truth, or meaning. Rather, the worry is one of a qualitatively different kind. The worry is that the true story of the world is, to a greater or lesser extent, beyond the endurance of the affect-laden mind.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes briefly entertains worries of this general kind. For a brief moment, it is supposed that the world is evil—God being a malicious deceiver—and hence that the mystifications of childhood are insurmountable.¹¹ The problem, once raised, is quickly bypassed in favor of the projects of the prevailing age. In the *Meditations*, the challenge posed by the secular problem of evil is set aside in favor of the challenge posed by radical skepticism and the epistemic foundation of the modern sciences.

There is, however, such a thing as the secular problem of evil. As I now aim to show, it confronts those who reject theism with a distinct philosophical problem.

Let us return to the existence of evil and our tripartite taxonomy of worlds. I take it that evil exists. As I hope to have shown, the existence of evil threatens to undermine an essential confidence in the world.

Now, it is one thing to maintain that evil exists. It is quite another to maintain that the world is not good-enough. All three possibilities in our taxonomy of worlds—karmic/enabling, nonkarmic/enabling, and disabling—are compatible with the existence of evil. The question,

¹¹ “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice I had subsequently based on them” (Descartes 1641: 76).

therefore, is not whether evil exists. It does. Rather, the question is whether we live in a world that provides the resources required for us to cope with the existence of evil unbenighted. The traumatic realist maintains we do not.

It is at this point that the atheist confronts a serious challenge.

Atheists typically take the alternative to a karmic/enabling world to be a nonkarmic/enabling, rather than a disabling, world. It is commonly assumed that removing the anthropocentric constraints on our metaphysics issues in a world that is indifferent, but not overtly hostile, to us. Much the same is assumed of the social world in the absence of transcendent order. It is commonly assumed that, in principle, we can meet the psychological requirements of human existence without the benefit of a karmic environment. In short, it is assumed that the world provides us with the requisite resources—and, in particular, the requisite degree of intelligibility and control.

The traumatic realist posits a world that is disabling, and so incompatible with all such aspirations. And it is here that the atheist and the traumatic realist typically part company. The typical atheist—no less than the theist—maintains modes of thought and action which presuppose the world can be trusted.

The problem the atheist confronts is grounding that trust.

Consider the following: All three candidates in our taxonomy of worlds are compatible with the existence of evil. But not all three are comparable in this regard. Karmic worlds are distinct from nonkarmic worlds in an important respect. A karmic world, by virtue of being karmic, guarantees that the existence of evil will be *met with a response*. There are no such guarantees in a nonkarmic world. In a nonkarmic/enabling world, evil *may not* be met with a

response. In a disabling world, it *will not* be met with a response. Evil is thus compounded in nonkarmic worlds in ways in which, in karmic worlds, it is not.

This compounding of evil—this failure to be met with a response—is itself an evil, and a very significant one. If experiencing evil is bad, being abandoned to evil is much worse. Evils that are thus compounded are *significantly greater* threats to the health and integrity of the personality than evils that are not. As contemporary research on posttraumatic stress has shown, the personality can survive a great deal, provided sufficient communal recognition and support (see, e.g., Herman 1992: 214-236). On the other hand, our existential condition is dramatically more precarious when communalization is absent or withdrawn. This phenomenon—first dubbed the ‘second injury’ by Martin Symonds (1980)—is now well documented.¹²

Let us call evil that fails to be met with a response **significant evil**. Significant evil is evidence—albeit, not conclusive evidence—of a not good-enough world.

Now, the vast majority of atheists are deeply committed to existence of significant evil. Indeed, the typical atheist holds not merely that significant evil exists, but that its existence is *pervasive*. This can be readily seen in the fact that the traditional problem of evil is the most popular—and arguably, most powerful—argument for atheism. It is the existence of *significant* evil, and not merely the existence of evil *per se*, that serves so well in arguments from evil against the existence of God.¹³ The traditional problem of evil arises because significant evil is pervasive from a human perspective. Here, Dostoevsky’s famous discussion in Book V, Chapter 4 of the *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) is both eloquent and instructive.

¹² For philosophical discussion see Margaret Urban Walker “Damages to Trust” in Walker 2006.

¹³ Here, I assume that atheists by and large endorse the traditional problem of evil as a powerful argument in favor of atheism. Of course, this need not be true of any particular atheist. One can be an atheist without it.

Could the world be good-enough on such an account? The answer, I think, is ‘yes.’ There is nothing in the foregoing that *necessarily* commits the atheist to a disabling world. The problem the atheist now confronts, however, is straightforward: Once one starts using the pervasive existence of significant evil as datum to draw conclusions, there is no principled way to stop. One cannot consistently accept the existence of significant evil in traditional arguments from evil only to bracket, minimize, or dismiss its relevance elsewhere. And yet this is what the atheist typically does. When it comes to the facts at issue, there is nothing to which the traumatic realist points that the typical atheist does not readily admit: Evil is routinely significant. It often *cannot* be amended or repaired. (Indeed, much evil is destructive of the very memory that it occurred.) These same premises that serve the typical atheist so well in arguments about the existence of God will serve the traumatic realist equally well in arguments about the nature of the world. The atheist’s trust that the world is good-enough, in other words, is not adequately grounded.

