



The painful holiness of the real

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Abstract

Yujin Nagasawa's book, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, aims to show how theists, pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists all share a problem. On the one hand, they posit some cherished entity (God, nature, evolution, etc.). On the other hand, this cherished entity either causes or contains suffering, which is apparently incompatible with their cherishing. To solve their problem, these groups can and have turned to holiness. A holy entity can be cherished even if it causes or contains suffering. Hence, their shared solution revolves around a common core, which I link with John Hick's Real. Nagasawa adds pantheism, axiarchism, and atheism to Hick's pluralism. By doing this, he strips the Real of residual monotheistic features which might make it idolatrous. For those who oppose idolatry, Nagasawa opens up a vast new territory of religious opportunities.

Keywords Problem of evil · Holiness · Pantheism · Axiarchism · Atheism · John Hick

1 Introduction

Yujin Nagasawa's book, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*, aims to show that the problem of evil (the problem of suffering) is not merely a problem for theists. On the contrary, it is a very general problem, which occurs in a wide range of Western and Eastern religious positions. Here I will focus on the four Western positions discussed by Nagasawa, namely, theism, pantheism, axiarchism, and atheism.

At a high level of abstraction, Nagasawa's argument runs roughly like this: (1) All four positions posit an ultimate reality which is, in some sense, good. Theists say God is good; pantheists say their divine Cosmos is good; axiarchists say their ultimate principles are good; and atheists say nature and evolution are good. (2) And, while the details of their axiologies vary, all four positions entail at least a *modest optimism* [135–153].¹ According to this modest optimism, we ought to find life worth living, we should not

¹ All bracketed numbers refer to pages in Nagasawa (2024).

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complain about the hardships of life, and we ought to rejoice in the wonders of nature. And, whatever ultimate reality might be, we ought to adopt practical attitudes of awe, reverence, and gratitude towards it. (3) However, our universe is so deeply saturated with pain that this modest optimism is unjustified. Although we expect our universe to support our modest optimism, in fact, it supports an extreme pessimism [171, 187–189]. (4) Hence, all four positions suffer from what Nagasawa calls an “axiological expectation mismatch” [40–41]. This axiological expectation mismatch is their shared problem of suffering.

I believe Nagasawa is correct when he argues that (1) all four positions posit an ultimate reality which is in some sense good, and (2) all four positions therefore entail at least a modest optimism. However, serious trouble for his reasoning emerges from his axiological assumption that *pleasure is good and pain is evil* [20]. Equivalently, happiness is good and suffering is evil. Although not all utilitarianisms focus on happiness and suffering, it is fair to refer to Nagasawa’s axiology as utilitarian. On his utilitarian axiology, the goodness of ultimate reality entails that it aims to maximize happiness, to produce the greatest happiness (for the greatest number, etc.). The problem for Nagasawa’s argument is that all four Western positions contain rejections of his utilitarian axiology. Their ultimates are not happiness-maximizers. Hence, these four positions need not suffer from any axiological expectation mismatches. Still, I agree with Nagasawa’s deeper point that there is at least an *apparent* conflict in all four positions between the painful evils of earth and their modest optimism. They all need to resolve this conflict.

Here, I will argue that all four positions have adopted a solution to their shared problem of suffering, a solution which Nagasawa mentions but does not explore. Their shared solution involves these points: (1) The goodness of ultimate reality is its *holiness*. (2) But *holiness does not aim to maximize happiness*; on the contrary, *it aims to maximize intrinsic value*. (3) And the maximization of intrinsic value, especially in biological evolution, entails enormous suffering. (4) While suffering is psychologically dispreferable, all four positions have held that it is not axiologically significant in any metaphysical or religious sense. Consequently, while the painful evils might lead us to psychological pessimism, we are still justified in having metaphysical or religious optimism. Moreover, since our metaphysical or religious optimism is ultimate, it ought to outweigh any psychological pessimism. All four positions are justified in having at least modest optimism.

2 Chapter 1: The problem of suffering for theists

Nagasawa begins, in chapter one, with the problem of suffering for theists. Theists say God is omnipotent and wholly good [36–40]. Strangely, Nagasawa explicitly says he will not analyze the goodness of God [10]. This is surprising, since there are different forms of goodness. Say the goodness of God (and thus God Itself) is *solicitous* if and only if it strives to maximize happiness; say it is *holy* if and only if it strives to maximize intrinsic value. We might say divine goodness is *artistic* if and only if it strives to maximize beauty, but here I will think of beauty as an aspect of

intrinsic value.² These different conceptions of divine goodness entail very different created worlds. Nagasawa regards pain as evil [20]; he argues that earthly biology is systemically evil because evolution saturates life with pain [e.g., 118–127]. Yet this pain challenges the goodness of God *only if* God is solicitous. Hence I infer that Nagasawa assumes that God is a happiness-maximizer. By contrast, if God is holy (or artistic), pain does not challenge divine goodness.

