The Secular Problem of Evil: An Essay in Analytic Existentialism

Paul W. Prescott
papresco@syr.edu

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Abstract: The existence of evil is often held to pose philosophical problems only for theism. I argue that the existence of evil gives rise to a philosophical problem which confronts theist and atheist alike. The problem is constituted by the following claims: (1) psychologically successful human beings necessarily trust in a good-enough world; (2) the actual world is not a good-enough world (i.e., sufficient evil exists). It follows that (3) psychologically successful human beings necessarily maintain a state of epistemic ignorance regarding the nature of the actual world. Theists resolve this problem by rejecting (2), only to confront the problem of evil as traditionally understood. Atheists typically also reject (2), but without adequate grounds for doing so.

> *We have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is in much more danger than our life; and the old wise ones, instead of warning us 'remember that you must die', would have done much better to remind us of this greater danger that threatens us.*
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> Primo Levi (1958)

In the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, the **problem of evil** is the problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the purported existence of God. On some versions of the problem, the existence of evil is held to be logically incompatible with the existence of God (Mackie 1955); on others, it is held to be evidence against the existence of God (Rowe 1979). On all versions, the philosophical problem posed by the existence of evil begins and ends with a commitment to theism. Reject theism and all that remains of the philosophical problem is a practical task of reconciling oneself to a world in which evil exists.[1]

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[1] There are exceptions to this view. For example, Susan Neiman (2002) has written extensively on the problem of evil from a secular point of view. I consider her work foundational for this paper. For a complimentary approach from a classical Chinese perspective, see Perkins 2014. For valuable work on the

While this assessment is common, I believe it is mistaken. The **classical problem of evil** is strictly a problem for theism. The philosophical problem posed by the existence of evil is not. Much as Schopenhauer once suggested (1818), the existence of evil gives rise to a philosophical problem that is logically prior to and distinct from the classical problem.[2]

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

Here is a preliminary outline of the problem. It arises out of a basic empirical fact about human beings which I will treat as given: human beings are vulnerable. We can be physically compromised. And we can be psychologically broken. Hence, we have basic prudential interests—including important psychological interests—which must be met if we are to be successful.

Now, let us call a world in which our basic prudential interests can be met a **good-enough world**. On the one hand, as I will argue:

(1)   Psychologically successful human beings trust in a good-enough world.

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

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

By the **actual world,** I mean everything that is—both natural and supernatural—including that which is socially constructed.[3] By 'not good-enough,' I mean that the conditions that obtain in the actual world are incompatible with the requirements imposed by our affect-laden minds, which trust that the world is good-enough. By **trust**, I mean a dependence relation that is both necessary and (importantly) noncognitive. It is one thing to know that evil exists, in the standard propositional sense of knowing. It is quite another know in an existential sense, in which one's experience of the world is "shaped by a pervasive

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practical task of reconciling oneself to the existence of evil (sometimes referred to as the **existential problem of evil**), see Hasker 1981.

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

[3] Hence, "two-world" views like those found in literatures influenced by Platonism comprise a single—albeit bifurcated—world as understood here.

awareness of one's own vulnerability," as Karen Jones has noted (2004: 7).[4] But I will return to these issues in subsequent sections. The point for moment is as follows: Should both (1) and (2) be true, psychological successful human beings live under a blanket of self-protective illusion. Under such conditions, theism and atheism are comparably deluded.

Let us call the view that both (1) and (2) are true **traumatic realism**. According to the traumatic realist, the human condition is defined by a fundamental conflict between our epistemic and prudential interests. Confronted with the existence of evil, we can either

(3a) abandon epistemic integrity

or

(3b) abandon trust in the world.

Neither option is attractive. The first entails maintaining a self-preserving state of epistemic ignorance regarding the nature of the actual world. The second requires surrendering one's basic prudential interests, and thereby one's psychological integrity as a person.

