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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Between horror and utopia: fiction and Nagasawa's existential problem of evil

Erkki V. R. Kojonen

Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
Email: rope.kojonen@helsinki.fi

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Abstract

This article examines Yujin Nagasawa's claim that the problem of evil challenges atheists as well as theists. Nagasawa says many atheists hold a 'modest optimism' about life, but this optimism clashes with how the world really is if nature is systemically tied to suffering. I explore this 'axiological expectation mismatch' through engagement with two short stories: H. P. Lovecraft's *Call of Cthulhu* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Both stories imagine universes in which there really seems to be an epistemic, emotive, and pragmatic problem of evil for atheists. These stories help test common objections to Nagasawa and suggest there can be a threshold of badness beyond which local gratitude and optimism become hard to sustain. I further argue that common presentations of the evolutionary problem of evil for theists indeed require portraying animal lives and our environment in highly negative terms, leading to the problem of evil for atheists. This supports Nagasawa's contention that there is some symmetry between theism and atheism on the problem of evil. The comparison with the imagined worlds of Lovecraft and Le Guin highlights how our engagement with literature can advance philosophical discussion, much like thought experiments.

Keywords: Nagasawa; problem of evil; evolutionary problem of evil; Lovecraft; Le Guin

Introduction

Recently, Nagasawa (2018, 2024) has argued that the problem of evil is not only a challenge for theists but also for atheists. The problem of evil can be understood, Nagasawa argues, as an 'axiological expectation mismatch' between existentially optimistic beliefs and attitudes, and the reality of evil in the world. Hence, Jonbäck (2021) has called Nagasawa's 'problem of evil for atheists' an 'existential problem', in distinction from the logical problem of evil. The term is apt because Nagasawa's formulation also concerns the difficulty of feeling grateful for our existence and of hoping for a good future. However, Nagasawa links epistemic and existential aspects – for him, the problem arises from the 'cognitive dissonance' between our beliefs and reality (Nagasawa 2024, 163). The existential problem of evil is thus not just about coming to terms with evil intellectually, but also about how to live with evil. Nagasawa's point is that this challenge is also relevant for atheists, not just theists.

In this article, I explore Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists from a new angle by putting it into dialogue with literature. I use H. P. Lovecraft's (d. 1937) *The Call of Cthulhu* (1926) and Ursula K. Le Guin's (d. 2018) *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) as thought

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experiments, through which I test the assumptions of Nagasawa's arguments and potential replies.[1] In doing so, I join several recent authors who have seen value in putting philosophical and theological ideas into engagement with science fiction and horror (e.g. Grafius and Morehead 2021; Duns 2024; Lorrimar 2025). Such stories commonly discuss topics such as humanity's place in the cosmos and the meaningfulness of existence, themes central to Nagasawa's existential problem of evil. As Duns (2024, 3) notes, 'for horror to horrify successfully, it must depict an event that shatters and disrupts expectations shared by the film's characters *and* audience'. This fits well with Nagasawa's idea of an 'axiological expectations mismatch'.

The purpose of the article is threefold: (1) to show that engagement with literature can indeed shed new light on philosophical problems, by documenting the results of my own deliberation on Lovecraft and Le Guin, (2) to provide thought experiments showing that there are indeed conceivable situations in which there would be a 'problem of evil for atheists', akin to what Nagasawa argues, and (3) to explore how the situations of these imagined worlds relate to our environment, particularly Nagasawa's systemic problem of evil. I will argue that certain common ways of formulating the evolutionary problem of evil indeed lead to this problem. I will also argue that the thought experiments show ways in which Nagasawa's problem of evil might be expanded.