At least one theistic tradition, namely, Old Testament (OT) theism, has focused on divine holiness. This tradition supports my first point that *the goodness of ultimate reality is its holiness*. So in this section, I will focus on OT theism. A very long theistic tradition, reaching all the way from the OT to the modern work of Otto, says that holiness entails painfully destructive *wrath* (Otto, 1917: 18). Divine holiness explains suffering. The wrath of God destroys wickedness (in the Genesis flood, the incineration of cities and idolators, hell, etc.). Yet that holiness also destroys those with good moral intentions (Leviticus 10:1–7; 2 Samuel 6:3–8). Moreover, it even destroys the innocent. Although Job was innocent (Job 1:1), God allowed the Adversary to destroy his innocent family and servants. God Itself asserts that this destruction was done for no moral reason (Job 2:3; see [12, 19]). God commands the Canaanite genocides. God slaughters the infants of the Egyptians and the Amalekites (Exodus 12; 1 Samuel 15: 2–3).

Speaking of God, Job says “he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the faces of its judges” (9:22–24).³ Job says “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away” (1:21). He asks “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (2:10). God confirms Job’s speech (42:7–9). And God says “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil” (Isaiah 45:7 KJV). As Harvey puts it, “God is not only the enemy of Job, but the enemy of all human beings” (2023: S10). Oswalt says “Yahweh’s holiness is deadly” (2023: 272).

Besides hurting humans, the holiness of God hurts other animals. God rejoices in the sacrificial slaughter of non-human animals. God slaughters the firstborn non-human animals of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:12). God rhetorically asks Job: “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?” (Job 38:39). And “Who provides food for the raven?” (Job 38:41). The answer is that God provides prey for predators. Likewise, the Psalmist declares, “the young lions roar for prey, seeking their food from God” (Psalms 104:21). God celebrates the war-horse, which lusts for battle (Job 39:19–26). God praises the eagle, whose “young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is he” (Job 39:30). God created an earth filled with biological violence (Job 36–41).⁴ Two violent chaos-monsters

² Aesthetic theodicy begins with Plotinus (*Enneads*, 2.3.18, 3.2.15–18, 3.6.2). And Nietzsche says “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 5).

³ All Biblical quotes are from the RSV unless noted as from KJV.

⁴ Otto discusses the later chapters of Job (1917: 77–80). He says they express “the downright stupendousness, the wellnigh daemonic and wholly incomprehensible character of the eternal creative power” (80).

(Behemoth and Leviathan) are the high points of God's creation. If evolution is red in tooth and claw, the Joban God rejoices in it. These points suggest that the holiness of God drives evolution by natural selection.

The second point in my response to Nagasawa is that *holiness does not aim to maximize happiness*; on the contrary, *holiness aims to maximize intrinsic value*. This premise is supported by the holiness of the OT God. When Job encounters God (in chapters 36–41), God reveals Himself as *pure creative power*. This pure creative power produced our universe and remains active in it as *natura naturans*, which drives evolution.⁵ The holiness of God is pure creative power.⁶ The purity of divine holiness is *pure* creativity. But a *purely* creative power is also destructively transformative: it destructively transforms nothing into something, and something into something new. Hence, *pure* creativity entails wrath. Kant says holiness is moral perfection. But the God in Job is not a utility-maximizer, who strives for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Its holy moral perfection is not utility-maximization.⁷ As Harvey says, God is “sublime and mighty,” a God of awe but not a God of love (2023: S13). As the author of evolution, God gives life a single moral imperative: *Maximize fitness!* This imperative can be consistently willed as universal law.

Nagasawa analogizes the world to a yellow-gray painting [171–172]. For the utilitarian, yellow is happiness, while gray is pain. On the surface, the painting has both yellow and gray patches. But, Nagasawa says, if we peel off the surface layer, we will see that the entire painting is really gray, because all life is based on evolutionary pain. Nagasawa says, “the entire biological *system* on which nature is based poses a challenge for theists’ belief in the existence of an omnipotent and wholly good God” [122]. Of course, this inference assumes that God is solicitous. But if God is holy, then the goodness of God aims to maximize intrinsic value. Intrinsic value is proportional to complexity, functional excellence, beauty, diversity, and so on. Maximizing intrinsic value does not entail that all things are maximally intrinsically valuable. If God maximizes intrinsic value, then all things climb their evolutionary Mount Improbables as high as they can. And the history of our universe shows that God succeeds *spectacularly* in maximizing intrinsic value. Things everywhere climb their Mount Improbables (Chaisson, 2001). On the holiness view, it turns out that the cosmic painting is positive yellow all the way down.

Of course, since holy creative power transforms things, it also destroys them. Organisms feel such destructive changes as painful. However, since this wrath comes from the holiness of God, which is the goodness of God, this suffering is compatible with that divine goodness. And, while I have focused on the Old Testament God, any theist who affirms that God is holy should be able to use this

⁵ Otto says holiness is “like a hidden force of nature” (1917: 18).

⁶ Shapiro says holiness “like some cosmic energy, makes possible the emergence and the perseverance of all forms of reality, high and low, noble and base, good and evil” (1964: 46).

