The Secular Problem of Evil: An Essay in Analytic Existentialism

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Abstract: The existence of evil is often 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) Successful human beings must trust in a good-enough world; (2) the actual world is not good-enough (i.e., sufficient evil exists). It follows that every successful human being maintains a state of epistemic ignorance regarding the nature of the actual world. 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 is understood to begin and end 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 a problem for theism. The philosophical problem posed by the existence of evil is not. Much as Schopenhauer first argued (1818), the existence of evil gives rise to a philosophical problem that is both logically prior to and distinct from the traditional problem.[2]

I call this problem the **secular problem of evil**.

Here is a preliminary outline of the problem. On the one hand, there is an empirical fact about human beings: human beings must satisfy basic prudential interests—both physiological and psychological—in order to be successful. Let us call a world in which those basic prudential interests can be met a **good-enough world**. As I will argue:

(1) Successful human beings necessarily trust that the actual world is a good-enough world.

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

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

Should both (1) and (2) be true, every successful human being necessarily maintains a state of epistemic ignorance regarding the human condition and the nature of the actual world. In such a world, mental and emotional health require a blanket of self-protective illusion.

Let us call the view that both (1) and (2) are true **traumatic realism**. According to the traumatic realist, "human kind | [c]annot bear very much reality", much as T. S. Eliot once noted (1943: 14). The actual world is simply not good-enough relative to our cognitive and emotional capacities. By 'actual world' I mean everything that is, both natural and supernatural, including that which is interpersonal and/or socially constructed. By 'not good-enough', I mean that the conditions that obtain in the actual world are incompatible with the requirements imposed by the affect-laden mind.

If traumatic realism is true, then the secular problem of evil defines the human condition, and we are hopelessly benighted.

There are responses to the secular problem of evil, however. Most of these responses can be found in the world's religious traditions. Theism, for example, guarantees a good-enough world. According to the theist, (2) is false. God exists and is hospitable to us. Hence, the actual world is a good-enough world. For many today, however, theism is untenable. Barring such options, one is left with a remainder: the problem of showing that traumatic realism is false without the resources provided by a religious worldview.

I approach the problem in five stages. In Parts 1 – 4, I make the case for traumatic realism as a philosophically viable option. In Part 1, I explicate the central notion of a good-enough world. In Part 2, I make the case that successful human beings must trust (and do trust) that the actual world is a good-enough world. In Part 3, I consider, and reject, an argument that successful human beings are possible in a not good-enough world. In Part 4, I consider, and reject, an argument that the actual world can be known to be good-enough *a priori*. Following that, I turn to the challenge posed for atheism, and for all those who reject a religious worldview.

I contend that the typical atheist is committed to a strong possibility that we live in a not good-enough world. Arguments to this effect are made in Part 5. Part 6 provides a brief conclusion.

My aim throughout is not to defend theism. On my view, theism is indefensible. Nor is it my aim to convince the reader that we do not live in a good-enough world. If I am right, no one is in a position to know whether the world in which we live is good-enough or not. Rather, my aim is to show that the philosophical problems posed by the existence of evil cannot be escaped by rejecting a religious worldview.

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

1. The Concept of a Good-enough World [3]

The concept of a good-enough world stands on two assumptions. The first assumption is that the human 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 our personalities are dependent upon, and existentially vulnerable to, a world which they inhabit, and within which they reside. Much as the human organism depends upon a world to provide the conditions nececessary for its ongoing integration and survival—e.g, food, shelter, oxygen, and atmospheric pressure—so the human personality depends upon a world to provide necessary conditions also. These necessary conditions—both physiological and psychological—comprise our basic prudential interests, which must be met if we are to be successful. As I will argue in Part 2, foremost among the psychological conditions are those required to maintain a capacity for thought and action.

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.

Let us say that a world is good-enough if and only if it enables us to meet our basic prudential interests in a full apprehension of our existential condition, despite the evils that threaten to undermine us. What makes for a good-enough world, thus understood? As means of approach, several basic distinctions will give the concept a thicker and more tractable definition. Here, I exposit three possibilities, which are intended to be exhaustive. A world can be **karmic**, and therefore **enabling**; it can be **nonkarmic,** yet nonetheless enabling; or it can be **disabling**.[4] Worlds that are enabling are good-enough. Worlds that are disabling are not.

