

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 38 | Issue 4

Article 3

10-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Kahane, Guy (2021) "Should Atheists Wish That There Were No Gratuitous Evils?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 38: Iss. 4, Article 3.

DOI: [10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.4.3](https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.4.3)

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol38/iss4/3>

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SHOULD ATHEISTS WISH THAT THERE WERE NO GRATUITOUS EVILS?

Guy Kahane

Many atheists argue that because gratuitous evil exists, God (probably) doesn't. But doesn't this commit atheists to wishing that God *did* exist, and to the pro-theist view that the world would have been better had God existed? This doesn't follow. I argue that if all that evil still remains but is just no longer gratuitous, then, from an atheist perspective, that wouldn't have been better. And while a counterfactual from which that evil is literally absent would have been impersonally better, it wouldn't have been better *for* anyone, not even for those who suffered such evils.

We inhabit a world which contains a staggering amount of suffering. Atheists argue that this evil is reason to think there is no God. Some atheists hold that such evil is logically incompatible with the existence of a supremely good, omnipotent, and omniscient being.¹ Others concede that God may have sufficient moral reasons to permit at least some instances of evil. But these atheists, and many theists, still agree that if there is, or were, a perfectly good God, He wouldn't permit the occurrence of *gratuitous* evil—evil that “could have been prevented without thereby losing some greater good or preventing some evil equally bad or worse.”² These atheists and theists agree that

(1) If God exists (or had existed) there would be no gratuitous evil.

Atheists and many theists also agree that a great deal of the evil that we find around us *seems* utterly gratuitous.³ These theists think that this is just an appearance—since God does exist, He must have perfectly good reasons to allow such evil to occur. This is what atheists deny: they hold that things are (or likely to be) as they appear and that we should therefore conclude that God doesn't exist.

¹Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*.

²Rowe, “The Problem of Evil.” See also Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, “Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?”

³Though skeptical theists often deny that we can even say that some evils *seem* gratuitous.



I will be concerned here with another thing on which many atheists and theists would agree. Lougheed writes that “[e]veryone could. . . agree that no gratuitous evil is good.”⁴ Put slightly differently, the claim is that

(2) It would be *better* if there weren’t (or hadn’t been) any gratuitous evil.

We should therefore ardently wish that this were (or is) the case. Of the multiple theist, agnostic, and atheist authors who have explicitly considered the matter, I’m not aware of anyone who rejects (2). In fact, (2) is widely assumed to be so blindingly obvious so as to require no defense.⁵ Licon goes even further when he writes that:

“[I]f we had a button that when pressed would eliminate all gratuitous suffering from the world (while leaving everything of value intact), it is difficult to imagine that anyone, except perhaps sociopaths, would think that they lacked a strong moral pro tanto reason to press it.”

Licon’s rhetoric certainly raises the stakes. But I’ll nevertheless argue that things aren’t so straightforward. We shall see that the idea of a world without gratuitous evil can refer to two very different possibilities. Licon, Lougheed, and most other authors take this possibility to involve a world that contains all the horrendous evil we see around us, but where that evil isn’t gratuitous. We shall see, however, that it is hard to explain why atheists should regard that as better. A more attractive way of interpreting this possibility involves the literal removal of all that evil. But this counterfactual, while itself obviously better, wouldn’t have been better *for* anyone.

The No Gratuitous Evil Argument

The argument we shall be considering can be set as follows:

The No Gratuitous Evil Argument (NGEA)

(A) No Gratuitous Evil (NGE): God will permit an evil to occur only for the sake of obtaining a greater, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a greater, otherwise-unpreventable evil.⁶

(B) Our world contains a great deal of evil that would count as gratuitous if God doesn’t exist.

⁴Lougheed, *The Axiological Status of Theism*, 22.

⁵I accepted (2) in Kahane, “Should We Want God to Exist?” Others who accept it include Kraay and Dragos, “On Preferring God not to Exist”; Kraay, “An Invitation to the Axiology of Theism,” 8, 15; Tooley, “Axiology: Theism Versus Widely Accepted Monotheisms”; Wielenberg, “The Absurdity of Life in a Christian Universe”; Betenson, “Recasting Anti-Theism.” This claim is central to Penner and Arbour, “Arguments From Evil and Evidence for Pro-theism” and Licon, “Aspirational Theism,” though Licon is concerned with the narrower question of whether we should hope that God *does* exist.

⁶I take this formulation from Kraay and Dragos, “On Preferring God not to Exist”; see also Kraay, “An Invitation to the Axiology of Theism.”

By contrast,

(C) If God exists (or had existed), there would be no gratuitous evil. [From A]

(D) A world without gratuitous evil is better, in one important respect, than a world that contains a great deal of gratuitous evil.

Therefore,

(E) If God exists (or had existed) then the world would be better, in one important respect, than if God doesn't exist (or hadn't existed). [From B, C, D]⁷

As I wrote above, most atheists and many theists accept (A)/NGE, and I will just assume it in what follows. Now some theists reject it.⁸ But if God's existence wouldn't mean that there is no gratuitous evil, then obviously God's existence cannot be claimed to be better on that count. So, we can set aside such views here.⁹ Premise (B) is also widely accepted, assuming the definition of gratuitous evil that I offered earlier.¹⁰ And (C) simply follows from (A). So, for our purposes, (D) is the critical premise. As we saw, it is widely accepted and certainly *sounds* very plausible.

The NGEA supports an axiological claim about a respect in which God's existence would be better compared to His non-existence. It supports what, in the current debate on the axiology of theism, is referred to as *narrow impersonal pro-theism*.¹¹ *Pro-theism* is the view that God's existence would be better (the contrary view, that God's existence would be worse, is known as anti-theism). *Narrow pro-theism* makes claims about certain ways in which God's existence would be better; such claims leave it open that there may also be downsides of God's existence that outweigh these benefits. *Wide pro-theism* claims that God's existence is *overall* better than His non-existence—better when we take into account *all* benefits and costs. Finally, *impersonal pro-theism* claims that God's existence would

⁷In Kahane, "Is Anti-Theism Incoherent?" I criticise a *formal* argument purporting to show that (E) is directly entailed by (A)/NGE (see e.g., Kraay and Dragos, "On Preferring God not to Exist"). By contrast, the argument I'm considering here revolves around (D), a substantive value claim.

⁸See, for example, Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil"; van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*; Almeida, *Freedom, God, and Worlds*.

⁹Though I suspect that some of these authors still want to say that (i) God's existence would mean that there is *less* gratuitous evil compared to His non-existence; and (ii) although some evil would remain gratuitous even if God exists, God's justification in allowing that evil nevertheless still relates to a greater good (e.g., free will) and, in virtue of that, that gratuitous evil could still be claimed to be better compared to its godless counterpart. My main argument here, I believe, also applies to such a view.