⁷ Otto says divine holiness “has no concern whatever with moral qualities” (1917: 18). But the command to maximize fitness entails concern with the moral quality of *arete*, the competitive excellence that shines in the biological struggle of life for greater life. For humans, *arete* is rational social excellence, which entails rational justice. Humans are not wolves. For humans, the holy command to maximize fitness repudiates social Darwinism.

solution. Of course, theists who use this solution will have to give up the notion that God is solicitous. Moreover, the concept of holiness can be detached from God. In fact, pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists both can and have appealed to non-theistic holiness to solve their problems of suffering.

3 Chapter 2: Axiological expectation mismatch

In my response to Nagasawa, my second point concerns intrinsic value and its relations to happiness and pain. So now I will turn to axiology, focusing on the second chapter of Nagasawa's book, where he develops his theory of good and evil. He divides evils into axiological and deontic [20–21]. This division resembles the older division of evils into natural and moral. Axiologically, Nagasawa says pleasure is good and pain is evil [20]. However, pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists often reject utilitarianism. Instead, they adopt axiologies based on intrinsic value. While utilitarianism does not work at the cosmic level, intrinsic value does. And I will show that pain works to preserve intrinsic value. If holiness aims to maximize intrinsic value, then pain serves holiness.

It is not clear that any utilitarian axiology is consistent at the cosmic level. Nagasawa considers a world (I will say “universe”) which contains only a rock [137]. Since rocks do not suffer, this rock universe contains no evil. Yet Nagasawa says the rock universe “would not even be a good [universe] because goodness is not instantiated (unless one thinks that the existence of a rock has positive axiological value).” Of course, many thinkers do believe rocks have positive axiological value. A rock has its own intrinsic value. And many who discuss cosmic value endorse axiologies based on intrinsic value. Buckareff (2022: 22–27) shows how pantheists are best served by axiologies based on intrinsic value. Many axiarchists and atheists also use intrinsic value.

The intrinsic value of a thing is the value it has *in itself*. Intrinsic value contrasts with *extrinsic value*. Extrinsic value is the value some thing has *for some evaluator* (such as the value which food has for an animal, or the value which pleasure has for a mind, or the disvalue which pain has for a mind). However, the intrinsic value of any thing is the value it has just because it exists. It is the value generated in it by the activity of some purely creative power. Ultimately, this is the holiness of the creative source. This source might be called God, the One, nature, or evolution. Since holiness is pure creativity, it is absolute creativity. Any holy power seeks to maximize intrinsic value. To use a more theological term, I will sometimes say intrinsic value is *glory*. While there are many degrees of glory, anything with maximal intrinsic value is simply *glorious*.

Intrinsic value is often identified with some kind of complexity. We can use the Stoic chain of being to illustrate some degrees of glory: (1) a universe with only rocks; (2) a universe with rocks plus plants; (3) a universe with rocks, plants, and non-human animals; (4) a universe with rocks, plants, non-human animals, and humans. As universes rise to greater heights of glory, they contain both more pains and pleasures. However, since these increases in pleasure and pain both depend on increasing intrinsic value, pleasure and pain are not fundamental values. The value

of a universe is proportional to the intrinsic value of its most intrinsically valuable parts. Many pantheists (e.g., Stoics), axiarchists, atheists, and religious naturalists adopt this conception of cosmic value.

Some humans do not feel pain (Habib et al., 2019; Levy, 2020). Lacking awareness of damage to their bodies, they fail to protect their bodies. Far from living ideal lives of utilitarian bliss, they usually die young and hideously from *painless* injuries and infections. Pain is essential for the preservation of the biological integrity of the body, that is, for its intrinsic value. It is *for the best* that organisms feel pain; they *ought* to feel pain. Pain is aversive. It is a repulsive force that emerges within intrinsically valuable things in response to the degradation of their intrinsic value. Pain plays a protective role, guarding intrinsic value. Pain acts as a ratchet that prevents intrinsically valuable things from degradation. As such, it serves the good. Since holiness aims to maximize intrinsic value, pain also serves holiness. The degradation of intrinsic value is axiologically negative. Pain is a force which strives to *negate that negation* by driving organisms away from their negaters. Thus, pain aligns the activities of organisms with the holy striving to maximize intrinsic value. However, by itself, pain is neither good nor evil, but merely protective.

Nagasawa now uses his utilitarian axiology to define his concept of axiological expectation mismatch. He states this mismatch as “(a) it is expected that there is no evil in the actual world; (b) there is evil in the actual world” [40–41]. He says “the problem of axiological expectation mismatch” concerns “the apparent mismatch between our expectations of how the actual world should be and our observation of how it is” [41]. Since many pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists reject utilitarianism, they are not likely to have any axiological expectation mismatches. In fact, they often explicitly say that *they expect the world to be exactly as it actually is*.⁸ No mismatch.

Since pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists often explicitly deny that they have any axiological expectation mismatches, one might object that Nagasawa has simply failed to show that they have any problem of suffering. However, I believe that would be superficial. I believe Nagasawa has a deeper point, namely, that the existence of systematic pain, as well as systematic injustice in human life, still *apparently* conflicts with their modest optimism. Hence, these non-theists *seem* to have a problem of suffering. Here, I am arguing that they solve their problem by saying that goodness is holiness; holiness maximizes intrinsic value; the maximization of intrinsic value entails the production of great suffering; but suffering is not axiologically significant.