Karmic-Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is necessarily enabling a **karmic-enabling world**. Karmic worlds are necessarily enabling 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 happen to good people; bad things happen to bad people. It matters little whether this causal connection is naturally or supernaturally imposed. However it comes about, in such a world people deserve what they (ultimately) get, and (ultimately) get what they deserve.

Moral order provides a world with two important features, which radically mitigate the existential threat posed by the existence of evil.

First, moral order allows for the possibility of **adaptation**. For any person confronted with the existential threat posed by the existence of evil, there is at least one constructive

response available. In a morally ordered world, one can protect oneself by being a good person. In light of our inherent fragility, not every way of life is sustainable in the face of the existence of evil. Many ways of life, for example, will prove to be mere vanity and illusion. Nevertheless, adaptation is always possible in a morally ordered world, for there is always at least one way of life—namely, a moral way of life—that can be successfully sustained by creatures like us. By adapting oneself to the moral order one can ensure that one's basic prudential interests will (ultimately) be met, thereby rendering oneself existentially secure.

Second and closely related to the first, moral order provides for the possibility of **control**. In light of our inherent fragility, not every action is possible in the face of the existence of evil. Indeed, there is a very great deal which is simply beyond our capacity as human agents. Nevertheless, in a morally ordered world, we are never wholly impotent. At least one action capable sustaining the personality—namely submission to the moral order—is always within our scope.

In providing these twin features, karmic-enabling worlds provide the conditions necessary to maintain a clear-eyed, uncompromised trust in the world despite the existence of evil. While evil may exist in a karmic-enabling world, its existence is subsumed under a larger order in which we and our basic prudential interests can be secured. Immanent justice follows: personalities which (ultimately) fail in a karmic-enabling world do so because they have chosen to fail, and hence deserve to fail, as persons.

Now, it is probably not the case that human beings *per se* need to trust that the world is karmic-enabling. 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 moral order is presupposed by many world religions and philosophical systems.

For example, Abrahamic monotheism, Buddhist nontheism, Hindu henotheism, Plato in the *Republic,* and arguably Kant, all presuppose a karmic-enabling world. Nevertheless, many trust the world to be sufficiently hospitable to us in the absence of moral order.

For these others, the world is a nonkarmic yet enabling world.

Nonkarmic-Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that remains sufficiently enabling in the absence of moral order a **nonkarmic-enabling world**. Nonkarmic-enabling worlds are enabling because they are sufficiently well-ordered to allow for the possibility of adaptation and control without recourse to self-protective illusions.

For the purposes of this paper, I will leave the precise conditions necessary for the possibility of successful adaptation and control underdetermined. Some such conditions are readily identifiable: a world cannot be too capricious, for example. Nor can conditions within it be too abusive. Nevertheless, while the precise conditions necessary for the possibility of successful adaptation and control are an important topic in their own right, for our purposes they are irrelevant. It suffices to say that there are some. Provided those conditions, nonkarmic-enabling worlds are such that the possibility of adaptation and control is not an illusion.

The important point is that nonkarmic-enabling worlds are sufficiently intelligible from a human perspective to be navigated, at least in principle, by creatures like us. Here, for example, we find the worlds presupposed by the ancient Stoics with their *logos*, by the classical Confucians with their *dao*, and by many modern Western philosophers—including many who are atheists, like Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill.[5] Such worlds are not always conducive to us.

And there are no guarantees (as there are in a karmic world). But confronted with the reality of evil, it remains possible for us to provide for ourselves unbenighted.

There is, however, a third option.

Disabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is not sufficiently conducive to our basic prudential interests a **disabling world**. Disabling worlds are fundamentally incompatible with the conditions upon which we depend. Should the world be disabling, human aspirations are without rational basis. Control is an illusion. Successful adaptation is based on illusion, also. In reality, our requirements will not be met.

