

Yujin Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, 248 pp.

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Yujin Nagasawa's *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* is an important and original contribution to the field with the potential to take the conversation around the problem of evil in new directions.¹ What makes Nagasawa's book especially interesting is that his response to the challenge evils present to traditional theism does not traverse the more usual paths of theodicy construction or skeptical theism although the existence of these is indirectly relevant to Nagasawa's argument. Instead, Nagasawa attempts to "neutralise" (p. 118) the problem of evil by arguing that all kinds of metaphysical worldviews – including atheism/non-theism – face their own versions of the problem of evil. Call this "the universality of the problem of evil." The success of this strategy depends on the crucial premise that "an argument against all is no argument against one" (p. 52). In addition to this neutralising strategy, Nagasawa also aims to show that traditional theism has better resources to respond to various versions of the problem of evil than some competing worldviews (pantheism, axiarchism, atheism/non-theism). While not an evidentialist argument for traditional theism as such, this, in Nagasawa's view, gives us reasons to prefer traditional theism to alternatives.

Nagasawa's book begins with an introduction to the problem of evil as it is standardly conceived as a challenge against traditional theism. By traditional theism Nagasawa means the following: "[T]here is a God, who is the greatest possible being or an omnipotent and wholly good being, and this being is also a personal being who created the actual world and interacts with human affairs" (p. 8). It is this type of theism that is normally thought to generate various problems of evils. Nagasawa's introduction to the this set of standard problems of evils is excellent, indeed perhaps the best one written so far. As such, it is an invaluable resource for anyone who is looking for an up-to-date introduction to standard problems of evils. In the next chapter, Nagasawa goes on to lay the groundwork for his main argument concerning the universality of the problem of evil. Here the crucial claim is that "the problem of evil is a specific version of a broader problem which I call the 'problem of axiological expectation mismatch'" (p. 35). In terms of fundamental structure, this mismatch

¹ Nagasawa rightly points out that there are many different versions of the problem of evil. For stylistic reasons, in this review I will be using the term "the problem of evil" as a shorthand to refers to all the different versions of the problem of evil.

problem emerges from the tension between the following: (a) it is expected that there is no evil in the actual world and (b) there is evil in the actual world. Importantly, this way of putting the problem does not necessarily entail anything about God.

Different metaphysical worldviews generate the expectation that there is no evil in different ways, as Nagasawa demonstrates. Importantly, Nagasawa's main argument concerning the universality of the problem of evil – and thus the success of his neutralising strategy – depends on his ability to prove that the worldviews he discusses do actually generate the expectation that there is no evil in the actual world. When it comes to alternative theistic worldviews – pantheism and axiarchism – his argument is, in my view, successful, although questions remain about his argument when it comes to atheism/non-theism.

I'll elaborate with the example of pantheism. Nagasawa understands pantheism to mean that "God is immanent in the sense that the whole world *is* God" (p. 57). As I understand it, for Nagasawa this definition entails naturalism in a sense that there is nothing "beyond" the world: God is what the world is. Thus – importantly – the naturalistic pantheist has no supernatural resources at her disposal to solve the problem of axiological expectation mismatch. At the same time, pantheism generates its own variation of the problem ("the divinity problem of evil" as Nagasawa calls it [p. 64]): if the world is God, we would expect it to not contain evils. Indeed, if the pantheist world does contain evils, then these evils, too, are God: they are elevated into the divine life.

The pantheist has some responses at their disposal – they could, for example, argue that "the divine or holy can have evil aspects" (p. 65) – but Nagasawa finds these unpersuasive. He concludes that even though pantheist can distance themselves from the traditional definitions of God as omnibenevolent, "[t]he all-inclusive unity cannot be divine if it is entirely evil or includes too much evil in quality or quantity" (p. 66). Traditional theists also face their version of the divinity problem of evil, because they, too, would standardly claim that the world somehow reflects God's character as a creator – and yet the world contains evils. However, unlike pantheists, traditional theists have supernatural and metaphysical resources they can use to better respond to this problem: they need not say that the world simply is God. There remains, thus, in traditional theism a salutary distinction between God and the world.

Next, let's consider Nagasawa's argument in the context of theism and atheism/non-theism. The variation of the problem of evil that traditional theists and non-theists share in Nagasawa's view is that of systemic evil. It goes like this: the realities of evolutionary processes are such that life requires "a specific system that nomologically necessitates pain and suffering" of millions of sentient beings through the ages (p. 122). Thus, life itself, including all its goods, is based upon, and inextricably entangled with, evil and suffering. For theists, this presents a question about how God could create such a world.

According to Nagasawa, however, systemic evil also presents a problem for the atheist/non-theist, because most atheist/non-theists are at least modest optimists in the axiological sense. That is, they expect the world to be at least "overall and

fundamentally" not bad (p. 142).² However, if life itself – including all its goods – is based upon suffering, then it would seem that modest optimism fails: the world is, in fact, "overall and fundamentally" bad. This problem is especially serious for non-theists because unlike traditional theists, they cannot appeal to supernatural sources of value: for the non-theist the values that save optimism must be found in that very natural world that is built upon the substratum of millions of years of evolutionary struggle.

