

Research Article

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The Sceptical Response to the Existential Problem of Systemic Suffering

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Abstract: Recently, Yujin Nagasawa has argued that “systemic suffering” – suffering inherent in the evolutionary process – poses a problem for existentially optimistic theists and atheists who think that the world is overall good and therefore are happy and thankful to be alive in it. In short, he shows that it is difficult to consistently believe that the world is overall good when also recognising the existence of systemic suffering. In this article, I evaluate a sceptical response to the problem. The idea behind the response is a sort of scepticism according to which we do not know whether our knowledge about the realm of values is representative. I argue that the response fails, but that theism in conjunction with such scepticism succeeds. Atheism in conjunction with such scepticism, on the other hand, does not. I also argue that atheists can at least consistently hope that the world is overall good, despite systemic suffering. Finally, I answer objections and conclude.

Keywords: systemic suffering, Yujin Nagasawa, sceptical theism, sceptical atheism, existential optimism, existential hope

1 Introduction

Suffering inherent in the evolutionary process is frequently invoked when arguing against the existence of a perfectly good and all-powerful God.¹ Recently, however, Yujin Nagasawa has argued that such suffering poses a problem for theists and atheists who are existential optimists and as such think that the world is overall good and are thankful to be alive in it.

In this article, I introduce Nagasawa’s problem and apply the scepticism endorsed by many so-called sceptical theists as a response to the problem. According to a version of such scepticism, we do not know whether our knowledge about the realm of values is representative. I argue that the response fails on its own, but the response succeeds when combining such scepticism with the world view of theism. Unfortunately, the response fails when combining such scepticism with atheism. Shortly put, sceptical theists can be existential optimists despite the evil inherent in the evolutionary system while sceptical atheists cannot. However, I also argue that sceptical atheists can at least settle for what I call ‘existential hope’, which I define as just hoping that the world is overall good. Finally, I conclude.²

¹ See, for example, Smith, “An Atheological Argument from Evil Natural Laws;” Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists” or Draper, “Darwin’s Argument from Evil.” For responses see, for example, Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*; and Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil*.

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I use “God” as a title. To hold the title of “God,” one must, as a minimum, be all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good and the creator of the world.³ A theist believes that there is a being holding the title of “God,” whereas an atheist denies it. Additionally, in this article, I think of atheists who are also naturalist and believe that there is no supernatural world. I also restrict myself to both theists and atheists who believe that there are such things as objective moral values. I use Nagasawa’s term “systemic suffering” to describe seemingly gratuitous suffering inherent in the evolutionary system or process.⁴

2 The existential problem of systemic suffering

Nagasawa presents the existential problem of systemic suffering by first presenting its two main components: “existential optimism” and “systemic suffering.” He defines existential optimism as the belief that “the world is overall good and that we should be happy and grateful to be alive in it.”⁵ We can see that the belief includes the following value judgement:

(1) The world is overall good.

It is because of the assigned positive value of the world, expressed by (1), that we should be happy to be alive in it. Nagasawa cites both theists and atheists as examples of existential optimists who make this positive value judgement. It seems quite natural to think that theists are existential optimists. After all, they believe that the world was created by a perfectly good and loving God. However, Nagasawa shows that there are quite a few atheists who espouse the same optimism. One such atheist is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Nagasawa quotes Dawkins from a debate in Wellington, New Zealand:

When I lie on my back and look up at the Milky Way on a clear night and see the vast distance of space and reflect that these are also vast differences of time as well, when I look at the Grand Canyon and see the strata going down, down, down, through periods of time when the human mind can’t comprehend. I’m overwhelmingly filled with a sense of, almost worship [...] it’s a feeling of a sort of abstract gratitude that I am alive to appreciate these wonders. When I look down a microscope it’s the same feeling: I’m grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders.⁶

Elsewhere, Dawkins even claims that “we have cause to give thanks for our highly improbable existence, and the law-like evolutionary process that gave rise to it.”⁷

Nagasawa argues that this optimism, here expressed by Dawkins, is difficult to hold consistently when one also recognises the suffering inherent in the evolutionary process. Dawkins himself is known for recognising this unpleasant process. In his book *River Out of Eden*, he clearly has this process in mind when writing that:

During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease.⁸

Commenting on Dawkins, Robert Francescotti also describes the brutality of the fundamental process that guides our world forward as follows:

³ Some so-called open theists would say that God is not all-knowing and some process-theists would argue that God is not almighty, but this is at least how I define the title “God” in this particular article.

⁴ Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists,” 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶ Dawkins, “Atheism is the New Fundamentalism.”