It is at this point—much as Nietzsche once suggested (1872)—that philosophers typically part ways with tragic poets. For philosophers, the world may or may not be karmic. But it is enabling. 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 Shakespeare in *Lear* and by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrranus*.

In order to give the idea of a disabling world an adequate hearing, two points are in order. First, the possibility of a disabling world is difficult to entertain for reasons that have nothing to do with the truth or falsity of the thesis. Entertaining the possibility of a disabling world requires acknowledging that one is psychologically and existentially vulnerable in ways that can be deeply unsettling. This experience—the experience of our own fragility—is something we typically defend ourselves against. Second, a disabling world need not be bad in every particular. Indeed, it 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 in relative privilege and comfort. In short, there is nothing about a disabling world that prevents people from living out their lives in ignorance or denial of the human condition. Hence, it is possible to live in a disabling world without ever recognizing or acknowledging its disabling order. Both these points will be important in what follows.

Let us now turn to traumatic realism, and to the claim that successful human beings must trust that the world is enabling.

2. Traumatic Realism

Traumatic realism is the view that the actual world is disabling. As noted in the introduction, traumatic realism is composed of two distinct claims:

(1) Successful human beings necessarily trust in a good-enough world.

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

In the previous section, I unpacked the second claim. Here, I focus on the first. For convenience, I will refer to (1) as the 'key assumption' of traumatic realism.

At this point one might ask: why accept the key assumption? In addressing this question I draw upon two arguments, which I will call the **argument from developmental psychology** and the **argument from posttraumatic aetiology**.

The Argument from Developmental Psychology

Let us begin with an observation: children trust in a good-enough world as a necessary condition of psychological development. The key assumption of traumatic realism may or may not be an essential feature of the human condition. But it is essential feature of childhood.

Consider the following: children are oblivious to many—perhaps most—of the existential dangers that surround them. That the world is a safe place to grow and explore, for example, is a given (whether or not the world is). That their parents are good people who love them is a given also (whether or not their parents are, or do). These and similar confidences are the bedrock of childhood. The possible contraries to such articles of faith are simply too terrifying for a child to endure. The key assumption of traumatic realism is thus satisfied in the case of children. Children need the world to meet certain requirements, and they trust that the world meets those requirements whether or not the world actually does.

Now, many of us tacitly assume that this state of affairs comes to an end with the advent of adulthood. But does it? Contemporary psychologists maintain that it does not.

According to the basic tenets of developmental psychology, trust in a good-enough world is foundational not only for childhood development but also in the resulting architecture of the adult personality. This claim is well-established—and widely accepted—throughout the psychological sciences: e.g., developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and psychiatry. Hence, support for the truth of this claim can be found nearly all texts concerned with the development and architecture of the adult personality. On Erikson's pioneering view, for example, "basic trust" serves as the necessary foundation of all subsequent development across the life-span (1959: 57-63). Comparably, Bowlby's cannonical attachment theory posits successful attachments (that is, relations of trust) as "central features of personality functioning throughout life" (1988: 123). The terminology employed varies. The basic claim expressed does

not. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalyists all maintain that trust in a good-enough world is a necessary condition of the personality, which can never be outgrown.[6]

Here, it is important to note that the use of the term 'trust' is not intended to indicate that one must believe that the world is good-enough (on an intellectualist understanding of 'belief'). Trust in a good-enough 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—that is, in one's capacity for practical reason. Hence, one can trust the world while asserting, and believing, that one does not. Indeed, this is not uncommon. We inhabit a "climate of trust" that, as Annette Baier once observed, typically goes unnoticed unless compromised or absent (1986: 234).

But there is a more powerful argument in support of the key assumption of traumatic realism, one less reliant on the explanatory commitments of the psychological sciences.

The Argument from Posttraumatic Aetiology

The strongest argument for the key assumption of traumatic realism is premised on cases where trust in the world has been forceably broken. As the foregoing might suggest, this is not readily accomplished. Basic trust, once forged, is remarkably resiliant and cannot be easily shaken. But trust in the world can be broken, whether accidentally or by intent. Accidentally, it can be undermined by catastrophic misfortune (traditionally known as 'natural evil'). Intentionally, it can be undermined by severe abuse or psychophysical torture (traditionally known as 'moral evil'). In both cases, when trust is sufficiently compromised, the personality is compromised as well.