⁸ Atheists deny any axiological expectation mismatch. See Bertrand Russell’s “A Free Man’s Worship” and “What I Believe.” Existentialists like Sartre and Camus affirm that the world is absurd and Sisyphean. Likewise see Dawkins (2003: ch.1.1; 2008: ch. 10; 2012). For pantheists, see Harrison (1999: 51).

4 Chapter 3: The problem of suffering for pantheists

I will now show how my response to Nagasawa's argument works for pantheism. Nagasawa discusses the problem of suffering for pantheists in his third chapter. He opens with this argument: Pantheism says our universe is God. Our universe contains a lot of suffering (evil). But if anything contains a lot of suffering, then it is not God [64–66]. The tension between the pantheistic claim that our universe is God and the inability of God to contain a lot of suffering is the pantheistic problem of suffering. Pantheists reply that our universe is holy [65]. Religious naturalists also say nature is holy (Crosby, 2002: 10). It would be more accurate to say our glorious universe is created by a holy power. Holiness entails a lot of suffering as it strives to maximize intrinsic value. For example, holiness works in both predators and prey, driving each to flourish; but the flourishing of each negates the other. In their conflict, holiness becomes wrath, causing pain.

Nagasawa makes a second argument against pantheism: If our universe contains lots of suffering, then it is not an appropriate object of religious emotions or acts like gratitude, veneration, or worship [67–70, 87]. If it cannot be the appropriate object of those emotions or acts, then it is not God. But pantheists say the universe is God. Again, pantheists appeal to the glory of our universe. Since a divine holy power (*Deus sive natura*) works in our universe to maximize its intrinsic value, suffering does not challenge pantheists. Contra Nagasawa [68], they deny that they have an axiological mismatch. They explicitly say they expect the universe to be exactly how it actually is.⁹ The Stoics were pantheists who explicitly argued that *pleasure and pain are axiologically irrelevant* (Long, 1968).

Do pantheists have any argument that some holy power works in our universe? Nagasawa recognizes that they offer this argument [67]: the universe evokes in us religious experiences like wonder, awe, and numinosity. If something evokes those experiences, then it is the glorious product of some holy power [65, 67]. Hence, our universe is the glorious product of some holy power. Either that holy power or its glorious product deserves to be called God (Levine, 1994: 48; Harrison, 1999: 47–49; Byerly, 2019: 2–6; Buckareff, 2022: 25–26). Nagasawa objects that the pantheist's religious emotions are merely subjective [69].¹⁰ They are not based on the objective structure of our universe as revealed by science. After all, at first glance, modern physics and cosmology do not seem to entail that the universe is divine or holy. But we should look deeper.

The old Stoics posited a *pyr technikon*, a designing fire, which they identified with the Logos and with Zeus. Modern pantheists might argue that something like this *pyr technikon* was present in the Big Bang. They can justify its presence by arguing that it provides the most economical explanation for the fine-tuning of

⁹ Harrison (1999: 51) states “The question of why God would allow pain and evil to exist is one of the most difficult of all for theists to answer. Pantheists do not have to answer it: the universe is what it is.”

¹⁰ Here pantheists have another reply: if Nagasawa thinks that pantheistic numinous experiences are merely subjective [68–69], then his psychological version of axiological expectation mismatch is also merely subjective.

the universe for the evolution of complexity. Modern pantheists might argue, with Nietzsche, that our universe is “a work of art that gives birth to itself” (*The Will to Power*, sec. 796). It contains a Dionysian *pyr technikon*. This *pyr technikon* drives our universe to maximize intrinsic value, thus driving its evolution of complexity. If holiness maximizes intrinsic value, then the *pyr technikon* is a holy power. It is holiness in motion; it is *active holiness*. By contrast, as an aversive force which resists the degradation of intrinsic value, and which repels things away from damage and destruction, pain is *reactive holiness*.

Another argument for cosmic holiness goes like this: All the things in our universe are rooted in an original common cause (the Big Bang). And they have all evolved to their present states through shared laws. Thus, it is plausible that our universe is an *organic whole* (Buckareff, 2022: 23–25). Organic wholes are intrinsically valuable. As the greatest organic whole, our universe is maximally intrinsically valuable (Buckareff, 2022: 26). To be maximally intrinsically valuable is to be glorious. Therefore, our universe is glorious. But the best explanation for its glory is that it was produced by a holy power. Therefore, there exists some holy power which created and works in our universe. Putting all the points in this discussion of pantheism together, I believe that pantheists can and have affirmed that their God is good; Its goodness is Its holiness; holiness maximizes intrinsic value; the maximization of intrinsic value entails the production of great suffering; but suffering is not axiologically significant. If these affirmations are correct, then the problem of suffering for pantheists is indeed merely apparent. Pantheists can be at least modest optimists and can probably adopt even stronger versions of optimism.