Thus, we arrive at an uncomfortable conclusion. Atheism is committed to a kind of faith—no less than the faith of theism, albeit not a faith in God. Where the typical theist takes it on faith that significant evil does not exist (God ultimately meeting every evil with a response), the typical atheist takes it on faith that the existence of significant evil, while pervasive, is not decisive.

The faith of atheism, in short, is a faith in a good-enough world.¹⁴

Concluding Remarks

¹⁴ The content of the faith I here attribute to the atheist bears some relation to moral faith, as typically understood. How closely faith that the world is good-enough approximates moral faith is a topic that I will leave aside. For an excellent treatment of moral faith and its various forms, see Adams 1995.

The secular problem of evil is the problem of showing that traumatic realism is false, and hence that knowledge of our existential condition is possible. Faced with the secular problem of evil, one immediate philosophical response is theism, with its guarantee that the world is hospitable to us. Theism, of course, is not without its problems—the traditional problem of evil perhaps foremost among them.

It has not been my aim to defend theism. On my view, theism is indefensible.¹⁵ Nor has my aim been to convince you that the world is not good-enough, and that traumatic realism is true. I do not know whether or not traumatic realism is true. If I am right, no one is in a position to know whether or not traumatic realism is true. My aim, rather, has been to show that the philosophical problem posed by the existence of evil cannot be escaped by rejecting a theistic worldview.

If the foregoing considerations are correct, our epistemic and existential condition in the absence of God (or something very much like God) is potentially dire. Precisely how dire depends on what is at stake, and whether human beings can, in principle, bear the entailed losses. Childhood aspirations that can be outgrown are one thing. Fundamental requirements that can never be relinquished, or overcome, are another. That the world is not immanently just is something that, presumably, we can learn to accept (though even here, it can hardly be overstated how loathe many are to accept this¹⁶). That the world is fundamentally incompatible with a human life lived in full appreciation of its existential condition, on the other hand, may well be

¹⁵ For a concise summary of the many philosophical challenges confronting theism, see section II of Philip Kitcher's "Challenges for Secularism" (Levine 2011: 24-56). I agree with Kitcher that the greatest philosophical challenge to theism is not the existence of evil, but rather the existence of religious pluralism.

¹⁶ Certainly, no amount of acquaintance with the recalcitrant facts of life seems enough for many people to shake the sense that, at least in their own case, God or the universe will make an exception.

“unacceptable” in the sense of being something that simply cannot be accepted—at least, not by a mentally and emotionally healthy human being.

At present, the secular problem of evil appears irresolvable. Only theism has the resources required to satisfactorily address the problem. Barring that, it is not clear what would, or could, provide an adequate solution. We may not live in a good-enough world. This possibility, it seems, is an ineliminable aspect of the human condition.¹⁷

Works Cited

- Adams, R. M. 1995. “Moral Faith.” *Journal of Philosophy* 92: 75-95.
- Améry, J. 1980. *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Indiana.
- Baier, A. 1986. “Trust and Antitrust.” *Ethics* 96/2: 231-60.
- . 1980. “Secular Faith.” *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10/1: 131-48.
- Conrad, J. 1889 [1988] *The Heart of Darkness*. Ed. R. Kimbrough. Norton.
- Descartes, R. 1641 [1988]. “Mediations on First Philosophy,” in *Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge.
- Dostoevsky, F. 1879 [1993]. *The Grand Inquisitor, with related chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*. Ed. C. Guignon. Trans. C. Garnett. Hackett.
- Figley, C. 1985. *Trauma and Its Wake: The Study and Treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*. Brunner/Mazel.
- Herman, J. L. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic.
- Horowitz, M. J. 1999. *Essential Papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*. NYU.
- Howell, E. F. 2005. *The Dissociative Mind*. Routledge.
- Hume, D. 1779 [2007]. *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, and Other Writings*. Ed. D. Coleman. Cambridge.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. 1992. *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*. Free Press.
- Langer, L. 1991. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. Yale.
- Lear, J. 1990. *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Lerner, M. J. 1980. *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. Plenum.
- Levi, P. 1958 [1996]. *Survival in Auschwitz*. Touchstone.
- Levine, G. 2011. *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now*. Princeton.

¹⁷ Acknowledgments to John Bishop, Robert W. Daly, Carrie Ichikawa Jenkins, Kris McDaniel, Adam Morton, Hille Paakkunainen, Michael Stocker, and Margaret Urban Walker for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. Additional acknowledgement to the audience at the 2015 conference on analytic existentialism at Boğaziçi University, with special thanks to Laurie Paul and Eric Schliesser.

- Mackie, J. L. 1955. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* 64: 200-12.
- Neiman, S. 2002. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton.
- Rowe, W. L. 1979. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 335-41.
- Scarry, E. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford.
- Symonds, M. 1980. *Evaluation and Change: Services for Survivors*. Minneapolis Medical Research Foundation.
- van der Kolk, B. A.; McFarlane, A. C., & Weisaeth, L. 1996. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. Guilford.
- Walker, M. U. 2006. *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*. Cambridge.
- Winnicott, D. W. 1958 [1984]. *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers*. Karnac.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1951 [1975]. *On Certainty*. Eds. G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe. Blackwell.