The current clinical term for what transpires once trust has been sufficiently compromised is 'posttraumatic stress disorder.' First identified by Pierre Janet in the 19th century (1889), and officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in the 20th (1980), posttraumatic stress disorder is now a well-established clinical phenomenon.[7] Central to our understanding of posttraumatic stress is the recognition that the personality is fragile. Deprived of a sustaining environment—that is, placed under sufficient duress—the personality will break down.

When the personality breaks down, one encounters a catastrophic disorganization of otherwise stable features and capacities, both cognitive and emotional. A sense of self which was previously coherent is fractured. Character traits which were previously reliable become disordered. Basic cognitive and emotional capacities—including capacities for thought, memory, and action—fail (c.f., e.g., Shay 1994: 165-181). In short, the human capacity for practical reason is undermined, in tandem with the subjectivity of the individual in question.[8] This possibility, I take it, is what Primo Levi characterized as the "greater danger" than death in the quote at the outset of this paper. Where our necessary conditions fail to be met, we come up against what Jean Améry once called "the mind's limits" (1966); and what Elaine Scarry—speaking inversely—termed "the unmaking of the world" (1985).

Here, two further clarificatory points are in order. First, in speaking of the 'human capacity' for practical reason, it is not my intent to suggest that practical reason *per se* requires a good-enough world. It is conceivable, for example, that beings not subject to our fragility would be able to reason practically in what is, for us, a disabling world. The point is merely that whatever may be true of such beings, it is not true of us. Second, in addressing 'posttraumatic stress disorder' it is not my intent to suggest that people suffering from posttraumatic stress are

unable to practically reason. Obviously, they are. Rather, the point is that the condition we currently call 'PTSD' has a well-established aetiology—that is, an identified cause. That cause is the experience of evil (as defined here), which compromises the personality and its capacity for thought and action. Naturally, the capacity for practical reason returns as safety is reestablished. Nonetheless, at least for a brief period, the subject experiences a disabling, or not good-enough, world.

Now, what exactly is compromised along with the personality in such cases? As suggested by the taxonomy of worlds in Part 1, the precise content of our sustaining commitments appears to vary. For some, maintaining the requisite capacity to think and act appears to require trust in a world that is karmic. Such individuals trust in a world that is morally ordered at a fundamental level, and are unable to organize themselves without it.[9] For others, comparable self-maintenance appears to require trust in a world that, while non-karmic, is nonetheless enabling. Such individuals presuppose a world that is sufficiently well-ordered to allow for the *possibility* of meaningful agency. For no one, however, can the world be disabling. A disabling world is, of course, a logical possibility. But it is not an existential one. It is not a possibility for us. Insofar as we wish to maintain our personalities, we are irrevocably committed to the necessary conditions upon which our personalities depend.

Having made the case for the key assumption of traumatic realism, I now turn to two important and informative objections. The first is drawn from the work of Albert Camus (Part 3). The second is from that of Jonathan Lear (Part 4).

3. The World is Beautiful, and Outside There is No Salvation

Let us begin with a traditional philosophical response to the secular problem of evil. The move is an axiological one. It is to change the subject to aesthetics, and away from metaphysics and morals. On the resulting view, the world may not be good-enough—at least, not in the sense under discussion. But it is beautiful. And because it is beautiful, successful human beings are possible.

Here, for example, we find the work of Albert Camus.[10]

Camus' Views Regarding the Human Condition and the Nature of the World

Camus shares the traumatic realist's view that the world is neither karmic nor enabling. However, it does not follow for Camus that the world is therefore disabling. Thus, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to Camus' view as the view that the world is **non-enabling**.

A non-enabling world is a world in which successful human beings are possible, but in which our hopes and aspirations are necessarily frustrated. Such a world is not amenable to human intervention and ordering. In Camus' terms, it is **absurd**. An absurd world, however, is not necessarily a disabling one. Justice cannot be achieved in such a world. But successful human life remains possible without illusions, provided one surrenders to a life lived in the present without hope of consolation.