To prepare for the discussion, a brief overview of Nagasawa's argument is in order. Nagasawa argues that humans have psychological and philosophical reasons for being 'modest optimists' in the sense that we believe 'overall and fundamentally, the environment we exist in is not bad' (Nagasawa 2024, 142).[2] Such optimism, in turn, grounds our existential gratitude and happiness in existence and helps us act in the world because we believe our actions can have positive results. As Nagasawa points out, many atheists express wonder and gratitude for our existence and maintain a positive outlook on life despite the prevalence of suffering. However, Nagasawa argues that this optimism is in tension with the real nature of the world, as revealed by the problem of systemic evil. He outlines (Nagasawa 2024, 154–169) three aspects of the problem of evil for atheists, which I will discuss by comparison with Lovecraft and Le Guin. These are (a) the axiological expectations mismatch between modest optimism and our evolutionary environment (which I will call the *epistemic problem*), (b) the difficulty of existential gratitude in a bad world (which I will call the *emotive problem*), and (c) the lack of hope for change, given the fundamental nature of the badness (which I will call the *pragmatic problem*). To remain an optimist in our evolutionary world would be, for Nagasawa,

> like expressing pleasure about and gratitude for living in our environment with smiley faces while, at the same time, recognizing that we are standing on the corpses of countless people and sentient animals that had to die painfully and miserably to allow us to survive. The costs that these people and animals had to pay for our survival appear unjustifiably high (Nagasawa 2024, 163).

Ultimately, Nagasawa concludes that the problem of evil is a challenge for both theists and atheists, but theists have a more robust set of answers. This is because theists can meet the challenge using all our human capabilities, the same as atheists, but can also rely on supernaturalist resources, such as hoping in God for salvation. Hence, 'with respect to grappling with the problem of evil, it seems that traditional theists can either win or draw while atheists/nontheists can at best draw but are more likely to lose' (Nagasawa 2024, 231; see further Alnashi 2025; Hill, Forthcoming).

Nagasawa's problem of evil has already created lively discussion since the publication of his initial argument (Nagasawa 2018). Several authors have raised objections, many of

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which Nagasawa addresses in his book-length defence of the argument (Nagasawa 2024). A common response has been that atheism and optimism are distinct theses, and arguments against optimism are thus not arguments against atheism (e.g. Kahane 2022; Sugeng 2025). In response, Nagasawa (2024, 175–177) has argued that the problem of evil for atheists is meant to be a challenge for those atheists who are modest optimists, and that if atheism required giving up modest optimism, this would be a high cost. He admits a full evaluation of the justification of theism and atheism in relation to evil would require addressing more than just the axiological problem (Nagasawa 2025; see also Loke 2025). In addition, Kahane (2022) argues that we have no way to evaluate the overall goodness of the cosmos, which could, in principle, offset any possible badness in our local environment. In response, Nagasawa (2024, 142) limits his modest optimism thesis only to 'the environment in which we exist', meaning the planet Earth. Oppy (2024, 346–347) argues that our environment may not be as bad as Nagasawa claims, noting that natural selection does not necessarily entail pain and suffering. In response, Nagasawa (2025, 385–387) argues that there is still a 'systemic connection' between natural selection and suffering. But if it is established that our world is not too bad, this would also remove the mismatch between theists' axiological expectations and reality. He sees it as a sign of success that his argument can reverse the usual order of discussion, making theists argue for the world's badness and atheists for its goodness (Nagasawa 2025, 386).

Despite existing discussion, many aspects still need further illumination, such as the relations among the different aspects of Nagasawa's problem (Aakko 2024, 128), and how the overall badness of our environment affects the possibilities for local optimism (Kahane 2022; Sugeng 2025).[3] In what follows, I will explore these and other aspects through the works of Lovecraft and Le Guin. In both sections, I will begin with an overview of the story and then discuss it in relation to Nagasawa.