Now, one might be tempted by the first option. Practically speaking, not thinking too closely about evil is among the more effective means of reconciling oneself to a world in which evil exists. Philosophically speaking, however, such reconciliations come at a cost. In the actual world, human affairs are routinely conditioned by the existence of evil. Thus, in not thinking too closely about evil, one can easily render oneself ill-equipped relative to human affairs. For example, there are important areas of philosophy—including ethics, social philosophy, and political philosophy—where a clear-eyed appreciation of the existence of evil can be essential to responsible engagement. The possibility that traumatic realism is true is thus a matter of no small concern.

There are responses to traumatic realism, however. Most of these responses can be found in the world's religious traditions. Theism, for example, guarantees a good-enough world. According to the theist, (2) is false. God exists and is hospitable to us. Hence, the actual world is a good-enough world. For many of us today, however, religious views like

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[4] For an account of trust comparable to the one employed here, see Karen Jones' account of trust as **basal security**: "Survivors of random attacks frequently describe themselves as living in different worlds before and after the attack and describe the change in trust terms. In many cases, the difference between these worlds cannot be captured in terms of different *beliefs* held pre- and postattack. ... [I]t is one thing to assent to the proposition that the world is risky, and it is another thing to have one's day-to-day experience of the world shaped by a pervasive sense of one's own vulnerability. … [Hence,] the postulation of an underlying, affectively laden state that is explanatory ... Call this state basal security" (2004: 7-8).

theism are untenable. Barring such options, one is left with a remainder: the problem of showing that traumatic realism is false without the resources provided by a religious worldview.

I approach the problem in five stages. In Parts 1 – 4, I present the **secular problem of evil *simpliciter***—which confronts theist and atheist alike—and make the case for traumatic realism as a philosophically viable option. In Part 1, I explicate the central notion of a good-enough world. In Part 2, I make the case that psychologically successful human beings must trust (and do trust) in a good-enough world. In Part 3, I consider, and reject, the current philosophical response to the secular problem of evil: an assumption that psychologically successful human beings are possible in a (so-called) not good-enough world. In Part 4, I consider, and reject, an argument that the actual world can be known to be good-enough *a priori*. Following that, I turn to the **secular problem of evil for atheism**, and to the challenge posed for all those who reject a religious worldview. I contend that the typical atheist trusts that the actual world is good-enough, despite substantial evidence that it is not. Arguments to this effect are made in Part 5. Part 6 provides a brief conclusion.

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

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

1. The Concept of a Good-enough World[5]

The concept of a good-enough world stands on two assumptions.

The first assumption is that the human personality is fragile. By the **personality**, I mean the integrated features of a person—including traits of character—that are typical of that person as an individual. By 'fragile' I mean that our personalities are dependent upon, and existentially vulnerable to, a world which they inhabit and within which they reside.[6] Much as the human organism depends upon a world to provide the physical conditions

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[5] I am indebted to the psychoanalytic theorist D. W. Winnicott for the notion of a 'good-enough world.' Winnicott is perhaps best known for his concept of the "good-enough mother." This notion, however, had its origins in the concept of a good-enough environment, first articulated in his 1949 paper "Mind and Its Relation to the Psyche-Soma" (1958: 243-254).

[6] For the classic treatment of this topic, see Nussbaum 1986.

necessary for its ongoing integration and survival—for example, food, shelter, oxygen, and atmospheric pressure—so the human personality depends upon a world to provide necessary conditions also. Foremost are those required to maintain a capacity for thought and action, as I will argue in Part 2. These necessary conditions comprise our basic prudential interests, which must be met if we are to be psychologically successful.

The second assumption on which the concept of a good-enough world stands is what Hume once called the "great and melancholy truth": evil exists (1779: 68). I will understand **evil** as that which threatens to undermine our personalities.

Let us say that a world is **good-enough** if and only if our basic prudential interests can be met (in principle) in full cognizance of the human condition. Such a world need not be good-enough for everyone. Indeed, it need not be good-enough for most. But it must be potentially good-enough for some. It cannot exceed the limits of what the human psyche can bear at a foundational level.