Camus' position on this point flirts with contradiction, the world he describes appearing both good-enough and not good-enough at the same time. That being the case, it will be important to spell out precisely what he is, and is not, saying.

On the one hand, Camus is clearly committed to the claim that the world is not enabling. He rejects the notion that the actual world is karmic: "there is no salvation" (1956a: 103). Likewise, he rejects the notion that the actual world could ever be rendered intelligible from a

human perpective: "[t]he world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said" (1955: 21). On the other hand, Camus holds that human beings are able to remain "intact"—a claim which he makes in his earliest essays (1956a: 69), and maintains throughout his life (169). Human being are able to remain intact because, despite the irrationality of the human condition, the world is beautiful. And so, "there is always a place where the heart can find rest" (90). In short, it is Camus' view that human beings can be existentially invulnerable even under conditions of absurdity:

> I discovered that one must keep a freshness and a source of joy intact within, loving the daylight that injustice leaves unscathed, and returning to the fray with this light as a trophy. … It was this that in the end saved me from despair … In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer (169).

On the resulting view, the human condition is insurmountable. But it is not fundamentally undermining. And so, it is possible for us "to live without appeal" (1955: 53).

A Response to Camus on Behalf of Traumatic Realism

From the vantagepoint of traumatic realism, Camus radically underestimates the depth of the problem posed by the existence of evil.

Let us stipulate that Camus is correct: the world is beautiful. Let us further stipulate that aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic activity remain possible in a non-enabling world. There is nothing entailed by this claim that rules out the possibility that the world is also disabling. A disabling world can be beautiful, and yet no less disabling for creatures like us.

The problem confronting Camus is that he never argues for his central thesis. Rather than provide reasons or evidence in support of his view, he provides literary illustrations. In his plays,

essays, and novels, Camus portrays lives lived with integrity under the conditions he describes. It is never asked whether the fact that one can imagine human beings living successfully under such conditions demonstrates that we actually can. It is simply assumed that it does. From the imaginable, the possible is taken to follow.

The traumatic realist maintains that (at least in this case) it does not follow.

According to the traumatic realist, human beings can imagine living successfully in a non-enabling world much as they can imagine being able to breath in outer space. In the actual world, they can do neither. Camus' Sisyphean heroes, in short, are phantasies—fictions that are appealing, in part, because they are able to do what we are not. Like many of the protagonists favored by his existentialist contemporaries, Camus' heroes can succeed in a non-enabling world. Unlike actual human beings, they are not vulnerable to psychological trauma.

Of course, Camus may be right that trust in a good-enough world is unwarranted. And he may also be right that we are "frustrated by the universe" as a consequence (1956b: 23). But should the world not be good-enough, the problem is not merely that our hopes and aspirations are frustrated. The problem is that we are undone.

Having addressed the traditional philosophical response to the secular problem of evil, I now turn to a recent alternative.

4. Love and Its Place in Nature

In his early work on the philosophical implications of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jonathan Lear affirms the key assumption of traumatic realism. Like the traumatic realist, Lear holds that there is a critical range of fit between the personality and the world in which it resides. And like the traumatic realist, Lear holds that outside this range of fit the personality is unsustainable

without recourse to illusion. This is not a problem for Lear, however, because on Lear's account the world is good-enough. Indeed, on Lear's account one can know that the world is good-enough *a priori*, for a world that is not-good-enough "is not a possible world" (1990: 140).[11]

The argument is as follows.

Lear's Argument on Behalf of a Good-enough World

Lear begins with the claim that the personality (or 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 is compromised and one "encounters psychosis" (1990: 139).[12]

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 Lear's argument only secures the existence of a good-enough environment as a developmental condition of any given personality. And one would be correct. As it stands, the argument says nothing about the conditions that obtain in the actual world. Rather, it speaks only to the conditions that obtained in the limited environment in which 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, in which defenses can be sucessfully mounted—that rules out the possibility that we live in a disabling world.