The Call of Cthulhu as cosmic horror

Although relatively unknown during his lifetime, H. P. Lovecraft is now regarded as one of the masters of 20th-century horror fiction, with a wide-ranging impact on popular culture. Lovecraft is best known for his *Cthulhu mythos* stories, such as *The Call of Cthulhu*, which are stylistically a mix of scientific realism and poetic descriptions of 'cosmic' horror (Joshi 2001, 242–246; Airaksinen 1999). In these stories, fear arises from slowly understanding that the world is ultimately contrary to human expectations, being hostile, indifferent, and incomprehensible. Although the stories include monstrous creatures, such as the iconic Cthulhu, these are not supernatural creatures as traditionally understood. Rather, they are extraterrestrial forms of life that operate according to laws that transcend human understanding (Hull 2006). Lovecraft's monsters are also not necessarily malevolent; rather, they see humans as no more significant than ants are to us.[4] As such, these monsters are commonly understood as symbolic representations of the 'purposeless, mindless, yet all-powerful universe' of the modern scientific worldview, as Lovecraft understood it (Leiber 1987, 8). Put more mildly, they might be seen as a 'means of reflecting on the vast, and sometimes frightening, nature of the universe and humankind's fragile place within it' (Sederholm 2016, 269). Lovecraft provides a kind of 'anti-mythology', in contrast to traditional ideas which saw a 'vital connection' between humanity and the cosmos (Joshi 2001, 246–247). All this makes Lovecraft's fiction an interesting place to explore what it might mean for us to experience an 'axiological expectations mismatch', which can occur when our optimistic beliefs, emotions, and attitudes do not match the fundamental reality of our cosmos.[5]

The Call of Cthulhu is representative of the wider themes and style of Lovecraft's fiction. The story is narrated by Francis Wayland Thurston, an anthropologist who comes across

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evidence of strange cults and mysterious events, including recurring nightmares, ancient artefacts, and encounters with strange creatures. His accidental notice of the evidence gives him, as he tells it, a 'single glimpse of forbidden aeons which chills me when I think of it and maddens me when I dream of it' (Lovecraft 1999, 139). Although Thurston begins his investigation as a staunch rationalist, he gradually uncovers terrifying truths that challenge his worldview. Humanity, our rationality, and our morals have little cosmic significance or correspondence with reality as it is. We were preceded on this Earth by the Old Ones, who came to our world from the stars. Now these Old Ones are sleeping, but the echoes of their dreams leak out to the minds of cultists and poets, telling of the coming change. Great Cthulhu will one day wake and put an end to the age of humanity.

This imagined world seems to embody both the epistemic, emotive, and pragmatic aspects of Nagasawa's problem of evil. In relation to the *epistemic problem*, the truth of the cosmos, as discussed in the story, is clearly contrary to modest optimism. The slice of reality that seems to allow for human morality and rationality is a small island amid a cosmos fundamentally inhospitable to these ideals. As the beginning of *The Call of Cthulhu* states the idea,

> We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age (Lovecraft 1999, 139).

The passage also highlights the emotive and pragmatic aspects of the problem. As stated here, once one discovers the truth, one is changed by it, and the alternatives are either madness or denial, meaning a return to ignorance. As Thurston, the protagonist, states at the end of the story, 'I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me' (Lovecraft 1999, 169). With the discovery that reality is fundamentally hostile or indifferent to humanity, it becomes difficult for Thurston to be joyful and grateful for existence.

Given the prospect of Cthulhu's awakening and given that the power of the Old Ones transcends the laws of nature as humans understand them, there is also little hope of creating a positive future for humanity. The human cultists' vision is that in the end, 'mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and revelling in joy' (Lovecraft 1999, 155). The time of humanity is coming to an end, and there is ultimately nothing we can do to make things better. Once the truth of what reality is really like is known, all our endeavours seem ephemeral and insignificant: 'Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men' (Lovecraft 1999, 169).

I will now move on to analyse the relevance of *The Call of Cthulhu* for Nagasawa's arguments.