What makes for a good-enough world, thus understood? As means of approach, several distinctions will give the concept a thicker and more tractable definition. Here, I exposit three possibilities, which are intended to be exhaustive. A world can be **karmic**, and therefore **enabling**; it can be **nonkarmic,** yet nonetheless enabling; or it can be **disabling**. Worlds that are enabling are good-enough. Worlds that are disabling are not.

1.1. Karmic-Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that is necessarily enabling a **karmic-enabling world**. Here, we find the world as it is understood by most theists. Karmic worlds are necessarily enabling because they are morally ordered. In virtue of being morally ordered, such worlds render our basic prudential interests secure.

Consider the following: moral order provides a world with two important features, which radically mitigate the existential threat posed by the existence of evil. First, moral order allows for the possibility of **adaptation**. For any personality confronted with the existence of evil, there is at least one constructive response available. In a morally ordered world, one can protect oneself by being a good person. Given our inherent fragility, not every way of life is sustainable in the face of the existence of evil. Many ways of life prove to be mere vanity and illusion. Nevertheless, adaptation is always possible in a morally ordered world, for there is always at least one way of life—namely, a moral way of life— that is neither vanity nor illusion, and that can be successfully adopted by creatures like us.

By adapting oneself to the moral order, one can ensure that one's basic prudential interests will (ultimately) be met thereby rendering oneself existentially secure.

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

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

Now, most atheists maintain that the idea that we live in a karmic-enabling world is a delusion. Human beings have a powerful tendency to posit such a world, as Lerner (1980), among others, has shown. And karmic-enabling conditions are often presupposed. For example, Abrahamic monotheism, Buddhist nontheism, Hindu henotheism, Plato in the *Republic,* and arguably Kant, all presuppose a karmic-enabling world. Nevertheless, many trust the world to be sufficiently hospitable to us in the absence of moral order.

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

1.2. Nonkarmic-Enabling Worlds

Let us call a world that remains sufficiently enabling in the absence of moral order a **nonkarmic-enabling world**. Here, we find the world as it is understood by many atheists. Nonkarmic-enabling worlds remain enabling because they are sufficiently well-ordered— in some relevant nonmoral sense—to allow for the possibility of adaptation and control.

For the purposes of this paper, I will leave the precise conditions necessary for the possibility of adaptation and control underdetermined. Some such conditions are readily identifiable: a world cannot be too capricious or unintelligible, for example. Nor can conditions within it be too abusive. Nonetheless, while the precise conditions required are an important topic in their own right, for the purposes of this paper they are irrelevant. It suffices to say that there are some. Provided those conditions, a nonkarmic-enabling world is good-enough. It is sufficiently viable from a human perspective such that creatures like

us can—at least, in principle—satisfy our basic prudential interests without recourse to illusion. Here, for example, we find the world presupposed by the ancient Stoics with their *logos*, by the classical Ruists (or 'Confucians') with their *Dao*, and arguably more recently by the Vienna Circle with their scientific *Weltauffassung*. Such a world is not always conducive to us. And there are no guarantees (as there are in a karmic world). But confronted with the reality of evil, it is at least possible for us to provide for ourselves unbenighted.[7]

There is, however, a third option.

1.3. Disabling Worlds

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

It is at this point—much as Nietzsche once suggested—that philosophers typically part ways with tragic poets.[8] For philosophers, the actual world may or may not be karmic. But it is enabling. For the tragic poets, the actual world is not. Not only is the world portrayed by the tragic poets nonkarmic, but it utterly outstrips the finite capacities of human beings to meaningfully compensate or respond. Here, for example, we find the world portrayed by Shakespeare in *King Lear* and by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Now, as Nietzsche also once suggested, in a disabling world the strength of a personality can be measured by how much truth it can endure:

> Something could be true even if it is harmful and dangerous to the highest degree. It could even be part of the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed—so that the strength of a spirit would be proportionate to how much of the "truth" he could withstand—or, to put it more clearly, to what extent he *needs* it to be thinned out, veiled over … (1886: 37).