¹⁰Even skeptical theists who deny that we should even describe actual evils as seeming to be gratuitous presumably still hold that, *if* God doesn't exist, many of these *would* be gratuitous. Notice that (B) is a claim about atheism when applied to the world around us; we can certainly conceive of godless (if perhaps supernatural) worlds containing no gratuitous evil (see Kahane, "If There is a Hole"; Loughheed, *The Axiological Status of Theism*, 184).

¹¹Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?"; Kraay, "An Invitation"; Loughheed, *The Axiological Status of Theism*; Kraay, *The Axiology of Theism*.

make the world as a whole better, whereas *personal* pro-theism claims that it would make the lives of individuals better.¹²

Since the *NGEA* focuses on one way in which God's existence might be better, it can only establish narrow pro-theism. However, I suspect that for many people, the supposed downsides of God's existence—say, loss of privacy—would be easily outweighed by the good of there being no gratuitous evil. So, the further step to wide pro-theism may be small.¹³ And the *NGEA* supports only *impersonal* pro-theism since *NGE* is silent on whether, when God permits some evil to an individual, the relevant great goods thereby achieved (or evil thereby prevented) relate to the very same individual, or indeed to anyone else. However, on most ways of fleshing out *NGE*, many individuals will benefit from these evils being permitted, supporting at least a restricted form of *personal* pro-theism. And we'll later consider a patient-centred reading of *NGE* which could support an even stronger form of personal pro-theism.

The *NGEA* is attractive in a further way. Some pro-theist arguments appeal to value claims that those attracted to anti-theism would reject—say, the superlative good of a relationship with a divine being. But even hardcore atheists are horrified by the idea of utterly gratuitous evil. Penner and Arbour say something even stronger. They argue that since most atheists accept some version of the Argument from Evil, they should find it hardest to reject the *NGEA*. Because of all the seemingly gratuitous evil we observe, atheists conclude that God doesn't exist. But this seems to commit them to thinking it would be much better if God *did* exist—and therefore to deeply regret that He doesn't.¹⁴ As Penner and Arbour write, one "might find arguments from evil or anti-theism compelling, but adopting one precludes the other."¹⁵ Since it's largely (perhaps exclusively) atheists who are attracted to anti-theism, the *NGEA* has considerable dialectical force.

Two Ways of Removing Gratuitous Evil

I wrote that most authors assume that (D), the claim that a world without gratuitous evil is better, is just obvious. But its plausibility depends on what possibility is referred to by the subsequent of the conditional

(C) If God exists (or had existed), there would be no gratuitous evil.

The problem is that this subsequent is ambiguous. It can refer to a world from which evils like genocide, torture, and rape are absent, or it may refer to a world that *still* contains such horrors yet where they are no longer gratuitous.

¹²Notice that impersonal value *doesn't* exclude the value of persons and their lives: these also contribute to the overall value of the world.

¹³See Penner and Arbour, "The Problem of Evil."

¹⁴Penner and Arbour, "The Problem of Evil."

¹⁵Penner and Arbour, "The Problem of Evil," 199; see also Tooley, "Axiology: Theism Versus Widely Accepted Monotheisms."

Theists must interpret (C) in this second way since they of course hold that the antecedent is true. If they also accept (A)/NGE, and don't attempt to absurdly claim that the great evils we see around us are illusory, then when they assert that the world contains no gratuitous evils, they mean that while all these great evils exist, none of them is in fact gratuitous. When agnostics consider the possibility that God exists, it's also natural to take them to have in mind the very same possibility that theists take to be true. Atheists, however, believe that the antecedent is false, and for them the consequent is a counterfactual. That counterfactual might still refer to the very same possibility that theists take to actually be true, and which agnostics think might be true. Call this possibility "This-Worldly Theism": a version of the actual world, but with, say, chattel slavery and the Black Plague somehow necessary for, or justified by, a greater good. However, when atheists reason from (C) to the non-existence of God, they assume that had God existed, *we wouldn't* see many or all of the great evils we see around us.¹⁶ That suggests a rather different counterfactual: a world from which things like genocide, slavery, murder, torture, and rape are simply absent. Call this "Other-Worldly Theism."¹⁷

Return to Licon's imaginary button that would remove all gratuitous evil. This could refer to literally *removing* horrors such as the Holocaust or chattel slavery. It does sound morally insane to refuse to do that. But Licon actually has in mind the "this worldly" reading on which all those horrors remain even after we press the button—doing so just adds surroundings that mean that this evil is no longer gratuitous.¹⁸ And it is far less clear why *that* is supposed to be such a great thing.

In this paper, I will largely interpret (C), and thus also (D), as referring to what I just called This Worldly Theism (TWT). There are several reasons for this focus.¹⁹

First, this is also the main focus of the current debate about the axiology of theism.²⁰ One advantage of focusing on TWT is that it allows theists, agnostics, and atheists to discuss the axiological properties of the same pair of possibilities; it wouldn't impress atheists, for example, if theists argue that it would be worse if God didn't exist because, if that were the case, there would be nothing. And since these possibilities are constructed around features of the actual world that remain broadly constant whether

¹⁶See Tooley, "Axiology: Theism Versus Widely Accepted Monotheisms."

¹⁷For further discussion of this distinction, see Kahane (forthcoming), which is something of a companion piece to the present paper, though it is not specifically focused on pro-theism or, indeed, theism.

¹⁸Kraay, "An Invitation," 8.

¹⁹A further reason is that I already discuss Other Worldly Theism at length in Kahane, "Is the Universe Indifferent?"

²⁰A focus on This-Worldly Theism is defended by Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?"; Klaas and Dragos, "On Preferring"; Mawson, "An Agreeable Answer to a Pro-theism/Anti-theism Question." This focus is assumed by most other authors considering such axiological questions. The same applies to Lougheed, *The Axiological Status of Theism* since he understands such axiological questions to relate to *epistemic* possibilities.

theism or atheism are true, they are relatively well-defined; by contrast, it's rather hard to say what Other-Worldly Theism would be like.²¹

Second, this focus also reflects, I believe, the most common way that atheists (outside of philosophical discussion of the problem of evil) understand counterfactual conditionals of the form "If God had existed, then. . .," especially when these involve some evaluative or affective claim. For example, when those who lost their faith experience the world as chilly and depressing, they are obviously contrasting this now godless world with the way they had previously *thought* the world was like. And when Thomas Nagel expresses the contrary anti-theist sentiment that he "doesn't want the world to be like that," it seems clear that the world he refers to is *this* world—i.e., TWT.