However, in his further reasoning about pantheism, Nagasawa surprisingly drops his utilitarian axiology and turns to an objection based on intrinsic value. He argues that, since our universe is physically and modally limited [72–73], it does not have the maximal intrinsic value required for glory. Since I am using intrinsic value, I have to agree that this is a strong argument against one-universe pantheism. So, Nagasawa turns to *multiverse pantheism*. Many modern thinkers have argued for a plurality of universes. Universes are maximal physical wholes; they are spatially, temporally, and causally closed.¹¹ Since all possible universes exist in the pantheistic multiverse, multiverse pantheism resembles Lewisian modal realism [76–77]. Multiverse pantheism says that the totality of universes has divine maximality, and so deserves to be called God. Here, I treat the multiverse as a class of universes. And I follow Kraay (2011) and refer to a class of universes as a *world*. The totality of all possible universes is the *Biggest World*.

Nagasawa objects that the Biggest World contains far too much suffering to be God [85–88, see 64–66]. He objects that the pantheistic multiverse is not the appropriate object of religious emotions and acts [87]. Again, as with one-universe pantheism, the multiverse pantheist might appeal to the glory of the pantheistic multiverse [85]. After all, in creating that glory, the holiness of God entails much suffering. However, here, it is hard to see how the multiverse pantheist will argue for the glory of the multiverse. We cannot perceive the multiverse as we can perceive

¹¹ Here universes are equivalent to the “worlds” in David Lewis’s modal realism.

the awe-inspiring features of our universe. Understanding the absolutely infinite line of ordinal numbers can inspire intellectual awe, because that line is orderly and progresses unsurpassably through all degrees of greatness. Yet, it is hard to understand how the orderless multiverse can arouse intellectual awe.

Nagasawa has yet another objection to multiverse pantheism. The pantheistic multiverse is neither rationally nor axiologically organized. It is an unstructured heap, whose parts do not depend on each other. Hence, the multiverse is not “a single organic whole” [108]. When Nagasawa appeals to organic wholes, he is appealing to a non-utilitarian axiology. Specifically, he is appealing to intrinsic value. An organic whole has greater intrinsic value than a mere heap. Since the pantheistic multiverse is not an organic whole, it is not maximally intrinsically valuable. Given the history of pantheism, it seems fair to require that any pantheistic God is an organic whole and to require that it has maximal intrinsic value. So, the pantheistic multiverse is not God.

When Nagasawa makes his strongest arguments against pantheism, he does not use his utilitarian axiology, but turns to an axiology based on intrinsic value. This supports my point that pleasure and pain are not axiologically significant in any metaphysical or religious sense; on the contrary, only intrinsic value is metaphysically and religiously significant. I agree that Nagasawa has given compelling arguments against multiverse pantheism. However, the one-universe pantheist still has a reply, namely, that our universe really is the largest concrete whole. It is neither physically nor modally limited. The one-universe pantheist who makes this reply can adopt my response to Nagasawa: the pantheistic Cosmic God is good; Its goodness is Its holiness; holiness maximizes intrinsic value; the maximization of intrinsic value entails the production of great suffering; but this suffering is not axiologically significant. Therefore, the existence of suffering need not mar the modest optimism of the one-universe pantheist.

5 Chapter 4: The problem of suffering for axiarchists

I will now show how my response to Nagasawa’s argument works for axiarchists. He discusses the problem of suffering for axiarchists in his fourth chapter. The basic idea behind axiarchism is that an impersonal goodness is somehow creatively responsible for all that concretely exists. Since axiarchism and Platonism are very close, I will just refer to this impersonal goodness as *the Good*. But axiarchism is generally non-theistic, since it affirms that the Good is an impersonal abstract principle. The axiarchisms of Leslie and Steinhart assume a Platonic background of abstract objects. These include abstractly possible universes, that is, *cosmic forms*. They are mathematical structures.

The cosmic forms are ordered by an *improvement relation* (Steinhart, 2020: ch. 5.3, 2022: ch. 9.2). The origin of this relation is the empty form, which has minimal intrinsic value. Every cosmic form surpasses itself into at least one improved *successor* form. The improvement relation orders cosmic forms into infinite progressions. Any such progression is improved into at least one *limit* form. Say a cosmic form is *bright* if and only if (1) it is the empty cosmic form, (2) it is some successor

of some bright cosmic form, or (3) it is some limit of some infinite progression of ever brighter cosmic forms. The bright cosmic forms make an abstract tree with the empty form as its root.

The Good is a proposition which states that an abstract cosmic form is concretized if and only if it is bright. Hence, the Good acts as an *axiarchic filter* which selects all and only the bright cosmic forms for concreteness (Parfit, 1998). To say that a cosmic form is concretized means that it is instantiated by a concrete physical copy of itself. The totality of concrete instances of all bright cosmic forms is the great *world tree*. The world tree is a proper class of concrete universes ordered by the improvement relation. I have argued elsewhere that this world tree is the *Best World* (Steinhart, 2022: chs. 4–5). The world tree is maximally intrinsically valuable; it is the glorious product of holiness.