In order to pin this problem on the atheists/non-theists as a group, however, Nagasawa needs to demonstrate that at least a significant portion of non-theists are indeed committed to optimism. He offers two main arguments in support of this. First, "there is a non-negligible number of atheist/non-theists whose [philosophical] views imply modest optimism" (p. 146). Second, empirical research indicates that "most atheists/non-theists are modest optimists" (p. 147). Thus, a significant portion of non-theists face an axiological expectation mismatch: they expect the world to be at least overall and fundamentally not bad, but the presence of systemic evil seems to suggest that that's not the case.

Nagasawa's point is that due to supernatural resources traditional theists enjoy an advantage when responding to the problem of systemic evil. It is important to note, though, that Nagasawa's is not an evidentialist argument against atheism/non-theism or for traditional theism "in any strict sense" (p. 177). Rather, he simply hopes to persuade his readers (i) that the problem of systemic evil arises for both atheist/non-theists and traditional theists and (ii) that traditional theists enjoy advantages over atheist/non-theists in responding to the problem of systematic evil. Nagasawa writes:

Traditional theists seem to have a better chance than atheists/non-theists of weakening the evidential force of systemic evil against modest optimism. Hence, I maintain that the problem of systemic evil can be presented as an indirect motivation for modest optimists to prefer traditional theism to atheism/non-theism. (p. 176)

At this point the atheist/non-theist might protest: why should the fact that things are worse than we assumed give us reason to reject the relevant evidence (systemic evil) in favour of modest optimism? Maybe things just are that bad. Nagasawa agrees with this objection but points out that things look different when there is a third option of traditional theism in the field that would allow us to maintain our modest optimism despite systemic evil. This, Nagasawa argues, gives *indirect motivation* to prefer traditional theism.

Some notes on this. Since atheism/non-theism itself does not *conceptually* entail modest optimism, it seems that this problem does not arise for atheism/non-theism *as such*. Nagasawa acknowledges this but it's not necessarily made sufficiently clear that this implies an important structural difference in his argument concerning atheism/non-theism: unlike in the case of alternative theisms where their version of the problem of evil arises directly from what is conceptually entailed by them, the

² Nagasawa discusses various versions of optimism settling for this modest claim that in his assessment targets most non-theists, including those who subscribe to stronger versions of optimism.

problem of systemic evil only targets atheists indirectly insofar as they happen to be committed to modest optimism. While there might be a problem of evil for some atheists, then, it remains an open question whether there is a problem of evil for *atheism* and if, indeed, this constitutes a problem for Nagasawa's argument concerning the universality of the problem of evil.

Nagasawa's response to the worry that atheism does not conceptually generate the problem of systemic evil is that the atheism of the atheist modest optimist is nevertheless conceptually relevant to how they approach the problem, because "the problem presents a more significant challenge for (modest optimist) atheists than for (modest optimist) traditional theists" (p. 186). However, while relevant in this indirect sense, it remains the case that it is not the atheist's atheism *per se* but rather her modest optimism that makes her a target of the problem.

Once again, Nagasawa would most likely agree but some implications of this for his broader argument might still require further attention. As Nagasawa's argument currently stands, it's based on the observation that, as a matter of fact, a significant number of atheists are modest optimist. If, however, we were to provide a successful normative argument for why everyone, including the atheist/non-theist, should embrace modest optimism, then all atheists could be included within the scope of the problem of systemic evil. While not made entirely explicit, Nagasawa's book points toward this type of argument in two ways. First, we might have pragmatic reasons to take seriously some fundamental human intuitions about the overall not-badness of our environment. Nagasawa points toward this when he writes that, while available to the atheist, pessimism has "significant existential implications" that are unsalutary, indeed perhaps even "morally repugnant" (p. 188). Here it seems, then, that some of the reasons to prefer traditional theism are not merely its better evidential resources but rather some of its practical implications. Indeed, in Nagasawa's discussion of Japanese philosophies and what he terms "the problem of impermanence," these pragmatic considerations become even more prominent and to some extent the emphasis seems to shift from an intellectual or evidential problem of evil toward a practical problem. In an otherwise very clearly written book, however, these connections between the evidential and practical elements of the various problems of evils are not made entirely clear nor are they systematically harvested for an argument in favour of modest optimism.

Second, we might treat the popularity of modest optimism and other relevant attitudes (like gratitude for existence) themselves as evidential "data" in need of explanation: perhaps our intuitions about value and meaning are so common and entrenched because the world's axiological character itself gives rise to them. That is, perhaps our assessment of the world's character is "properly basic" rather than something that is *prima facie* in need of justification and therefore non-veridical until proven otherwise. Treating these intuitions themselves as robust facts and thereby shifting the burden of proof might allow for an independent argument for modest optimism (especially if one refuses to beg the question in favour of some reductionist naturalistic explanation for these human intuitions). Establishing the plausibility of modest optimism independently would then allow one to further ground the argument that the problem of systemic evil does indeed rise for atheist/non-theists insofar as they are (and, indeed, *should* be) modest optimists and that traditional

theism has better resources to respond it. Assuming prior commitment to modest optimism, then, traditional theism is preferable.

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