Third, and perhaps more importantly, nearly everyone who has endorsed (D) either explicitly has TWT in mind²² or seems to assume that this distinction doesn't matter much.²³ And I suspect that many will find (D) extremely plausible *even* when applied to TWT. Draper, for example, reports that he is "horrified by the possibility that the suffering of innocents has no purpose and no compensation."²⁴

I will argue, however, that it is hard to see why atheists should accept (D) under that interpretation.

The Value of Non-Gratuitousness

So, we're considering the axiological implications of a world which contains no gratuitous evil when that world is understood to be much like the world we find around us—a world containing the suffering of sentient beings over millions of years of evolution, the Black Plague, slavery, the Holocaust, and so forth. This evil is still there. It's just that none of it is gratuitous. I'll refer to the parallel atheist world, in which that evil is gratuitous, as This-Worldly Atheism (TWA). We are asking whether this difference makes TWT better than TWA.

²¹TWT can also seem a nearer possible world than the otherworldly alternative. But the argument of this paper suggests that this is a mistaken impression.

²²For example, Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" and Klaas and Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence" explicitly understand (D) to refer to TWT, as does Loughheed *The Axiological Status of Theism*, who is concerned with epistemic possibility. Licon must also refer to TWT since he is asking whether we should hope that God *does* exist (Licon, "Aspirational Theism").

²³Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" 680n11, Kraay, "An Invitation," 8 and Penner and Arbour, "Problem of Evil," 197 mention what I call Other-Worldly Theism in passing but seem to think it makes no difference. An important exception is Tooley, "Axiology: Theism Versus Widely Accepted Monotheisms," who focuses on Other-Worldly Theism. But even Tooley doesn't really deny that TWT would be better, in this respect; he just claims that Other-Worldly Theism would be *even better*.

²⁴Draper, "Seeking But Not Believing." Draper is an agnostic who thinks that the problem of evil is the greatest challenge to theism. But I'm sure that many atheists share this sentiment.

To answer our question, we need to compare evils that we assume to be gratuitous with counterparts that are exactly alike yet non-gratuitous. To bring out what is at stake, I will, with some trepidation, largely focus on an example of a truly horrendous evil, the Holocaust.

If we accept that

NGE: God will permit an evil to occur only for the sake of obtaining a greater, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a greater, otherwise-unpreventable evil.

then in TWT,

(3) God permissibly allowed the Holocaust to happen only because it was necessary either (i) to obtain a good great enough to outweigh that evil or (ii) to prevent an even worse evil.

So, in TWT the horror of the Holocaust remains. It's just that while in TWA all these people suffered and died in vain, in TWT that isn't so. And that certainly does *sound* much better.

Now implicit in NGE is a deontic claim, a claim about what God may permissibly allow to happen; but that permissibility is grounded in two axiological patterns (bringing about a greater good or preventing a greater evil). We're not interested here in whether this deontic claim is true but in its axiological implications.

In exploring these implications, we need to distinguish three aspects of NGE, each of which could potentially make a distinctive difference in value. These are:

Permissibly Allowed Evil. That an evil is *permissibly allowed* to occur by a good agent who could have prevented it;
 Axiologically Offset Evil. That this evil will be *offset* by a greater good or the absence of a greater evil;
 Necessary Evil. That this evil will occur only *because* its occurrence is a *necessary condition* for that greater good or prevention of a greater evil.

I will consider each in turn.²⁵

Permissibly Allowed Evil

If God exists, then

(4) The Holocaust could have been prevented by a benevolent agent who acted *morally permissibly* in choosing to allow it to occur.

When we ask whether (4) would be better than the atheist alternative (in which there were just the malevolent perpetrators and indifferent

²⁵Notice that even theists who reject NGE will typically accept *Permissibly Allowed Evil* and *Axiologically Offset Evil*. My discussion of these two claims thus applies to those views as well. These theists do reject *Necessary Evil* but they typically accept that the *possibility* of the evil in question is necessary for that great good (because e.g., free will makes possible evil choices). What I will say about *Necessary Evil* applies, I believe, with even greater force to these views.

bystanders) we should bear in mind that even if such an agent had existed, the evil of the malevolent perpetrators of the Holocaust would remain in place and add to the badness of the world. If such horrific acts are intrinsically bad, then this badness is held fixed between TWT and TWA; in fact, on theist accounts on which natural evil is due to malevolent supernatural agents, TWT contains a great deal *more* evil of this sort. All that (4) directly adds is a further, morally permissible choice. But merely acting permissibly, let alone permissibly *omitting* to act, needn't make the world any better—if only it were that easy to add good to the world. Supererogatory acts involving great sacrifice may perhaps add further value to the world. But I find it hard to see (4) as counting as such an act. If anything, having to allow such evil to occur when you can prevent it seems bad rather than good.²⁶

Now it's true that many religious victims of the Holocaust, and other theists, deeply wished there was some way that, despite appearances, (4) were true. But that is because they wanted to reconcile the horrors they were experiencing with their belief in God, not because (3) would have been independently better than the godless alternative.

Axiologically Offset Evil

So, God's permissibly allowing evil to happen doesn't, on its own, make TWT better than TWA. What is more likely to make it better are God's moral grounds for allowing that evil. NGE entails that

(5) The Holocaust either (i) made possible a good great enough to outweigh that evil or (ii) had the Holocaust not occurred, something even worse would have happened.

If (5) is true, then all the evils we see around us, however horrendous, must be equalled or, more likely, outweighed by some greater value. And doesn't this mean that TWT must be better than TWA, in which these evils just occur without any such counterbalancing?²⁷

Now, clauses (i) and (ii) are both assumed to be ways of grounding claims such as (4)—ways of making it permissible to allow evil to occur. But their axiological upshots are rather different. If permitting an evil is supported by (i), we get what I'll call *intra-world axiological offsetting*: the evil permitted will be counterbalanced by an equal or, more plausibly, greater good *within* the world in question. So that evil, however horrific in itself, cannot make that world overall worse; and if each evil that occurs brings about a greater

²⁶But isn't a world in which an agent is acting permissibly better than one where they act impermissibly? That may be so, but this isn't the comparison we are considering—our contrast is with a world from which this agent is simply absent. Notice also that we're now considering only whether adding this permissible allowing of evil *in itself* makes a world better; we'll consider below the specific properties that, according to NGE, *make* that allowing of evil permissible. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

²⁷See Licon, "Aspirational Theism," where he appeals to "morally offset" suffering.

good, we can know a priori that the overall balance is positive. By contrast, (ii) involves only *counterfactual axiological offsetting*: it only entails a comparative claim about the value of alternatives to that world; it entails nothing about the value contained *in* this world. So unlike (i), it has no direct implications for the overall value of the world—which, in this respect, should be the same as in TWA. Moreover, when (5) asserts that it would have been worse had the Holocaust not occurred, this is intended to apply to a theist's range of possibilities. We cannot assume that this also applies to their atheist counterparts. On the contrary, atheists will insist that the multiple ways in which the Holocaust could have been avoided, had God *not* existed, would almost certainly have been monumentally better.²⁸