In anticipation of this objection, Lear's argument 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 successful human personalities—are here. Hence, not only is the world *for me* good-enough, but the world *for us* is good-enough also. 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 sucessful 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, there is no conceptual space for a world above and beyond the world as we collectively encounter it.

A Response to Lear on Behalf of Traumatic Realism

Lear's assessment is correct 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 is experienced as good-enough by many human beings. The larger argument to the adequacy of the actual world, however, confronts a serious challenge.

The challenge is simple. It is not a necessary condition for 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 successful human being will trust that the world satisfies their necessary conditions. In short, they will necessarily experience the world as good-enough, regardless of whether or not the actual world is. What has not been ruled out is the possibility that the actual world is the world experienced by the compromised personality—in Lear's terms, the psychotic. Nothing Lear says rules out the possibility that psychosis is warranted, in the sense of being an appropriate response to the world. He simply assumes that it is not.

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 argument effectively does. Having identified the psychotic as the bearer of contrary experience, the testimony born of that experience is excluded. It appears that here—as is so often the case in human communities, and among human beings—voices which disturb the prevailing consensus are simply not being given a hearing.[13]

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 actual world is good-enough? Or because many of us possess robust (and highly advantageous) defenses that limit our ability to track the traumatic reality?

Having laid the foundations in the preceding sections, I now turn—at long last—to the challenge the secular problem of evil poses for atheism.

5. The Problem of Evil Cannot Be Escaped

Let us return to the existence of evil and our tripartite taxonomy of worlds. It is one thing to maintain that evil exists. It is quite another to maintain that this is not a good-enough world. All three possibilities in our taxonomy of worlds—karmic-enabling, nonkarmic-enabling, and disabling—are compatible with the existence of evil. The question, therefore, is not whether evil exists. It does. Rather, the question is whether we live in a world that provides the resources necessary for us to cope with that fact unbenighted. The traumatic realist maintains we do not.

It is at this point that atheism confronts a serious challenge. Successful atheists—that is, atheists who are meeting their basic prudential interests—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 a transcendent order. It is commonly assumed that, in principle, we can meet the necessary conditions of human existence without the benefit of a karmic environment. In short, it is assumed that the actual world provides the resources required for us to meet our basic prudential interests unbenighted.

The traumatic realist posits a world that is disabling, and so incompatible with all such aspirations. And it is here that the successful atheist and the traumatic realist part company. Much like Camus, the successful atheist maintains modes of thought and action which presuppose that the world can be trusted.

The problem the successful 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, in virtue of being

karmic, guarantees that the existence of evil is met with a response. In a karmic world, evil is subsumed under a moral order which guarantees that our necessary conditions are secure. There is no comparable guarantee 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 significant one. If experiencing evil is bad, being abandoned to evil is worse. Evils that are thus compounded are significantly greater threats to integrity of the personality than evils that are not. As the research on posttraumatic stress has consistently shown, our personalities can survive a great deal provided sufficient support, and thereby at least the possibility of successful adaptation and control. On the other hand, our existential condition is dramatically more precarious when the requisite support is absent or withdrawn. This phenomenon—first dubbed the 'second injury' by Martin Symonds (1980)—is now well documented.[14]

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, most atheists are deeply committed to existence of significant evil. Indeed, the typical atheist does not merely hold that significant evil exists; the typical atheist holds that significant evil is pervasive. This can be 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 the atheist articulates so forcefully, and so well, in arguments from evil against the existence of God.[15] Here, Dostoevsky's famous discussion in Book V, Chapter 4 of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) is both eloquent and instructive.

That being the case, the problem the atheist confronts is straightforward. Once one starts using the existence of significant evil as datum to draw conclusions, there is no principled way to stop. One cannot consistently accept the pervasive 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 successful atheist does not readily admit: Significant evil exists. It is pervasive. Our necessary conditions routinely fail to be met. On many occasions, in many people's lives, the world simply cannot be trusted. These same premises that serve the 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.