Nagasawa says any world must satisfy three demands in order to be best [107, 108, 138]. First, it must not be surpassed by any better world. Since the world tree includes all ordinally-definable better worlds, it is a proper class, which cannot be surpassed by any better world. Second, there cannot be many equally best worlds. But if there were many such worlds, then the world tree would be their union. Third, the best world must be an organic whole. Since all the universes in the world tree grow from a single root according to the same laws, the world tree is an organic whole. The world tree satisfies Nagasawa's demands, so that indeed it is the Best World. It is an "optimal multiverse" [106].

Just as the pantheist says a Dionysian *pyr technikon* burns at the root of our universe (the Big Bang), so the axiarchist says that a Dionysian *pyr technikon* burns at the root of the great world tree. The *pyr technikon* is divine and holy. It is a recursively self-improving power which grows stronger as universes rise to higher ranks in the world tree. As the complexities of universes increase, so too do the amounts of pleasure and pain in each universe. Recall the Stoic degrees of cosmic value: (1) a universe with only rocks; (2) a universe with rocks plus plants; (3) a universe with rocks, plants, and non-human animals; (4) a universe with rocks, plants, non-human animals, and humans. Beyond these, there are universes which add rank beyond rank of superhumans. Higher universes contain greater intrinsic values, and therefore greater pleasures and greater pains.

The Good acts as a *telos* or finality, like the sun, towards which the entire world tree grows. However, the Good is a selective but not productive power—it does not produce the concrete instances of bright cosmic forms. Nor does the Good produce those forms. It does not produce the Platonic background of abstract mathematical objects. Axiarchists argue that there exists some ultimate productive power (Steinhart, 2019a, 2022: chs. 2–3). As a Platonic axiarchist, I refer to this productive power as *the One*. Like Speusippus and the Pythagoreans, I distinguish between the One and the Good. The One is non-theistic. It is impersonal and mindless. The One is the root of the world tree.

I have argued elsewhere for a modern analytic theory of the One (Steinhart, 2019a, 2020: ch. 6.1–2, 2022: chs. 2–3). This theory begins with absolute nothingness. Absolute nothingness negates itself. The self-negation of nothingness is the One. The One is being itself. Since nothingness is absolutely negative, powerless, and unproductive, its self-negation is absolutely positive productive power. The

power of the One is the *pyr technikon*. Its power is its holiness. Since its power is holy, it is not utilitarian; it maximizes glory rather than happiness. Since its power is maximally productive, its holiness emanates all mathematically possible universes as abstract cosmic forms. Since its power is maximally positive, its holiness applies the Good to those cosmic forms. Since its power is both maximally productive and maximally positive, its holiness concretizes the forms that satisfy the Good. These are the concrete universes in the Best World. Since our universe is concrete, our universe is one of the universes in the Best World. But there is no best universe in that world. Our universe, like every universe in the world tree, will be surpassed by many infinitely iterated improvements of itself.

Axiarchists can and have adopted my response to Nagasawa: the ultimate axiarchic principle is good; its goodness is its holiness; its holiness maximizes intrinsic value; its maximization of intrinsic value entails the production of great suffering, but suffering is not axiologically significant in any metaphysical or religious sense. Axiarchists can be modest optimists. Moreover, axiarchists (like Rescher) who endorse an optimal multiverse can ultimately adopt a very strong Leibnizian optimism [131–139].

6 Chapters 5–7: the problem of suffering for atheists

I will now show how my response to Nagasawa's argument works for atheists. In his fifth through seventh chapters, Nagasawa gives an argument that atheists have a problem of suffering. Its *positive premise* states that atheists adopt many positive attitudes towards our earthly ecosystem, our universe, and nature as a whole. These include wonder, awe, reverence, and gratitude [159–164]. Plus, Dawkins adds Platonic transcendence (Dawkins, 1998: x, 312–313; see Steinhart, 2020: ch. 3.4, 2022: ch. 7.9). And atheists have mystical experiences which they sometimes interpret as union with being-itself (Steinhart, 2022: ch. 11). Atheists do seem to have at least a moderate optimism [140–153].

The *negative premise* of Nagasawa's argument states that our earthly ecosystem is systemically filled with pain and suffering [155–159]. Let me strengthen Nagasawa's argument. Darwinism is probably universal (Dawkins, 2017). Wherever there is life, there is evolutionary suffering. And, since our universe seems to be finely tuned for the evolution of complexity, even basic physics seems finely tuned for the evolutionary generation of suffering. So the positive and negative premises are in considerable tension, and this tension is the problem of *suffering* for atheists.

Although I doubt that many atheists will think that their problem of suffering is a problem of *evil*, suffering is negatively valenced, and that negativity is in tension with the positive attitudes (the optimism) adopted by atheists. I will show how my response to this tension works for atheists. Even atheists can affirm that nature is ultimately good; its goodness is its holiness; its holiness maximizes intrinsic value; its maximization of intrinsic value entails the production of great suffering, but suffering is not axiologically significant in any metaphysical or religious sense. Atheists can be optimists.