Thus, If NGE is realised via (ii) this entails no difference in value between TWT and TWA. Since NGE is silent on which form of offsetting will be involved in a given evil, and since it's even compatible with *all* evils occurring because of (ii), the offsetting entailed by NGE doesn't, on its own, entail *any* advantage to TWT over TWA.²⁹

Even when NGE is realised via (i), we cannot assume that this must mean that TWT is better. That's because *it cannot be ruled out that a similar offsetting will also occur, de facto, in the godless alternative*. First, for at least some goods that have been taken to justify God's permitting evils to occur, these would either *also* be present in TWA—think of the supposed good of a world governed by simple, exceptionless natural laws, or of the supposed role of evil in making moral motivation, virtue, or compassion possible—or *might* also be present in TWA—think of libertarian free will. Second, even setting this aside, it may still be that for every evil in TWA, there is, or will be at some point, some greater good that will outweigh it. We of course have no idea if that's the case because we don't know what lies in humanity's future, or what wonderful things extra-terrestrial civilizations might be achieving. But if, say, our future is very bright, containing billions of utopian years, then the horrors of early human history might be thoroughly outweighed by that immense future bliss. Now if such intra-world offsetting does occur in the TWA, that's far more likely to be accidental than by design (though we can imagine future humans who, using powerful simulations, identify each and every instance of past evil and make sure to produce some extra good that is equal or greater to it). And that does mark an important difference from the way such offsetting is achieved under NGE. But since those past evils would be outweighed all the same, that's irrelevant to the question of axiological offsetting. We'll

²⁸That's compatible with accepting that, for all we know, *some* of the ways in which the Holocaust could have been avoided would have led to an even worse outcome.

²⁹Particular accounts of how NGE applies (or could apply) to the actual world might take a stand on this issue; I'll later briefly consider some examples. But if pro-theists are appealing to some such (controversial) account then it's no longer NGE itself that's doing the work.

later consider whether this difference in the source of the offsetting might make an intrinsic value difference.³⁰

Couldn't impersonal pro-theists still appeal to the point that such offsetting is *guaranteed* under theism while highly improbable under atheism?³¹

We can understand this suggestion in two ways. On one reading, what matters is that there *is* axiological offsetting. It's just that, if atheism is true, we don't know if that's the case, while we do under theism. But that's an epistemic, not an axiological claim, and therefore cannot support (D) since for all we know theism might confer no such advantage. Such an epistemic difference might still bear on a different question, the question of whether we should *prefer* God to exist. It might be argued, in particular, that the expected value (in this respect) of theism is greater, and that this gives us a pro tanto reason to prefer theism to be true. However, even this seems doubtful. First, while we don't know if there's offsetting if atheism is true, I doubt we're in a position to say that it's *improbable* that there would be such offsetting. Second, since offsetting under theism might be merely counterfactual, we also don't know the probability that there will be intra-world offsetting under theism. So, I doubt that we can really assert that the probability of intra-world axiological offsetting is greater on theism.

Moreover, even if it were unlikely that TWA will turn out so rosy, the fact that it *might* means it's also the case that

- (6) There are possible godless naturalist worlds in which all evils are offset by greater goods.

Even if TWA isn't one of these worlds, it remains the case that, in the relevant respect, these worlds offer the same advantage as TWT. And at least for atheists, such worlds seem a more fitting focus for preference than the far more distant theistic alternative.

It is the second, axiological reading of the claim that is more relevant to our discussion. On this reading, the claim is that it's good *in itself* that axiological setting is guaranteed. So even if there is axiological offsetting in TWA, it would still lack this second-order value. But it seems far from obvious that this modal property is intrinsically valuable. Even if it is, I suspect it would offer only a modest support to pro-theism, one that could be overturned by the downsides that anti-theists associate with TWT.³²

I therefore don't think that axiological offsetting can show that it's better if an evil is non-gratuitous. There are, however, two complications. First, some of the more attractive versions of NGE require the relevant offsetting

³⁰It might be objected that if the contents of the natural world are held fixed between TWT and TWA then the kind of intra-world offsetting I described would be shared by both, but in TWT there will also be the *extra* value of the offsetting that God intends, making TWT better. I concede that this would be so under this assumption. But first, I don't see why we should accept that TWT and TWA must be exactly the same, in this respect, all the way to the heat death of the universe. Second, as mentioned above, some goods that theists take to justify the existence of evil are also present in TWA.

³¹Licon, "Aspirational Theism" emphasizes this "metaphysical guarantee."

³²I discuss this value claim in Kahane, "Is the Universe Indifferent?"

to occur *within* the lives of the suffering individuals themselves.³³ It's *very* hard to see how this could be realised in a naturalistic framework. I'll return to this later in the argument. Second, I've focused only on what follows from NGE but there are other aspects of theism that may well guarantee a priori that there will be de facto intra-world axiological offsetting in a theist world—just think of God's own immense value, and the many other goods His existence is supposed to entail. That's a fair point. But then NGE is no longer doing any work. Indeed, God's infinite value could generate such de facto intra-world offsetting even if God allowed all hell to break loose, so to speak.³⁴

Necessary Evil

I've argued that the axiological offsetting entailed by NGE needn't make TWT better, and we can anyway obtain the de facto intra-world offsetting from other implications of theism. It might be objected that what makes NGE desirable isn't such bare offsetting of evil but that on NGE evil occurs *only* because it's *necessary* to prevent a greater evil or bring about some great good. After all, as we have seen, evil might be offset only by chance, or if not by chance, only after the fact. And even if an evil leads to greater good, that (or an equivalent) good might have been realised anyway. In such cases, although the evil doesn't lead to an overall value deficit, it remains without point or meaning. The current proposal is that NGE is better because it means that all evils that occur do have a point. This takes us to the last element of NGE, the one relating to necessary evil.

As I'll understand necessary evil, there's a sense in which an evil can be necessary even if no agency is involved. When an evil is necessary to bring about a critical good, or prevent a far worse catastrophe, then an agent who can bring about that evil might be required, or at least permitted, to bring about that evil, or to not prevent it from occurring. But we can regard evil as necessary in this way even if we can't choose to bring it about or prevent it. It's enough that we know that its occurrence was necessary for some great good or meant that a greater evil was avoided.

We are asking, then, whether it's better if a given evil is also a necessary one, in this sense—whether it's better that,

(7) The Holocaust was *necessary* for some greater good to be realised, or to prevent an even greater evil.

Or the further teleological claim that,

(7') The Holocaust only occurred *because* it was necessary for some greater good to be realised, or to prevent an even greater evil.