Of course, it remains possible that we live in a good-enough world. The prevalence of significant evil strongly suggests that we may not. But nothing in the foregoing demonstrates that we do not. The problem is that confidence in these matters is now suspect, on a par with our prevailing suspicions regarding religious conviction in general. We trust in a good-enough world, just as we once trusted in providence, moral order, and God. But much as Freud once suggested regarding those latter three: "it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it would be" (1928: 42).

Thus, we arrive at an uncomfortable conclusion. The successful atheist does not know that the world is good-enough, but trusts that it is. And so, the successful atheist is committed to a kind of faith: no less than the faith of the theist, albeit not a faith in God. Where the theist takes it on faith that significant evil does not exist (God ultimately meeting every evil with a response), the successful 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.

6. Concluding Remarks

The pursuit of truth has always come with a shadow: the possibility that the truth, should it be known, would be unbearable. The problem is not merely a skeptical problem. It is not merely a problem about the possibility of knowledge (although it is that also). Nor is the problem one of nihilism. At issue is not the absence of truth, or value, or meaning. Rather, the problem is one of a qualitatively different kind. The problem is that the true story of the world may be 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 not good-enough—God being a malicious deceiver—and hence that the mystifications of childhood are insurmountable.[16] 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. If the foregoing consideration are correct, it not only underwrites the world's religions, but remains once religious convictions are gone.[17]

At present, the secular problem of evil appears irresolvable. We may not live in a good-enough world. Should that be the human condition, there are only two unpalatable options. One can abandon trust in the world (and thereby, one's basic prudential interests) in order to retain contact with the traumatic reality. Or one can abandon epistemic integrity, and live in a self-preserving state of ignorance regarding the human condition and the evil nature of the world.[18]

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

[2] "Philosophy, like the overture to *Don Juan*, starts with a minor chord … The more specific character of the astonishment … that urges us to philosophize obviously springs from the sight of the *evil* and *wickedness* in the world" (1818: 171).

[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" (1958: 243-254).

[4] Here, I wish to thank Peter French for introducing a distinction between karmic and non-karmic moral theories. While my distinction regarding worlds does not precisely map onto his, his distinction was my inspiration. See French 2001: 70-80.

[5] 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 and its evolving procedures" (133).

[6] It is an operative assumption of this paper that people working in philosophy have an epistemic responsibility to defer to the well-established findings of the social sciences, barring a comparably strong reason not to do so.

[7] For canonical literature on PTSD, see Figley 1985; Herman 1992; Horowitz 1999; and van der Kolk 2014. Space prohibits providing a more substantive overview here.

[8] For philosophical discussion, see Susan J. Brison's "Outliving Oneself" (2002: 37-66).

[9] For a theory of psychological trauma premised on the view that all persons implicitly trust that the world is karmic, see Janoff-Bulman 1992.

[10] In changing the subject from the metaphysical to the aesthetic, Camus follows lines of thought laid down by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The criticisms of his views found here are intended to apply to his predecessors also.

[11] Here, I take Lear to mean 'empirically possible' rather than 'metaphysically possible.'

[12] As is the case with the literature on posttraumatic stress, I intend my views 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 'compromised personality.' I have reconstructed Lear's arguments accordingly.

[13] For an insightful, troubling, and highly relevant discussion of this phenomenon in relation to the reception of testimony from the Holocaust, see Langer 1991.

[14] For philosophical discussion, see Margaret Urban Walker's "Damages to Trust" (2006: 72-109).

[15] Here, I assume that atheists endorse the traditional problem of evil as a powerful argument in favor of atheism. Of course, this assumption need not be true. One can be an atheist without it.

[16] "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).

[17] "The possibility of radical evil both destroys and institutes the religious" (Derrida 1996: 100).

[18] Acknowledgments to Fred Beiser, John Bishop, Ben Bradley, Robert W. Daly, David Hunt, Carrie Jenkins, Kris McDaniel, Adam Morton, Hille Paakkunainen, Michael Stocker, Margaret Urban Walker, and several anonymous referees for helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. Additional acknowledgements to the audience at the 2015 conference on analytic existentialism at Boğaziçi University, with special thanks to Irem Kurtsal, Laurie Paul, and Eric Schliesser.