There are two primary kinds of *calamities* that produce evolutionary suffering here on earth. If universal Darwinism is true, they generalize to all planets with life. The first kind of calamity faced by organisms is *biological*. These are mainly due to predation: the fawn is killed and eaten by a mountain lion. Predation involves one organism eating another (taking its energy or materials). Predation includes parasitism. Viruses prey on cells; unicellular organisms prey on each other; many fungi are predators; all animals are predators; even some plants are predators. Beyond predation, life implies the sufferings associated with illness, aging, and dying. Evolution intensely *radiates pain*. If universal Darwinism is true, then our universe is probably filled with trillions of living planets, brilliantly radiating pain, like tortured beacons in the hideous night.

Many atheists regard biological evolution as an *optimization algorithm* which maximizes biological intrinsic value (Dawkins, 1986, 1996; Dennett, 1995). It maximizes the fitnesses of organisms and thereby maximizes the intrinsic values of their bodies. Hence, evolution maximizes biological intrinsic value. More generally, evolution maximizes complexity. It maximizes related aesthetic values, such as beauty, grandeur, and numinosity. As far as we know, living organisms and ecosystems are the most complex and intrinsically valuable structures in the entire universe. Any planet with life is one of the most glorious things in the universe. Since it maximizes intrinsic value, biological evolution is the most intense expression of the *pyr technikon* in our universe. Indeed, if our universe is finely tuned for the evolution of complexity, and especially for biological evolution, then planets running evolutionary algorithms are the greatest and most glorious realizations of the *pyr technikon*. Atheists are entirely free to say the *pyr technikon* is holy; after all, it is a natural force, not a theistic deity. Since holiness aims to maximize intrinsic value, biological evolution is the greatest expression of holiness.

Holiness appears in every act of predation. Consider a hawk that kills and eats a rabbit. By preying on the rabbit, the hawk perpetuates its species. It continues the holy evolutionary optimization algorithm, which defines a glory-increasing process. The hawk's act of predation expresses the *active holiness* of the *pyr technikon*. Since the *pyr technikon* in the hawk strives towards the Good, the hawk serves the Good by devouring the rabbit. What about the rabbit? The rabbit experiences the holy power working in the hawk as holy wrath. The rabbit suffers extreme pain; it feels a powerful aversive force, which repels the rabbit from its death and drives it to struggle against the hawk. Its painful struggle expresses the *reactive holiness* of the *pyr technikon*. Since the *pyr technikon* of the rabbit strives towards the Good, the rabbit serves the Good by painfully struggling. By painfully struggling, the rabbit has a chance of escaping to live another day. The pain of the rabbit is holy. If the rabbit felt no pain, it would not serve the Good. Organisms ultimately suffer *for the sake of the Good*. Without pain holding it up, the whole earthly ecosystem would collapse into primitiveness or sterility. This does not mean suffering is good; suffering is neither good nor evil, but merely protective.

Nagasawa seeks to draw axiological parallels between atheism and theism. So here I will draw a relevant parallel involving the Old Testament (OT) God. Since Nagasawa's discussion of the problem of suffering for atheists focuses on evolution, I will point to an evolutionary parallel. The OT portrays God as providing predators with prey; hence,

God and evolution generate pain in analogous ways: *fitness stands to unfitness as righteousness stands to sin*. Just as God punishes sin and rewards righteousness, so evolution punishes unfitness and rewards fitness. This is *evolutionary justice*. It emerges from the holy imperative to maximize fitness. But evolutionary justice is not utilitarian. It does not strive for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. It strives to maximize the intrinsic value of the entire earthly ecosystem. Of course, many biological calamities are moral evils. Here the concept of deontic evil comes into play [see 20–21]: *evil acts violate moral norms*. To violate some moral norm is evil *whether or not* it causes suffering.

Now back to calamities, the second kind of calamity is *physical*. Consider a fawn that dies in some bushfire started by lightning [15, 22, 27, 31, 121, 124]. That fawn is not killed by any evolved organism. But it is killed because earthly evolution involves lightning, the growth of flammable plants, and the deer that feed on them. So the entire earth is responsible for biological suffering. And since evolution is tied up with the movements of the sun, moon, and planets, the entire solar system is responsible too. But our sun exists due to processes involving the black hole at the center of our galaxy. Ultimately, the laws of physics, finely tuned for the evolution of complexity, are responsible. But now we are back at the holiness of the *pyr technikon*. The pain of every possible organism in our universe serves holiness. If any possible organism in our universe suffers, then it suffers for the sake of the Good. Pain is reactive holiness, spread throughout our entire universe, wherever there is life. Besides atheists, pantheists can also use these ideas.