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[7] For an attempt to secure Kantianism in a nonkarmic world, see Baier 1980. Baier's thesis is that "the secular equivalent of faith in God ... is faith in the human community and its evolving procedures" (133).

[8] "The deity who spoke out of [Euripides] was not Dionysos, nor Apollo, but an altogether newborn daemon called *Socrates*. This is the new opposition: the Dionysiac versus the Socratic, and the work of art that once was Greek tragedy was destroyed by it" (Nietzsche 1872: 60).

The point for our purposes is as follows: One's circumstances can be very bad. Indeed, they can be so bad that to experience them as good-enough is to be deluded. It is possible, furthermore, that such circumstances are not merely one's own circumstances (which may or may not be representative), but those which define the human condition. Should that be the case, the truth about the world would be such that every human mind would necessarily defend itself against it.[9] This is what it means to speak of a state of fundamental epistemic ignorance and a disabling world.

Once again, it is not my intention to argue that the world is disabling. I merely seek to give the notion a hearing. Toward that end, two points are in order before moving forward. First, as we are seeing, the possibility of a disabling world can be difficult to entertain for reasons that have nothing to do with the truth or falsity of the thesis. Entertaining the possibility of a disabling world requires acknowledging that one is psychologically, existentially, and intellectually vulnerable in ways that can be deeply unsettling. This experience—the experience of our own fragility—is something we typically defend ourselves against. Second, a disabling world need not be bad in every particular. Indeed, it can contain a great deal of good fortune. There can be seemingly good-enough environments within it—islands of comparative enablement—capable of underwriting some personalities in relative privilege and comfort. Of course, if the world is disabling such personalities will necessarily be deluded regarding the human condition and the nature of the actual world. But that is precisely the point. It is entirely possible to live in a disabling world without ever recognizing—much less acknowledging—its disabling order.

Let us now turn to traumatic realism, and to the claim that successful human beings necessarily trust in an enabling world.

2. Traumatic Realism

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

(1) Psychologically successful human beings trust in a good-enough world.
(2) The actual world is not a good-enough world.

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[9] For foundational work on the mind's defenses, see A. Freud (1937).

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

At this point one might ask: why accept the key assumption? In addressing this question, I will draw upon two arguments. The first I will call the **argument from human development**; the second, the **argument from posttraumatic aetiology**.

2.1. The Argument from Human Development

The argument from human development begins with an observation: children trust in a good-enough world as a necessary condition of the developmental process. Such trust is a foundational condition of childhood. Children cannot be children without it.

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

Now, many of us tacitly assume that this state of affairs comes to an end with the advent of adulthood. But does it?

Contemporary psychologists maintain that it does not.

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

psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts all maintain that trust in a good-enough world is a necessary condition of the personality, which can never be outgrown.[10]

Here, two points of emphasis are called for. First, it is important to remain cognizant that the use of the term 'trust' is not intended to indicate that one must believe that the world is good-enough (on an intellectualist understanding of 'belief'). Trust in a good-enough world is not seen in one's cognitive attitudes, much less in the propositions one endorses. Rather, it is seen in one's integrated modes of thought and action—that is, in one's capacity for practical reason. Hence, one can trust the world while asserting, and believing, that one does not. Indeed, this is not uncommon. We inhabit a "climate of trust" that, as Annette Baier once observed, typically goes unnoticed unless compromised or absent (1986: 234).

Second, as noted at the outset of the paper, the secular problem of evil is not a practical problem. It is not the problem of reconciling oneself to the existence of evil, either with or without God. Considered strictly on a practical level, most human beings need not overly concern themselves with the nature of the actual world. All that is required is a good-enough world for us: that is, a good-enough local environment. And there are seemingly good-enough local environments. Many people have the privilege, and the good fortune, of living in one. And so, the secular problem of evil does not spontaneously arise for them. Regardless of one's fortunes, however, the secular problem of evil does arise once one begins asking about the nature of the actual world—that is, about the fundamental human condition. Here, reasons to conclude that "human kind | [c]annot bear very much reality" abound, much as T. S. Eliot once noted (1943: 14). But I will return to this point in Part 4.