We are asking whether these features would, in themselves, make the world better. In thinking about this suggestion, it's important not to confuse it with the familiar claim that

³³See, e.g., McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils*.

(8) Evil is much harder to bear when it is taken to have no good purpose.

Such a psychological claim about suffering is repeatedly emphasized by Nietzsche, that arch-atheist; and Victor Frankl famously made similar claims on the basis of his experience in Auschwitz.³⁵ But even if correct, (8) cannot help the pro-theist. It's a claim about the consequences of *belief* that evil has a good purpose. But in the comparison we are considering, people's beliefs are held fixed on both sides. Perhaps victims of the Holocaust who were religious believers suffered less because they believed that the horrors they were subjected to were somehow morally necessary, though that's doubtful. But if so, they suffered less whether or not God exists and NGE holds. Now perhaps people find it easier to endure evil that had a good purpose *because* they see such necessary evil as better. But whether it really is better is precisely what needs to be established.

So, we are considering the claim that

(9) INTRINSIC VALUE OF NECESSARY EVIL. Holding two evils and all surrounding first-order value fixed, if one evil was necessary for a greater good, or to prevent a greater evil, it is better than the parallel evil that wasn't thus necessary for greater value.³⁶

Preventing evil and making a great good possible again play out rather differently. Consider first prevention of evil. It can help here to consider a way in which (7') could have been true even in a godless world. At the end of WWII, the allies had the ability to bomb the railway lines leading to the extermination camps and decided, for strategic reasons, not to do so, permitting great evil to occur. That was a grave moral error. But we can imagine different circumstances in which this would have been the right choice—because, if they had bombed the railway lines, that would have put the entire war effort at risk. By assumption, this would have made a great deontic difference: turning an unforgivable mistake into a justified tragic choice. But what's generating this deontic difference is that the *nearest alternative* to the evil occurring is now *worse*. It's hard to see how that could add to the value of the (imagined) actual course of history. As if, knowing that some misfortune is coming your way, I can benefit you by making it true that if it didn't occur, things would have been even worse (say I hire an assassin to kill you if you *don't* get cancer). To be sure, if we're aware of that even worse alternative, this should change our

³⁴See Kahane, "Is Anti-Theism Coherent?" 380–381.

³⁵Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

³⁶It's important not to confuse this proposal with claims about the value of desert or of justice more generally. Someone may be subjected to an evil that is necessary in our sense without in any way deserving that evil. Now if God is permitted to allow that evil then God doesn't act unjustly in doing so but the evil itself may still involve great injustice; and a world that contains much evil that is gratuitous in our sense needn't contain any injustice. It would be better if, at least at an ultimate level, our world was just and everyone got what they deserved (though theism puts extra pressure on the already problematic idea of desert). But this is distinct from the claim about gratuitous evil that is our concern here.

attitudes toward the evil in the actual world, and toward some of the acts that enabled it. We would, for example, no longer regret the Allied commanders' choice in the bombing scenario I described. Painfully aware that things could have been even worse, we treat this kind of necessary evil with a kind of sorrowful resignation. But this change in attitudes needn't indicate any change in valuation. It reflects a change in the alternative to which we're comparing the actual world, not a change in our evaluation of the actual world.

Let us turn to the case where the evil is necessary for some greater good. In assessing such scenarios, it's important that we set aside the value of that great good. Of course, if one world contains a great good and another doesn't, the first is better—even more so if a superlative supernatural good is in question. But that tells us nothing about the value of evil being necessary. It is the superlative good that's doing the work, not the fact that evil was needed to realise it. Such superlative goods would have made TWT better regardless of the evil—if anything, the presence of the evil, even if necessary, only *reduces* the degree to which that good improves things. And such goods anyway bear only on the issue of axiological off-setting, which we've already discussed.

So even when the evil was necessary for a greater good, we should be comparing two worlds that contain the *same* first-order goods and evils. It's just that in one, the evils are necessary for the realisation of the good and in the other they aren't. Now, again, when evils are necessary for good in this way, this changes how we feel about them. At least the suffering wasn't in vain, at least it led to something good. And, if the good is great enough, we might no longer wish that the evil hadn't occurred. But do we also see the evil itself as better? This seems to me far from obvious. Moreover, even if it's better if evil at least leads to good, it seems similarly worse if *good is dependent on evil*. Perhaps, when witnessing a great evil, you might wish that at least something good will come of it. But when you consider the things you most cherish, do you really wish that they only came about because of some horrific past catastrophe? Thus, if being a necessary evil is better, this extra value might be cancelled out by the badness of good depending on evil.³⁷

Let us suppose though, for argument's sake, that it is better if evil is necessary. For this to be an interesting result, this extra value shouldn't be negligible. But if it is significant, then it follows that

- (10) In comparison to a course of history where the Holocaust is gratuitous, an alternative where the Holocaust was necessary for some great good would have been better, in itself—*setting aside the value contributed by that*

³⁷The value of achievement arguably resides in effortfully overcoming great obstacles. But this doesn't show that it's generally good for good to depend on evil. To be subjected to horrendous suffering isn't an achievement of the victim, and a project that would require subjecting others to horrific evil would not, I believe, possess value as an achievement. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to address this issue.

great good—even if in that scenario the Holocaust had involved *even more* suffering and murder.

I find this hard to accept. At the very least, this seems far from obvious. And if we reject (9) or even just (10), then I don't see how we can defend (D) in any sense worth considering.

I'll now go on to argue that, when we consider the sense in which the Holocaust would be a necessary evil in TWT, this seems not better, but much worse. Since this further argument is compatible with accepting (9) and (10), I will proceed, just for argument's sake, as if these claims are correct.

Return to my imaginary example of the allied commanders deciding not to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz. The commanders regard the horrors that they therefore allow to continue as necessary evils. Needless to say, these horrors aren't literally necessary. There are, to begin with, numerous possible worlds in which they don't occur. And many of these possibilities are also massively superior. The link between the evil and the greater evil that would otherwise occur is entirely contingent. The evil is necessary only relative to a given set of circumstances and to these agents' limited powers and knowledge. If the circumstances had been a bit different, or if these agents had greater capacities or resources, they could have prevented the evil without ending up with an even worse one.

Because of these unfortunate circumstances, the imagined allied commanders are facing a tragic choice. If their choice is correct, there is a sense in which, looking back, they needn't regret making it. They needn't since that would be to prefer the even more horrific alternative. But what they surely wish, both at the time and looking back, is that the evil weren't necessary. Not of course in the sense of wishing it had occurred pointlessly. But what they wish is that the evil was severed from the causal factors that would have led to a worse outcome. Or in scenarios where an evil was necessary for some greater good, agents, as well as spectators, wish that this good could have been obtained *without* needing that evil. In typical instances of necessary evil, these possibilities remain on the table. They are merely out of reach, or improbable.