Buckareff says, “while the evolution of life includes a good deal of natural evil, the organic whole still has immense (if not maximal) intrinsic value” (2022: 26). Nietzsche saw the evolutionary process as “*holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering” (*Will to Power*, sec. 1052, his italics). Evolution expresses the *pyr technikon* as it strives to maximize intrinsic value. But thermodynamic forces are always dragging the *pyr technikon* down into the simplicity of sterility. It therefore requires a proportional ratchet to oppose its tendency to collapse back into simplicity, and that ratchet is the repulsive force of pain. As far as we know, evolution is the most intrinsically valuable process in our universe. It is glorious. Since its holiness is responsible for maximizing that glory, its holiness is maximal too. The mountains of glory raised by evolution, which display their songs and feathers like hymns to the Good, are held up by monstrous amounts of suffering. Holiness is purely value-creating. Precisely because it is pure, its value-creation entails a monstrous amount of suffering. This entailment explains and redeems that suffering. Moreover, atheists can agree with pantheists and axiarchists that suffering is not axiologically significant in any metaphysical or religious sense. Atheists who accept the holiness of the *pyr technikon* have solved their problem of suffering. They can be at least modest optimists. But they may have another problem.

7 The Real without idolatry

There is a tension between two sides of atheism. On the one side, if an atheist wants to deal with suffering in an axiologically coherent way, they need to appeal to some *holy power* that drives things to become more complex and more intrinsically valuable. The *pyr technikon* (or *natura naturans*) is such a holy power.

On the other side, atheists have traditionally been skeptical about such powers. However, the difference between these two sides can be decreased by a *grand inference* to the best explanation: the holiness of the *pyr technikon* is the best explanation for the fine-tuning of our physical laws, as well as for the evolution of complexity throughout our universe. The grand inference is arguably also a scientific inference. It does not logically differ from the immense inference that Darwin made from his data to biological evolution. Considerations from thermodynamics may bring these two sides together (Steinhart, 2018, 2020: chs. 2–3).

If atheists accept the grand inference, then these two sides do come together. But then atheism collapses into pantheism. Nagasawa points out that pantheism is disguised atheism [68–70]. Here I say the same thing in the other direction: atheism is disguised pantheism. This validates Nagasawa's point, though I think his point goes deeper. If atheists want to be axiologically coherent, then atheists are really *axiarchists*. Axiarchic atheists might very well think of the *pyr technikon* as a mindless natural power driving the evolution of complexity towards glory. The *pyr technikon* is creatively responsible for the evolution of the great world tree to ever-greater heights of complexity and intrinsic value. Within any universe, it is creatively responsible for the evolution of all complexity. Ultimately, the *pyr technikon* is creatively responsible for all the beings among beings; it is the *divine* ground of being. Moreover, without the *holiness* of the *pyr technikon*, atheists cannot be axiologically coherent; but incoherence violates rationality; atheists are committed to rationality; therefore, atheists are committed to the holiness of the *pyr technikon*.

The *pyr technikon* is that mindless, impersonal, divine, and holy power which makes all the beings be. Since the *pyr technikon* is the creative ground of being, Tillich might say it is God. But God is exactly what atheists reject. Referring to the *pyr technikon* as God saddles it with far too much monotheistic baggage. Fortunately, the Western religious tradition provides alternative names for this ultimate power, which are also alternative theories of its nature. Perhaps the *pyr technikon* is an impersonal Absolute. However, Nagasawa's reasoning suggests a better alternative. Nagasawa has revealed that theism, pantheism, axiarchism, and atheism revolve around a common axiological core. His reasoning strikes me as analogous to that of John Hick, who argued that all world religions share a common core (1982). Hick refers to this common core as *the Real*.

On my interpretation, Nagasawa's great achievement is that he shows how to add non-theistic positions, like pantheism, axiarchism, and atheism, to Hick's pluralism. Hick's pluralism left the Real with many residual monotheistic features, like transcendence. However, pantheists, axiarchists, and atheists have often been highly skeptical about transcendence. They have seen transcendence as signifying a domineering "higher power," or as bound up with a Feuerbachian anthropic projection. And neither pantheists, nor axiarchists, nor atheists, have a transcendent creator. Moreover, especially for atheists, the residual monotheistic features of Hick's Real may make it seem idolatrous. Atheism looks like an extreme Protestantism (Clark, 2015; Fraser, 2018). As such, atheism extremely opposes idolatry (Findlay, 1949: 354). By adding the four non-theistic Western positions to Hick's pluralism, Nagasawa's reasoning shows that the residual

monotheistic features of the Real are merely phenomenal and must be stripped from the Real. The Real is not a higher power, but a wider and deeper power. Thus, Nagasawa shows how to make the Real less idolatrous. He shows how to expand and clarify Hick's pluralism.

Stripped of its idolatrous features, the Real is no longer philanthropic. It is not a utility-maximizer, and it looks far more like the God of Job. Hick says there may be creatures which "make a benign/malign distinction with respect to themselves, but by whom the Real is experienced as hostile, not good but evil" (2000: 44). It would be more accurate to say the Real is holy and that its holiness painfully produces glory. Its holiness drives the evolution of biological complexity. Evolution is painful, but it is maximally good. Since atheists affirm evolution, atheists who adopt the Real as their metaphysical core might be able to develop naturalized versions of process theology (Steinhart, 2008, 2019b, 2019c). Further naturalizing Peters (2002), they might develop new religious naturalisms. They might develop new religions of nature (Steinhart, 2016). For those who oppose idolatry, Nagasawa opens up a vast new territory of religious opportunities.

Declarations

Ethics statement Not applicable.

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