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

2.2. The Argument from Posttraumatic Aetiology

The strongest argument for the key assumption of traumatic realism is premised on cases where trust in the world has been forcibly broken. Here, we move from the realm of speculative possibility to that of empirically observable reality.

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

As the foregoing might suggest, our foundational trust in the world is not easily disrupted. Basic trust, once forged, is remarkably resilient. It cannot be easily shaken. But it can be broken, whether accidentally or by intent. Accidentally, it can be undermined by catastrophic misfortune (traditionally known as 'natural evil'). Intentionally, it can be undermined by severe abuse or psychophysical torture (traditionally known as 'moral evil'). In both cases, when trust is sufficiently compromised, the personality is compromised as well.

The current clinical term for what transpires once trust has been sufficiently compromised is 'posttraumatic stress disorder.' First identified by Pierre Janet in the 19th century (1889), and officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in the 20th (1980), posttraumatic stress is now a well-established clinical phenomenon.[11] Central to our understanding of posttraumatic stress is the recognition that the personality is fragile. Deprived of a sustaining environment—that is, placed under sufficient duress—the personality breaks down.

When the personality breaks down, one encounters a catastrophic disorganization of otherwise stable features and capacities, both cognitive and emotional. A sense of self which was previously coherent is fractured. Character traits which were previously reliable become disordered. Basic cognitive and emotional capacities—including capacities for thought, memory, and action—fail (cf., e.g., Shay 1994: 165-181). In short, the human capacity for practical reason is undermined, in tandem with the subjectivity of the individual in question. This possibility, I take it, is what Primo Levi characterized as the "greater danger" than death in the quote at the outset of this paper. When our necessary conditions fail to be met, we come up against what Jean Améry once called "the mind's limits" (1966); and what Elaine Scarry—speaking inversely—termed "the unmaking of the world" (1985).[12]

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

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[11] For canonical literature on posttraumatic stress, see Figley 1985; van der Kolk 1987; Herman 1992; Shay 1994; and Horowitz 1999.

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

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

Now, what exactly is compromised along with the personality in such cases? As suggested by the taxonomy of worlds in Part 1, the precise content of our sustaining commitments appears to vary. For some, maintaining the requisite capacity to think and act appears to require trust in a world that is karmic. Such individuals trust in a world that is morally ordered at a fundamental level and are unable to organize themselves without it.[13] For others, comparable self-maintenance appears to require trust in a world that, while nonkarmic, is nonetheless enabling. Such individuals presuppose a world that is sufficiently well-ordered to allow for the possibility of meaningful thought and action. For no one, however, can the world be disabling. A disabling world is, of course, a logical possibility. But it is not an existential one. It is not a possibility for us. Insofar as we wish to maintain our personalities, we are irrevocably committed to the necessary conditions upon which those personalities depend.

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

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

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

Here, for example, we find the work of Albert Camus.[14]

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

[14] In changing the subject from metaphysics to aesthetics, Camus follows lines of thought laid down by Hegel and Nietzsche. For discussion, see Raymond Geuss' "Art and Theodicy" (1999: 78-115) and Bernard Williams' "*The Women of Trachis*: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics" (2006: 49-59). My objections to Camus' views are intended to apply to his predecessors also.

3.1. Camus' Views Regarding the Human Condition and the Nature of the Actual World

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

A **nonenabling** world is one in which successful human beings are possible, but in which our hopes and aspirations are necessarily frustrated. Such a world is not amenable to human intervention and ordering. In Camus' terms, it is 'absurd.'

According to Camus, an absurd world is not necessarily a disabling one. A successful human life remains possible in a nonenabling world, provided one surrenders to a life lived in the present without hope of consolation. Camus' position on this point, however, flirts with contradiction. The world he describes can appear both good-enough and not good-enough at the same time. That being the case, it will be important to identify precisely what he is, and is not, saying.