⁷ Dawkins, “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

⁸ Dawkins, *River out of Eden*, 132.

The evolutionary machinery of natural selection currently causes much animal pain and suffering and no doubt had done so long before humans appeared on the scene – with the first mammals predating *Homo sapiens* for over 200 million years, and the first vertebrates appearing during the Cambrian period more than 500 million years ago. We seem to have, as Darwin describes, “the suffering of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time” – cruel works of nature indeed!⁹

It is clearly difficult to both be thankful and see the world as overall good while also recognising that the system driving or guiding our world forward is, in a sense, inherently bad and seems to be gratuitous. Indeed, Nagasawa emphasises that this cruel system is nomologically necessary for our very existence.¹⁰ Thus, existential optimism is difficult to uphold in the light of systemic suffering. Since Nagasawa does not refer to God, he has therefore successfully presented, and drawn our attention to, a new problem of suffering that cuts across the theism and atheism divide.¹¹

Moreover, in a response to Andrew Gleeson, Nagasawa also emphasises that even though the problem he presents includes the notion of “existential optimism,” the problem is a theoretical rather than an existential one.¹² Indeed, he explicitly puts forward the problem in terms of inconsistency. He wonders “[h]ow can you consistently say that I am glad to be alive while also acknowledging that my existence depends on a historical injustice which I think should never have happened?”¹³

More precisely, we can recognise that there seems to be a contradiction between the value judgement expressed by (1), which we stated as follows:

(1) The world is overall good.

And the following proposition:

(2) There is systemic suffering in our world.

However, there is no formal contradiction between (1) and (2), only an apparent one.¹⁴ Yet since (2) does not refer to a single event or case of suffering, but rather to suffering inherent in the fundamental process of evolution, the existence of systemic suffering at least seems to render the world overall bad. The general idea here is that even though something seems to be good, if one just looks a bit closer one would see that underlying the good parts of the world there is a bad biological system linked to unfair competition and cruelty. Furthermore, there is clearly a contradiction between (1) and the following judgement:

(3) The world is overall bad.

The value judgement expressed by (3) would be an essential part of what might be called existential pessimism.

Interestingly, Nagasawa argues, I think rightly that theists have greater metaphysical resources than atheists when trying to resolve the *apparent inconsistency* between (1) and (2). This is because the theistic world view includes not only the natural world but also the supernatural realm (heaven is perhaps the first thing that comes to mind), whereas atheists can only allude to the natural world. Nevertheless, if the inconsistency cannot be shown to be merely apparent when one also considers the problem from the perspective of a theistic and atheistic world view, then the only alternative seems to be to conclude (3) and thus not endorse existential optimism but rather the opposite – existential pessimism.

⁹ Francescotti, “The Problem of Animal Pain and Suffering,” 113.

¹⁰ Without natural selection our (or our counterparts) existence would, at least, be very different than it is today. For a thorough explanation of this law-like necessity, see Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists,” 159.

¹¹ Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists,” 156–7.

¹² Nagasawa, “Replies by Nagasawa,” 173.

¹³ Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists,” 159.

¹⁴ Nagasawa explicitly uses the expression “apparent incompatibility.” See Nagasawa, “The Problem of Evil for Atheists,” 156.

3 The sceptical response

It is true that since the problem presented by Nagasawa is one of apparent inconsistency, one only needs to find a proposition which in conjunction with (2) entails (1). However, I think it is important to recognise that whichever proposition or set of propositions is put forward to dissolve the apparent contradiction between “existential optimism” and “systemic suffering,” must, if combined with systemic suffering, suggest that it is probable (more likely than not) that the world is overall good anyway. It is indeed difficult to be optimistic about and thankful for anything at all if one also believes that that which one is optimistic about is true. In short, even though the problem is presented as one of inconsistency, it is actually, in a sense, a probabilistic problem.

Consequently (and interestingly), even though it is presented as a problem of inconsistency, for theists Nagasawa’s new problem at first glance falls quite nicely into the subcategory known as the “probabilistic problems of suffering.” In other words, if the standard theistic and probabilistic problem of suffering (suffering inherent in evolution) is solved, then Nagasawa’s problem would also be solved. More precisely, to show that there is no contradiction between (1) and (2), theists need to come up with a greater good that can figure in a reason God has for creating a world governed by an evolutionary process that leads to the suffering of innumerable animals, and this must not only be a possible reason that God might have; it has to be a probable one.