Lovecraft and Nagasawa's problem of evil

All aspects of Lovecraft's horror are not analogous to Nagasawa's problem of evil. Some of the differences make our world seem better. Even though humanity in our world also faces severe problems, which some have described in Lovecraftian terms (Lysgaard 2019), at least we will most likely not be eaten by Cthulhu. Hence, the futuristic aspects of the existential problem of evil seem more severe in Lovecraft's imagined world, although Nagasawa's problem of evil also includes a future-oriented pragmatic dimension, as discussed. On the other

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hand, *The Call of Cthulhu* does not describe humanity itself as being created by, or dependent on evil, which is a central part of Nagasawa's systemic problem of evil. But despite these differences, in *The Call of Cthulhu*, humanity clearly faces an 'axiological expectation mismatch' between our expectations and how the world really is. And in both the Cthulhuverse and our world, the problem concerns fundamental features of reality that humanity has no power to change (Nagasawa 2024, 168–169).

The in-principle possibility of a problem of evil for atheists is the first lesson I draw from putting Lovecraft and Nagasawa into dialogue. *The Call of Cthulhu* presents an imagined universe in which there indeed seems to be a significant problem of evil for atheists, in the form of epistemic, emotive, and pragmatic challenges. It thus provides a useful thought experiment for testing philosophical objections against Nagasawa's problem. If these do not work in the Lovecraftian universe, then this may provide a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, meaning that the objections may also not work in relation to our local environment. If the badness of the Cthulhuverse would create a severe existential problem of evil, then it seems a world with somewhat less badness might also pose a challenge, with the severity of the challenge depending on the degree of badness.[6]

Consider this in relation to the possibility of local optimism. Against Nagasawa, some have argued that it may be possible to remain an existential optimist on local grounds even while granting that, from a wider perspective (such as when considering all of Earth's history), things are overall bad. Sugeng (2025, 5) argues that one could be a selfish personal optimist, being grateful for one's own existence, even if others have less fortunate circumstances. Kahane (2022) argues that even if the badness of the cosmos prevents thoroughgoing existential optimism, it could still allow a more limited gladness about one's own existence or even humanity's local circumstances. Perhaps the badness of the global environment might even increase our appreciation of the goodness of our local circumstances, just as an oasis is no less valuable for being in the middle of a desert. After all, 'dark surroundings often amplify, rather than dampen, the gladness we feel about glimmers of good' (Kahane 2022, 709).

Lovecraft's own ideas might be brought in to support this criticism as well: for instance, he found much delight in writing his own horror stories. As he wrote,

> Pleasure to me is wonder – the unexplored, the unexpected, the thing that is hidden and the changeless thing that lurks behind superficial mutability. To trace the remote in the immediate; the eternal in the ephemeral; the past in the present; the infinite in the finite; these are to me the springs of delight and beauty.[7]

Lovecraft's protagonists also commonly manage to remain somewhat sane, remaining between the extremes of madness and denial. Although 'even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison' (Lovecraft 1999, 169), meaning that although the protagonists certainly do not emerge unchanged, they remain functional at least for some time.

Nagasawa has several replies to the possibility of local optimism. As noted, he argues that the problem of systemic evil is pervasive and thus there is no environment in which it is irrelevant. Also, he argues that the problem of evil is a challenge, not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle (Nagasawa 2024, 177). Those who find reason for gladness in a dark world may still find it challenging, and the resulting cognitive dissonance requires a solution. Moreover, positive action often requires more foundational positive beliefs about the world. For example, procreation is more sensible if one believes that 'the environment we inhabit merits our appreciation and gratitude because it offers the opportunity or potential for offspring to flourish and lead meaningful lives' (Nagasawa 2024, 184). If we did not have

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such a belief, it would be more moral not to have children, although we might still express gratefulness in a more limited sense.