On the one hand, Camus is clearly committed to the claim that the actual world is not enabling. He rejects the notion that the actual world is karmic: "there is no salvation" (1956b: 103). Likewise, he rejects the notion that the actual world could ever be rendered intelligible from a human perspective: "[t]he world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said" (1955: 21). On the other hand, Camus holds that human beings are able to remain "intact." He makes this claim in his earliest essays (1956b: 69), and maintains it throughout his life. Human being are able to remain intact because, despite the irrationality of the human condition, the world is beautiful. And so, "there is always a place where the heart can find rest" (90).

In short, it is Camus' view that human beings can secure their basic prudential interests even under conditions of absurdity. In a famous passage, for example, Camus writes:

> I discovered one must keep a freshness and a source of joy intact within, loving the daylight that injustice leaves unscathed, and returning to the fray with this light as a trophy. … It was this that in the end had saved me from despair. … In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer (1956b: 168-9).

Camus' point, as I understand it, is that the resources required to sustain our personalities are available to us even in a nonenabling world. On the resulting view, the human condition

is insurmountable. But it is not fundamentally undermining. And so, it remains possible for us "to live without appeal" (1955: 53).

3.2. A Response to Camus on Behalf of Traumatic Realism

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

Let us stipulate that Camus is correct: the world is beautiful. Let us further stipulate that aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic activity remain possible in a nonenabling world. There is nothing entailed by this claim that rules out the possibility that the actual world is disabling. A disabling world can contain beauty—or even be beautiful—and yet be no less disabling for creatures like us.

The problem confronting Camus is that he never argues for his central thesis. Camus holds that successful human beings are possible in a nonenabling world. But rather than provide reasons or evidence in support of his view, he provides literary illustrations. In his plays, essays, and novels, Camus portrays lives lived with integrity under the conditions he describes. It is never asked whether the fact that we can imagine human beings living successfully under such conditions demonstrates that human beings actually can. It is simply assumed that it does. From the imaginable, the possible is taken to follow.

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

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

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

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

4. Love and Its Place in Nature

In his early work on the philosophical implications of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jonathan Lear affirms the key assumption of traumatic realism. Like the traumatic realist, Lear holds that there is a critical range of fit between the personality and the world in which it resides. And like the traumatic realist, Lear holds that outside this range of fit the personality is unsustainable without recourse to illusion. This is not a problem for Lear, however, because on Lear's account the actual world is good-enough. Indeed, on Lear's account one can know that the actual world is good-enough *a priori*, for a world that is not good-enough "is not a possible world" (1990: 140).[15]

The argument is as follows.

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

Lear begins with the claim that the personality (or ego) is a psychological achievement, a condition of the possibility of which is a good-enough world. He also affirms that this can be seen in the fact that when the world is not good-enough the personality breaks down and one "encounters psychosis" (1990: 139).[16]

On Lear's account, this gives rise to a simple transcendental deduction:

1. A condition of the possibility of a successful personality is a good-enough world.
2. There are successful personalities.
3. Therefore, there is a good-enough world.

In short, Lear maintains that the fact that there are psychologically successful adults demonstrates the existence of a good-enough world.

Now, one might counter that Lear's argument only secures the existence of a good-enough local environment as a developmental condition of any given personality. And one would be correct. As it stands, the argument says nothing about the conditions that obtain in the actual world. Rather, it speaks only to the conditions that obtained in the limited environment in which an individual developed. Clearly, for example, insofar as I am a

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

[16] As is the case with the literature on posttraumatic stress, I intend my views to be broadly compatible with the literature on psychoanalytic theory. Where Lear speaks of a "lovable world," I speak of a 'good-enough world;' where Lear speaks of "the ego," I speak of 'the personality.' I have reconstructed Lear's arguments accordingly.

psychologically successful adult, there was a good-enough world for me. But, as we have seen, there is nothing in the existence of a good-enough world for me—an island of comparative enablement, in which defenses can be successfully mounted—that rules out the possibility that we live in a disabling world.