Arguably, and with respect to theism, the most common response to probabilistic problems of suffering is to allude to the position known as sceptical theism. Typically, a sceptical theist would argue that we cannot say, with any probability, that there are no greater goods that can figure in a reason God has for permitting seemingly gratuitous suffering (in this case systemic suffering). Regardless of how things seem, it would not be surprising if there were such a greater good beyond our ken, so to speak. The sceptical theist Michael Bergmann argues that such a response to the probabilistic problems of suffering follow from at least the following sceptical theses (ST):

- (ST1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- (ST2) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- (ST3) We have no good reasons for thinking that the entailment relations between the possible goods and the permission of the possible evils we know of are representative of all such entailments that there are.
- (ST4) We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.¹⁵

Bergmann claims that (ST1)–(ST4) are commonsensical and in no sense excessively sceptical. I think he is right and I have defended his view elsewhere,¹⁶ but for now just notice the modest formulation “We have no good reason for thinking.” This suggests that were we to be given such a reason we would, or at least should, change our mind. But short of that, (ST1)–(ST4) do appear to constitute a good starting point.

Now, none of the theses include a reference to theism. They are world view neutral in the sense that they are acceptable to both theists and naturalistic atheists. Bergmann even states that ST1–ST4 “easily” can be divorced from the acceptance of theism.¹⁷ This means that the theses can also be used by atheist, the only difference being that atheists would not appeal to God when using the theses to respond to the existential problem of systemic suffering. They would simply claim that given the theses one cannot say

¹⁵ Bergmann, “Commonsense Sceptical Theism,” 11–2.

¹⁶ Jonbäck, *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*, 53–74.

¹⁷ Bergmann, “Sceptical Theism and Rowe’s New Evidential Argument from Evil,” 2.

with any probability that systemic suffering is necessary for a greater good or greater goods that would render the world positive overall.

Unfortunately, when we take a closer look at what (ST1)–(ST4) actually entail, we see that while they can be used by theists to defeat standard (say Rowe-style) probabilistic arguments from suffering with the conclusion that God probably does not exist they cannot be used by neither theists or atheists as a solution to the existential problem of systemic suffering. The scepticism the theses put forward is about us having representative knowledge with respect to possible goods and evils. Not knowing whether or not our knowledge is representative, we cannot make probability claims about the overall value of the world. In other words, only the following judgement seems to follow:

(4) The overall value of the world is inscrutable.

However, we need to recall that what is needed to be existentially optimistic, despite the existence of systemic suffering, is not that the overall value of the world is inscrutable, but the stronger claim that the world is probably overall good despite systemic suffering. Again, a necessary condition for being existentially optimistic is that it is more likely than not that the world is overall good. In other words, claiming that the overall value of the world is inscrutable is not enough. This finding is interesting since the scepticism that (ST1)–(ST4) present is so frequently used to refute standard arguments from suffering against the existence of a theistic God. On the other hand, things might change if we add to the scepticism embodied in (ST1)–(ST4) a specific world view.

4 Adding a world view

As the term sceptical theism suggests, Bergmann actually presents the position as consisting of two components. The first component is the scepticism presented in (ST1)–(ST4) and the second is just theism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the latter component is often ignored, as it is the former that is used to refute standard probabilistic arguments from suffering against belief in God. However, with respect to the existential problem of systemic suffering it might be important to see whether things change if we also consider the world view of theism, and perhaps also what happens when the scepticism in (ST1)–(ST4) is considered in conjunction with naturalistic atheism instead of theism. Recall that Nagasawa thinks that theists have better metaphysical (world view-related) resources for solving his problem than atheist who do not believe that there is anything beyond the natural world.

It is in my view fairly easy to show that theists are in a better position here, even a much better position than Nagasawa suggests. In fact, to use the words of Jimmy Alfonso Licon, theism serves as a “metaphysical guaranty” against gratuitous suffering.¹⁸ This can be established by considering the following argument, which we can call “the goodness argument:”

- (i) God exists.
- (ii) If God exists, there is no suffering unless it is necessary for a greater good.

Therefore:

- (iii) There is no gratuitous suffering.

Obviously, theists would accept (i), and (ii) follows from the definition of God; that is to say, from the following three world view-related premises:

- (iv) A good God does not want suffering unless it is necessary for a greater good.
- (v) An all-powerful God can make sure that there is no suffering that is not necessary for a greater good.
- (vi) An all-knowing God is aware of all suffering that exists in the world.

¹⁸ Licon, “Aspirational Theism and Gratuitous Suffering,” 6.

We may conclude that if we accept theism, systemic suffering is necessary for a greater good.¹⁹ Indeed, given the existence of a perfectly good, all-powerful and all-knowing God, it is not only the case that systemic suffering is not gratuitous, but using the same sort of argument even the value of the whole world is overall positive and good despite systemic suffering. In other words, on theism, the following value judgement seems true:

(5) The world is overall good despite systemic suffering.