But the sense in which an evil would be necessary to God is very different. In TWT,

(11) The Holocaust could have been prevented by an *omnipotent* benevolent agent who acted morally permissibly in choosing, out of *all* available options, to allow it to occur because it was necessary for some greater good, or prevented even greater evil.

Here, the Holocaust isn't a necessary evil in the sense that it was, tragically, the best option out of the limited range open to finite agents operating in awful circumstances outside their control. It is necessary in a much stronger sense—when *all* options are open, including, for example, the success of one of the many assassination attempts against Hitler's life, or

even Hitler becoming an obscure painter. It seems, in particular, that NGE applied to TWT implies that

(12) *All the possible theist worlds in which the Holocaust (or equivalent evil) doesn't occur (or is cut short earlier, or occurs on a smaller scale, etc.) would be worse (or at least no better) than the horrific actual course of history.*³⁸

Moreover, while it remains within God's power to prevent the Holocaust in all these ways, there is also a sense that when we conjoin NGE and (12) then, given God's nature, He will *never* bring about one of these alternative, worse scenarios; under TWT such evils therefore approach literal necessity.

Both TWT and TWA contain the Holocaust and its horrors. Once we set aside the presence of a good agent permissibly allowing the Holocaust to happen, and the offsetting of evil, then (12) seems to me to remain the key difference between these worlds. Would it be better if (12) were true? I earlier quoted Nagel saying, of the possibility that God exists, that he doesn't "want the universe to be like that." Well, I don't want the universe to be like *that*. I don't want horrors such as the Holocaust to be written, so to speak, into the very fabric of the universe. I don't want a world in which such horrors occur to be the best, or even good enough—and for all the many ways in which they could have been avoided to be even worse (or no better).

TWA is pretty bleak. It contains many horrors. If we are in TWA, we should wish that these horrors hadn't happened—that the world had been better in a vast number of ways. But it seems to me better that we *are* in a position to so wish—that the world *could* have been better in all these ways. A world in which evil is contingent, in which even when things are bleak, they needn't have been, seems to me far more attractive than a world in which such evils are necessary in the maximal way entailed by the conjunction of Theism, NGE, and TWT.

I said above that in typical cases of necessary evil, even though we sorrowfully resign ourselves to their occurrence, we also wish they weren't necessary. But, since this *isn't* possible on TWT, that is very close to saying that we should wish that TWT weren't true.

³⁸So far as I can see, (12) is simply entailed by the conjunction of NGE and TWT; notice also that it's compatible with rejecting the idea of a best possible world. Some theists might object that in the case of moral evil such as the Holocaust, it was open to the Nazis to act otherwise, and worlds in which they had are indeed superior. What would be worse, and undermine the great good of free will, is for God to intervene to prevent or block such free acts. This, however, isn't compatible with NGE. We'd need to revise it to say that what's necessary for the great good (or prevention of greater evil) is God's *allowing* the evil, if it is independently about to happen. In any event, (i) I don't think this move is available for natural evils so what I go on to say about (12) can be restated in terms of such evil; (ii) if there's also libertarian freedom in TWA then, on this picture, it's hard to see how TWT is supposed to be better—since here it's God's *permissibly allowing* the Holocaust, not the Holocaust itself, that is necessary for some greater good; and (iii) even if there's no libertarian freedom in TWA, if the pro-theist argument revolves around its value then it seems that the special status of evil under theism is no longer doing the work.

Those who are attracted by (9) and (10) are presumably impressed by the idea that

(13) *If* some evil is *going* to happen, it would be better if it at least wasn't for nothing, if it at least brought about a great good or prevented a greater evil.

And I can understand why this may seem attractive. But it's a big slide from (13) to

(14) It's better if *all* actual great evils (or equivalent ones) *had* to happen, because absolutely *all* the alternatives in which they don't occur would have been *even worse* (or at least no better).

I find nothing attractive at all in (14). As I said, I find such a world far worse than TWA. But to block the NGEA it is enough if it is no better.

Goods That Cannot be Realised Without Evil

It might be objected that the examples of necessary evil that I have focused on so far are misleading. The link between, say, bombing the rail tracks and losing the war is merely contingent. But when theists claim that evils such as the Holocaust were necessary, they typically mean that if God didn't allow these evils to occur then the relevant goods would be simply impossible to realize—the link in question isn't contingent. For example, it's argued that without facing great evils, it would be simply impossible to achieve a certain kind of moral maturity or spiritual growth, or experience deep compassion, or the "incommensurate good" of achieving the deepest kind of communion with God.³⁹ It's similarly claimed that a varied world that is governed by simple natural laws, or in which libertarian free will is realized, will contain a degree of evil. But if so, does it really make sense to complain that in TWT there aren't better alternatives where evils like the Holocaust are absent?

In reply, recall first that in considering this objection we need to set aside the value supposedly contributed by these supposed goods—if their presence in TWT is what makes it better, this has nothing to do with NGE or indeed with evil more generally. Moreover, if these goods aren't already realised in TWA then they may well involve value claims that anti-theists (or atheists more generally) reject—forgoing one main attraction of the NGEA.

Second, for this reply to work, it's not enough that we accept that, say, libertarian freedom is a great good. Even if we assume NGE, we also need to hold that:

- (i) The realization of this good really requires, not just that some evil occur, but horrific evil of the magnitude of the Holocaust;⁴⁰
- (ii) This good is so great that it outweighs such horrific evils;⁴¹

³⁹See e.g., Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*; McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils*; Stump, "The Problem of Evil."

⁴⁰Though see note 38 for discussion of views on which the good of libertarian freedom only makes possible, rather than requires, such great evil.

⁴¹This needn't be a single good—the good of free will may make possible a range of further moral goods, such as virtue.

And since NGE only states a necessary condition for God's allowing such horrors, non-consequentialists may still hold that it would be wrong for God to allow such horrors to occur *even* if it is required for the realization of such great goods. So, we still need to further add that

(iii) In TWT, it will be morally permissible for God to allow such evils to occur to secure these great goods.⁴²

So, for each such supposed good, this reply requires us to accept at least three controversial normative claims that go well beyond the bare NGE. Notice, moreover, that atheists who appeal to the Argument From Evil are already committed to rejecting (or at least to seriously doubting) at least one, if not all, of these three claims. For example, atheists either deny that libertarian free will has such great value, or that the realization of that value necessarily requires allowing great evils to happen, or that, if it does, the value gained is so great that it would justify permitting horrors such as the Holocaust to occur. Thus, even if successful in its own terms, this reply has no force for its intended audience of atheists—precisely those who were claimed to be particularly vulnerable to the NGEA.