In anticipation of this objection, Lear's argument takes on an additional level. Human beings, he points out, are not possible in social isolation. Hence, a condition of the possibility of a good-enough world for me is a good-enough world for us. We—the community of successful human personalities—are here. Hence, not only is the world for me good-enough, but the world for us is good-enough also.

At this point, however, Lear makes an interesting move. Lear maintains that the world as it is experienced "by us" psychologically successful adults simply is the actual world:

> It is a condition of there being a world that it be lovable by beings like us. ... This is more than a psychological condition of there being a world *for us*. There is no content to the idea of a world that is not a possible world for us. And a world that is not lovable (by beings like us) is not a possible world (1990: 141-42).

On Lear's account, there is no conceptual space for a world above and beyond the world as successful human beings collectively encounter it.

4.2. A Response to Lear on Behalf of Traumatic Realism

Lear's account is correct up to (but not including) the point where the world as it is for us is equated with the actual world. Human beings need the world to be good-enough, and the world is experienced as good-enough by many human beings. The larger argument to the adequacy of the actual world, however, confronts a serious challenge.

The challenge is simple. It is not a necessary condition for the successful personality that the actual world be good-enough. There is another option: namely, that regardless of the conditions under which human beings exist, any successful human being will necessarily trust that the actual world meets their necessary conditions. In short, they will necessarily experience the world as good-enough, regardless of whether or not the actual world is. What has not been ruled out is the possibility that the actual world is the world experienced by the compromised personality—in Lear's terms, the psychotic.

Nothing Lear says rules out the possibility that psychosis is warranted, in the sense of being an appropriate response to the world. He simply assumes that it is not.

This point is important, for at issue is the privileging of experience. Who counts as 'us' in Lear's "for us"? If one wants to establish that this is, in fact, a good-enough world, one cannot rule out evidence and testimony to contrary from the start. And yet this is what Lear's argument effectively does. Having identified the psychotic as the bearer of contrary experience, the evidential weight of that experience is pre-emptively excluded. It appears that here—as is so often the case in human communities, and among human beings— voices which disturb the prevailing consensus are simply not given a hearing.[17]

Lear is surely correct that we are here, alive, in the actual world. He is also correct that some of us are psychologically successful adults. But why? Because the actual world is good-enough? Or because many of us possess robust (and highly advantageous) defenses that limit our ability to track the traumatic reality?

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

5. The Problem of Evil Cannot Be Escaped

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

It is at this point that the typical atheist confronts a serious challenge. Psychologically successful atheists—that is, atheists who are meeting their basic prudential interests—take the alternative to a karmic-enabling world to be a nonkarmic-enabling, rather than a disabling, world. It is commonly assumed that removing the anthropocentric constraints on our metaphysics issues in a world that is indifferent, but not overtly hostile, to us. Much the same is assumed of the social world in the absence of a transcendent order. It is commonly assumed that, in principle, we can meet our basic prudential interests

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[17] For an insightful, troubling, and highly relevant discussion of this phenomenon in relation to the reception of testimony from the Holocaust, see Langer 1991. See also the literature on epistemic injustice, esp. Fricker 2007.

without the benefit of a karmic environment. In short, it is assumed that the actual world provides the resources required.

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

The problem that the successful atheist confronts is grounding that trust.

Consider the following: All three candidates in our taxonomy of worlds are compatible with the existence of evil. But not all three are comparable in this regard. Karmic worlds are distinct from nonkarmic worlds in an important respect. A karmic world, in virtue of being karmic, guarantees that the existence of evil will be met with a response. In a karmic world, the existence of evil is subsumed within a moral order which guarantees that our basic prudential interests can be secured. There is no comparable guarantee in a nonkarmic world. In a nonkarmic-enabling world, evil may not be met with a response. In a disabling world, it will not be met with a response. Evil is thus compounded in nonkarmic worlds in ways in which in karmic worlds, it is not.