So given theism *on its own* the world is actually overall good, despite the existence of systemic suffering.

Now what follows if we combine theism with the scepticism in (ST1)–(ST4) is not that the value of the world is inscrutable. What follows is the following reformulation of (5):

(5*) The world is overall good and the goods outweighing systemic suffering are either beyond our ken or within our ken.

To elaborate, (ST1)–(ST2) entail that it would not be surprising if there were goods beyond our ken which make the world overall good, despite systemic suffering. ST4 entails that it would not be surprising if there were complex states of affairs within our ken which render the world overall good despite systemic suffering (perhaps we are just making imprecise value judgements). In addition, “the goodness argument” establishes that, assuming theism, either the latter or former entailment reflects how things really are. In other words, the goods that render the world overall good are either beyond our ken or within our ken, or perhaps it is a combination of the two.

However, when we instead combine naturalistic atheism with the scepticism presented in (ST1)–(ST4), nothing really interesting happens. Atheists deny the existence of a perfectly good, all-powerful and all-knowing God. Thus, they cannot formulate anything like “the goodness argument.”

Nevertheless, an atheist who accepts (ST1)–(ST4) could at least settle for what we might call “existential hope.” Someone who is existentially hopeful does not believe that it is more likely than not that the world is overall good but instead hopes that the world is overall good. The question now is whether such existential hope is consistent with systemic suffering.

It may be recognised that whichever proposition or set of propositions is put forward to dissolve the apparent contradiction between “existential hope” and “systemic suffering,” must, if combined with systemic suffering, suggest that it is possible that the world is overall good anyway. Indeed, it is difficult to hope for anything at all if the thing one hopes for does not at least constitute a possibility.²⁰ However, one no longer needs to show that the world is probably overall good despite the existence of systemic suffering, which one would have to show with respect to existential optimism.

Moreover, if this is recognised, then (ST1)–(ST4) show that it is at least possible that the world is overall good. Recall that the value judgement in (4), according to which the value of the world is inscrutable, followed from those theses. In addition, if the value of the world is inscrutable then hope is at least possible.²¹ A sceptical atheist can thus have existential hope, but they cannot be existentially optimistic. Interestingly, sceptical atheism does not suggest existential pessimism either. A necessary condition for existential pessimism is that one thinks that the world is probably overall bad. However, if the value of the world is inscrutable, no probability judgement either positive or negative is really justified.

¹⁹ “The goodness argument” is a version of what William Rowe calls “the indirect procedure” for answering his evidential argument from evil against the existence of God. See Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 339. When using it as a response to that argument, the theist needs to give reasons for believing (i) that are stronger than the support for its denial. Otherwise, one would just beg the question. Here, however, we are considering whether theists are in a better position than naturalists when answering the existential problem of systemic evil. When doing that we are just considering the world view-related resources for answering that argument not the evidential support for their independent world views.

²⁰ According to, for example, Carl-Johan Palmqvist, the orthodox view is that hope is analysed in terms of epistemic possibility and desirability. See Palmqvist, “Analysing Hope: The Live Possibility Account,” 1.

²¹ More precisely, it is epistemically possible in the sense that nothing we know of serves as a straightforward contradiction to the proposition that the value of the world is overall good, which would imply that hope is a possible attitude to have.

5 Objections

There is a fairly extensive literature about sceptical theism and in particular on whether the scepticism of (ST1)–(ST4) entails overly sceptical views. Here I do not have time to evaluate these objections in any detail but will briefly consider whether Sceptical theism or sceptical atheism has an easier time responding to some of them.

One of the more common objections against sceptical theism, which might also count as an objection against sceptical atheism, is that the theses above invite moral scepticism or what, for example, Mark Piper calls “moral aporia.”²² According to such aporia, when in situations to relieve someone’s suffering, we are presented with the alternative of relieving suffering if it would lead to goodness being best served or refraining from relieving suffering if it would lead to goodness being best served. However, if we cannot know whether our known sample of goods are representative of the goods there are, we cannot know which of the two alternatives we should choose. We would be morally paralyzed.