Third, and most importantly, making evil literally metaphysically necessary for good seems to me to make things *even worse*. When I consider from outside, so to speak, the idea of a world in which the realisation of certain superlative goods necessarily depends on the occurrence of unspeakable horrors, this seems to me not to offer relief, but to make that world even more horrifying.

Alternative Moralities

If an evil happens, it can seem better if it at least serves a good purpose. It can seem better if it were a necessary rather than a pointless evil. But I've argued that this impression changes when we realise that the evil had to be necessary in a much stronger sense—that TWT is such that there are simply no better alternatives from which this (or equivalent) evil is absent.

Some pro-theists claim that when atheists argue that God doesn't exist because the evil we observe cannot be reconciled with NGE, this strongly commits them to thinking it would have been better had God existed, and NGE did hold. I have argued that insofar as this is a claim about TWT, it isn't correct. We can now dig deeper into the reason why, despite appearances, the Argument From Evil is perfectly compatible with, and indeed *reinforces*, anti-theism.

I said that atheists typically hold either that NGE cannot apply to at least some of the great evils we see around us, or that it's highly unlikely

⁴²For a rejection of several of these claims, see Schellenberg, "The Atheist's Free Will Offence."

that it could. As we just saw, to hold this view is to reject, or at least seriously doubt, the kinds of normative claims that are needed to reconcile NGE and actual evil. Many atheists don't just think that such claims are mistaken—they are repulsed by the very idea that it would be morally permissible to allow horrors such as the Holocaust. What this means is that to ask atheists to contemplate TWT is to ask them to contemplate *the possibility that some of their deepest moral and evaluative convictions are false*. And to the extent that these are confident atheists, they aren't contemplating the possibility that these convictions are *mistaken*. Rather, for them TWT describes a *counterfactual universe* that is governed by a *different* moral and axiological framework.⁴³

It should now be clearer why, when what TWT involves is spelled out, it doesn't seem so attractive to atheists: few are attracted to the idea of a universe governed by a moral framework they deem deeply mistaken. Put differently, even if TWT (internally) realises NGE, there's a sense that, for atheists, a great deal of the evil in it *is* gratuitous (in light of *their* moral framework).

Worse, it now seems as if the *NGEA*, as applied to TWT and viewed from an atheist standpoint, ultimately relies on the claim that

(15) A world is better, and should be preferred, if it contains less evil, even if this is only because the moral and axiological framework holding in it is different from the one we take to be correct.

But (15) has to be false. For consider the following:

(16) If Nazi ideology were correct, the Holocaust wouldn't have been an evil.

The idea that such a counterfactual—if such a counterfactual is even intelligible—would be better, let alone something we should long for, seems profoundly misguided.⁴⁴

Intra-Personal Axiological Offsetting

We can now address the issue of “patient-centred” NGE (PCNGE)—a version of NGE on which the overall good, or prevention of great evil, must refer to good and harm *for* the very agent who endures the given evil.⁴⁵ When discussing axiological offsetting, I conceded that it is extremely hard to see how something like this could ever be realised in TWA.

Notice, however, that since PCNGE only directly differs from NGE in the distribution of goods and evils, not their total amount, it may leave the

⁴³A question I cannot address here is whether it even makes sense to compare the value of possibilities in which different axiologies hold. Another issue is that fundamental normative claims are widely assumed to be metaphysically necessary, meaning that, from an atheist standpoint, TWT might be an impossibility. Since this worry already arises when we contemplate the possibility that God, a supposedly necessary being, doesn't exist, I set this aside here.

⁴⁴See also Kahane, “Is the Universe Indifferent?” section 7.

⁴⁵See e.g., Stump, “The Problem of Evil”; McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils*.

total amount the same. Thus, even if it gives further support for personal pro-theism, especially for those who had to endure great evils, it doesn't immediately add to the case for impersonal pro-theism.

It could, however, add to that case if also we hold that

(17) it is *impersonally* better that evils and benefits are counterbalanced in this way within each individual life, as opposed to some innocent individuals suffering greatly without compensation.

So, we are again adding a further non-obvious value premise to the argument. Suppose though we accept (17). However, even if that meant that TWT is, in this respect, impersonally better than TWA, there would still be counterfactual godless alternatives to TWA that, at least in this respect, seem even better than TWT: ones where the victims of great evil live decent lives and *aren't* subjected to such horrors in the first place.⁴⁶ As we saw, such alternatives won't be on offer if God exists and PCNGE holds—meaning that my main argument can be extended to cover PCNGE, since PCNGE still commits us to a world in which horrific evils are strongly necessary. It might seem callous to cavalierly dismiss in this way the possibility that all these victims didn't suffer in vain, and where the suffering they endured is amply compensated for. But this objection forgets that such compensation is at issue only because TWT is governed by normative principles that anti-theists are almost certain to reject. As an analogy, consider Aztec human sacrifice. In a world in which the Aztec gods really do exist and require such sacrifice, the victims of such sacrifice help to realise great cosmic goods and therefore don't die pointlessly. Let us even assume that being sacrificed to the gods is a great honor. That's how those deaths are assessed by the framework *internal* to that imagined world. But that in no way makes that world attractive to *us*, who find that framework itself deeply repugnant.

The Relationship Between Existential and Axiological Questions

Questions about the value, both absolute and comparative, of a set of possibilities should be independent of the question of which of these possibilities is actual. It's plausible that

(18) Once we individuate a pair of possibilities, and adopt a certain axiology, this should be sufficient to settle whether one is better than the other.

And many therefore assume that our take on the pro-theism/anti-theism debate should be independent on whether we believe that God exists.⁴⁷ It may therefore seem surprising that many of the claims I made were

⁴⁶It's true that if these counterfactuals are naturalist, these victims won't enjoy, say, eternal heavenly bliss. But first, the independent value of eternal heavenly bliss has nothing to do with the gratuitousness of evil, and second, such heavenly bliss can also be on offer in (supernatural) godless alternatives (see Kahane, "If There is a Hole").

⁴⁷I claimed that in Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?"; see also Kraay and Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence."

explicitly tied to an atheist starting point. However, whether you believe that God exists can make a difference in the following two ways.⁴⁸ One way is by bearing on your axiological commitments. Now, if we consider theism on its own—independently of the further claims of some specific religious tradition—then it seems compatible with a wide range of axiological frameworks. At the same time, actual theists, especially when members of religious traditions, may in fact accept values that are rather different than those accepted by atheists, and this will affect how they evaluate a given set of possibilities. But I have in mind something stronger than this. On the one hand, theists will be led to accept certain axiological claims (or at least take them to be more likely to be true) because they must reconcile their theism to various facts about the actual world, most obviously ones relating to evil. If they accept NGE, for example, then this can lead them to accept or at least seriously entertain various claims about the point (or possible point) of the evils we see around us. Conversely, atheists who appeal to the problem of evil will *reject* claims of this sort, denying that these ways of accommodating actual evil within NGE are successful or likely enough to be successful. To the extent that atheists reject these claims, they also take up certain axiological commitments, commitments that will also affect how they *evaluate* the possibility of God's existence, a possibility they take to be false *because* of these commitments. As we saw, such commitments can lead atheists to regard TWT in a negative light and are perfectly consistent with—indeed driven *by*—the Argument From Evil.