This compounding of evil—this failure to be met with a response—is itself an evil, and a significant one. If experiencing evil is bad, being abandoned to evil is worse. Evils that are thus compounded are significantly greater threats to integrity of the personality than evils that are not. As research on posttraumatic stress has consistently shown, our personalities can survive a great deal provided sufficient support, and thereby at least the possibility of successful adaptation and control (cf., e.g., Herman 1992: 214-236). On the other hand, our existential condition is dramatically more precarious when the requisite support is absent or withdrawn. This phenomenon—first dubbed the 'second injury' by Martin Symonds (1980)—is now well documented.

Let us call evil that fails to be met with a response **significant evil**. Significant evil is evidence—albeit, not conclusive evidence—of a not good-enough world.

Now, most atheists are deeply committed to existence of significant evil. Indeed, the typical atheist does not merely hold that significant evil exists. The typical atheist holds that significant evil is pervasive. It is the pervasive existence of significant evil, for example (and not merely the existence of evil *per se*), that many find so persuasive—and hence, that serves the atheist so well—in classical arguments from evil against the existence of God. Evils that can be folded into a greater good are not the problem. Evils

that cannot be reconciled or redeemed are. Here, Dostoevsky's famous discussion in Book V, Chapter 4 of *The Brothers Karamazov* is both eloquent and instructive.[18]

That being the case, the problem the atheist confronts is straightforward. Once one has allowed for the pervasive existence of significant evil, there is no principled way to stop. One cannot consistently commit to the pervasive existence of significant evil in classical arguments from evil only to bracket, minimize, or dismiss its relevance elsewhere. And yet, this is what the atheist typically does.[19] When it comes to the claims at issue, there is nothing to which the traumatic realist points that the typical atheist does not readily admit. Significant evil exists. It is pervasive. Our necessary conditions routinely fail to be met. On many occasions, in many people's lives, the world simply cannot be trusted. These same premises that serve the typical atheist so well in classical arguments about the existence of God will serve the traumatic realist equally well in arguments about the nature of the actual world.

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

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

The faith of atheism, in short, is faith in a good-enough world.

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[18] "[The tears of the children who have been tortured] must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured?" (Dostoevsky 1879: 15-16).

[19] Here, I assume that the typical atheist endorses the classical argument from evil as a powerful argument in favor of atheism. Of course, this assumption need not be true of any particular atheist. One can be an atheist without it.

6. Concluding Remarks

The pursuit of truth has always come with a shadow: the possibility that the truth, should it be known, would be unbearable. The problem is not merely a skeptical problem. It is not merely a problem about the possibility of knowledge (although it is that also). Nor is the problem one of nihilism. At issue is not the absence of truth, or value, or meaning. Rather, the problem is one of a qualitatively different kind. The problem is that the true story of the world may be beyond the endurance of the affect-laden mind.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes briefly entertains worries of this general kind. For a brief moment, it is supposed that the actual world is not good-enough—God being a malicious deceiver—and hence that the mystifications of childhood are insurmountable.[20] The problem, once raised, is quickly bypassed in favor of the projects of the prevailing age. In the *Meditations*, the challenges posed by the secular problem of evil are set aside in favor of the challenges posed by radical skepticism and the epistemic foundation of the modern sciences.

There is, however, such a thing as the secular problem of evil. If the foregoing consideration are correct, it not only underwrites the world's religious traditions but remains once religious convictions are gone.[21] At present, the problem appears irresolvable. We may not live in a good-enough world. Should that be the human condition, there are only two unpalatable options. One can abandon trust in the world (and thereby, one's basic prudential interests) in order to retain contact with the traumatic reality. Or one can abandon epistemic integrity and live in a self-preserving state of ignorance regarding the evil nature of the actual world.[22]

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[20] "Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice I had subsequently based on them" (Descartes 1641: 76).

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

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