As far as I can see, by basing moral choices on something other than inductive reasoning from a known sample of goods and evils, one can avoid moral scepticism and thus avoid situations of moral aporia. Here we uncover a potential world view-related advantage that one might think sceptical theists have. It is not uncommon that theists base their moral decisions on revelation, for example, on divine commandments.²³ Unfortunately (for sceptical theists), the question now is why theists who accept (ST1)–(ST4) should even trust God’s supposed commandments at all. If God exists, perhaps there is a greater good involved in providing theists false commandments. Moreover, given the scepticism the sceptical theists endorse, they are completely in the dark about how probable or improbable it is that there is such a greater good. Indeed, by adding the belief that God exists to the endorsement of (ST1)–(ST4), it might be very difficult to stop not only scepticism about divine commandments but also scepticism about any assertions or promises from God. William Rowe writes:

Skeptical theists choose to ride the trolley car of skepticism [...] But once on that trolley car it may not be easy to prevent that skepticism from also undercutting any reason they may suppose they may have for thinking that God will provide them and the worshipping faithful with life everlasting in his presence.²⁴

Indeed, the trolley car of scepticism might run in to even worse kinds of scepticism. Ian Wilks, for example, argues that even if we have astronomical evidence suggesting that God did not create a world in which the Sun orbits the Earth, a sceptical theist must accept the following scenario:

There may be so much astronomical evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy involved in creating the world in such a way that it is orbited by the sun.²⁵

Presumably, such a strategy would involve the realization of a greater good, and (again) since we have no reason to believe that the goods we know are representative of the goods there are, we are in the dark about the reality of such a possible divine strategy.

There are quite many arguments along the above lines, but all I will notice here is that these arguments, are only problematic for sceptical theists. Perhaps sceptical theists have counterarguments suggesting that God would not deceive us even in order to realize a greater goods, but the point is that sceptical atheists do not even have to deal with these arguments.

So even if sceptical theism is applicable to the existential argument from systemic evil while sceptical atheism is not, sceptical theism has more work to do when defending the view itself than does sceptical atheism.

²² See Piper, “Skeptical Theism and The Problem of Moral Aporia,” 72.

²³ See, for example, Bergmann and Rea, “In Defence of Skeptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy,” 244–5.

²⁴ Rowe, “Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism and The Problem of Evil,” 91.

²⁵ Wilks, “Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability,” 73.

However, before I offer my conclusion, I would like to point out that sceptical atheism might have another interesting problem to tend to. The scepticism in (ST1)–(ST4) undercuts standard Rowe-style arguments from evil against the existence of God and in doing so they undermine atheism itself. In other words, if endorsing the scepticism referred to, they lose important arguments for their atheism.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Nagasawa has presented a new problem of suffering, which shows that there might be a contradiction between the following propositions:

(1) The world is overall good.

And

(2) There is systemic suffering in our world.

That is to say, there seems to be a contradiction between the value judgement expressed by existential optimism and the existence of suffering inherent in the process of evolution. There seems to be such a contradiction here because evolution is a system responsible for the suffering of innumerable animals and at the same time nomologically necessary for their existence. That is to say, given the systemic suffering the following value judgement *seems* to be true:

(3) The world is overall bad.

Since the problem does not refer to God, this is a problem for both theists and naturalistic atheists (at least if they endorse existential optimism).

I have shown that the scepticism presented in (ST1)–(ST4) cannot be used to solve the problem of systemic suffering since it only entails that:

(4) The overall value of the world is inscrutable.

In order to show that it is possible to be existentially optimistic, one needs to show that the world probably is overall good despite systemic suffering. It is not enough to show that the value of the world is inscrutable. However, in conjunction with theism the world seems to be overall good, since a theistic God serves as a metaphysical guarantee against gratuitous suffering. Thus, I claimed that given theism the following proposition is true:

(5) The world is overall good despite systemic suffering.

This is what the “goodness argument” was intended to show. Additionally, the following reformulation of (5) followed when theism was combined with the scepticism in (ST1)–(ST4):

(5*) The world is overall good and either the goods outweighing systemic suffering are beyond our ken or within our ken.

Moreover, I claimed that combining the scepticism in (ST1)–(ST4) with atheism does not make things better for the atheists, since atheists cannot formulate anything like “the goodness argument.” I concluded that sceptical atheism is unable to solve the problem of systemic suffering. However, I went on to claim that a sceptical atheist could at least settle for what might be called “existential hope,” which I defined as just hoping that the world is overall good. A necessary condition for such hope is that it is at least (epistemically) possible that the world is overall good, and if the value of the world is inscrutable as suggested by (4) then such a possibility seems to exist. Nothing we know contradicts this being the case. I ended by considering whether sceptical theism or sceptical atheism has an easier time responding to some standard argument against (ST1–ST4). I argued that while sceptical theism is applicable to the existential argument

from systemic evil while sceptical atheism is not. Sceptical theism has more work to do when defending the view itself than does sceptical atheism.

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