The second way in which your existential commitments can affect your answers to axiological ones is by bearing on which, of the range of possibilities, offer the most relevant interpretation of the contrast in question. The Argument From Evil involves normative assumptions that should lead atheists to see TWT in a negative light. But it can also be understood to direct atheists' attention to a different way of conceiving of a counterfactual where God does exist—to the counterfactual that I earlier called "Other-Worldly Theism."⁴⁹ I will end by briefly considering how such a change in focus will affect the NGEA.⁵⁰

Other-Worldly Theism

While TWT might be the world we in fact inhabit, Other-Worldly Theism (OWT) is necessarily a counterfactual. It's a world that realizes NGE in a very different way than TWT. Instead of holding fixed horrors such as the Holocaust, and just removing their gratuitousness, in OWT such

⁴⁸Tooley, "Axiology: Theism Versus Widely Accepted Monotheisms," offers a different argument from anti-theism to atheism which I don't have space to discuss here.

⁴⁹This change in focus will be reinforced if we understand the upshot of my argument so far as showing that TWT describes what, for atheist, is a *morally impossible* world.

⁵⁰For a fuller discussion, see Kahane, "Is the Universe Indifferent?"

horrors are *literally* removed. So, we needn't worry about the presence of evils that are strongly necessary or about worlds governed by alternative moralities.

If we interpret the *NGEA* to refer to *OWT* then it does, I believe, offer a sound argument for narrow impersonal anti-theism. And when we bear in mind that the horrors that stain our world will be absent from this counterfactual, I suspect that many will find the negatives that anti-theists associate with God's existence to be puny in comparison. If so, then this may well be the basis for an argument for wide impersonal pro-theism—though this is compatible with holding that a supernatural atheist counterfactual from which both great evils *and* these negatives are absent would be superior to *OWT*.⁵¹

But there is a catch. To want *OWT* to be true isn't to want God *to* exist. In fact, if my argument so far is correct, atheists should want God *not* to exist—for *TWT* to be false. The question is whether they should nevertheless wish that God *had* existed—wish that *OWT* *had* been true. Suppose that wide impersonal pro-theism is in fact true when we contrast the miserable *TWA* with the rosy *OWT*. The problem, however, is that *OWT* is so different from the actual world that it makes little or no sense to think that it would have—or even could have—contained any of us, including any of the victims of the actual horrors that will be absent from *OWT*. If World War I hadn't occurred, few if any of the people who exist today would still have been born.⁵² But if we remove *all* gratuitous evil, not just from the entirety of human history, but even throughout millions of years of evolution, it's hard to see how any of us, or any actual past humans, could have come to exist in *OWT*—and that's assuming that *Homo sapiens*, that unimpressive product of blind evolution, will even be created in that utopian universe.⁵³

If that's right, there is nothing in *OWT* for us, or for anyone who actually existed or had existed.⁵⁴ I understand personal pro-theism to claim that God's existence would have been better for all (or most) of *us*. So even if shifting to *OWT* salvages the argument for impersonal pro-theism, it

⁵¹Kahane, "If There is a Hole."

⁵²See Adams, "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil."

⁵³It might be objected that when we consider a counterfactual, we should focus on the possible world that realises it that is closest to the actual world. And if so, shouldn't we entertain a version of *OWT* in which we *do* exist? But *OWT* *just is* incredibly distant, and it's doubtful that this combination makes sense. It's true that if someone asks, for example, how things would have been like had the Holocaust not happened, it would be odd to take this to refer to a counterfactual where, say, Constantine didn't convert to Christianity, even though such a radically different history almost certainly wouldn't have contained the Holocaust. But nor should we consider instead a counterfactual where Holocaust deniers are right—although such a counterfactual is much closer to the actual world, and easily still contains us, compared to one where Hitler became an artist, and in which many of us would never get born. See Kahane, "History and Persons."

⁵⁴Unless our lives are so bad that they are worse than non-existence.

also entails the falsity of (wide) *personal* pro-theism and, if counterfactuals in which we don't even come to exist count as worse for us, may even support personal *anti*-theism.

Should we wish, then, that OWT *had* been true? If, at the beginning of time, we were choosing whether to create OWT or TWT it would indeed be monstrous to choose TWT with all its horrors. But we're not in that position. We're already here, and OWT offers us (literally) nothing, nor is it a counterfactual where the victims of past horrors instead go on to prosper.⁵⁵ Compare: our parents could have had many other children and surely some of these would have been better than us; yet how many of us regret that we were born instead? Atheists similarly needn't wish that God had existed, even if OWT would have been marvellous, impersonally speaking.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The world around us contains a mass of unspeakable evils, horrors that seem utterly senseless. Many find it blindingly obvious that it would be better—so much better—if God had existed and the world contained no such gratuitous horrors. Licon even suggests that only a sociopath would reject such a wonderful thing. But I have argued that things are more complicated. A world without gratuitous evil can be *our* world, or a world much like ours, that contains all actual horrors but with a supernatural backstage that means they aren't gratuitous. Or it can be a world *utterly different* from ours from which all the familiar horrors are literally absent. In this paper, I largely focused on this first possibility. I have argued that “non-gratuitousness” in this sense has several dimensions, and the only one that is straightforwardly attractive—“axiological offsetting”—may already be a feature of our miserable actual world even if God doesn't exist. In fact, we saw that when we unpack what it would mean for God's existence to render the evils we find around us non-gratuitous, then, at least for atheists, this possibility has a sinister side. This sinister side is admittedly absent from the second possibility, that of a counterfactual world from which all terrestrial atrocities are absent. But since we, and everyone who had ever existed, will almost certainly also be absent from that alternative, we needn't regret that it wasn't realized instead of the disappointing actual world.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵For a more general application of this point to our attitudes to past evil, see Kahane, “History and Persons.”

⁵⁶How we add up such impersonal and personal (or “person-affecting”) considerations is a difficult question. Some hold that when we compare possibilities, we should give weight *only* to how things might be better or worse for existing persons. In a relevant discussion, Mawson (“An Agreeable Answer”) argues that impersonal considerations do count, but for very little. On either of these views, OWT holds little attraction even from an impartial standpoint.

⁵⁷I am grateful to Kirk Lougheed and to two anonymous referees for extremely helpful comments.

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