However, the analogy with Lovecraftian horror allows a further reply.[8] Even supposing that local optimism and gratefulness are possible in a world that contains much suffering, *The Call of Cthulhu* seems to show that there may be a threshold of badness, beyond which local optimism becomes much less feasible. In such cases, the darkness of the environment would not cause the light of our goodness to shine brighter but might instead dim it. For instance, living in a world with Cthulhu would not, it seems, amplify our gladness about the 'glimmers of good' (Kahane 2022, 709) in our own lives. This provides a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the position that local and global existential optimism can be fully separated. The existence of great Cthulhu, sleeping in his halls somewhere under Earth's oceans, would pose a problem for local optimism. But then, plausibly, other fundamentally evil or bad features of our reality could also pose such a problem (even if a weaker one).

The question then becomes, of course, what the scope of the problem of evil is in our world, in comparison to the Cthulhuverse. My use of the Lovecraftian horror as a *reductio ad absurdum* against some objections to Nagasawa assumes that Lovecraft's imagined cosmos is worse than our world. So, admitting that there would be a problem of evil for atheists in a Lovecraftian scenario does not require believing that the problem is equally severe in our world. Nevertheless, if Nagasawa is correct about the problem of systemic evil, then our world is also a fundamentally bad place. Nagasawa points particularly to the cruelty of natural selection and the scale of suffering it necessitates. This is a 'biological system which necessitates pain and suffering for uncountably many organisms' (Nagasawa 2024, 123), and which our own existence depends on, making it perverse to express 'pleasure about and gratitude for living in our environment with smiley faces' (Nagasawa 2024, 163).

Many critics have argued that the world may not be as bad as this (e.g. Kahane 2022; Oppy 2024). However, in atheistic uses of the evolutionary problem of evil, commonplace assumptions do seem to lead to a highly negative view of the world. For instance, our millions of years of evolutionary history are often thought to add to the problem, because they increase the scale of suffering (e.g. Dawkins 1995, 131–132; Kitcher 2009, 123), and because a process using natural selection seems to be an unnecessarily cruel way to create (e.g. Draper 2012). But, as I have argued elsewhere (Kojonen 2022, 395), increasing the number of animals only makes the problem of evil worse if the lives of animals are, on average, bad and thus do not, on balance, add good to the world. Drawing on C. S. Lewis' principle of repeatable reasons, I pointed out that if some act is overall good or justifiable, then repeating it does not make the act more morally problematic (Kojonen 2022, 391–395). Similarly, then, increasing the number of animals does not make the problem of evil worse if the creation of a mortal animal capable of suffering is itself a good and justifiable act. The increased scale of evolution will only make things worse if we assume that 'the creation of each mortal creature on average adds more bad than good to the world' (Kojonen 2022, 395). But this would make our world a very bad place and thus leads to Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists. Although the precise threshold of evil that creates problems for optimists is hard to determine (Kahane 2022; Oppy 2024), it seems that, under such assumptions, the massive amounts of evolutionary evil should indeed count as at least some kind of problem.

One way to respond to the problem for atheists would be to argue that, on average, animal lives add value to the world (a conclusion that might also delight wildlife conservationists). But, as Nagasawa (2025, 386) points out, this would then also reduce or eliminate the mismatch between the theists' expectations and the empirical data. Either way, the landscape of the discussion on evil has changed.[9]

Comparison with Lovecraft might be used to expand Nagasawa's problem of evil. Nagasawa focuses on axiological expectations mismatches in the case of systemic evil.

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However, he notes that other phenomena, such as the prevalence of human suffering (Nagasawa 2024, 130–131, 143–144, 147) and the problem of impermanence (Nagasawa 2024, 195–230), might also be understood as systemic. He references (Nagasawa 2024, 188) thinkers such as Craig (1994, 57–75) and de Ray (2023) who have argued that a naturalistic cosmos may threaten the meaningfulness of life (see further Metz and Seachris 2023). Expanding on such aspects could bring Nagasawa's problem of evil closer to *The Call of Cthulhu*, in which the mismatch arises from expectations regarding human rationality, morality, and significance in relation to the cosmos.

Moreover, although Lovecraft's understanding of the modern scientific worldview is clearly an important inspiration of his horror, biographers have noted how events in Lovecraft's life, such as the mental and physical illness of loved ones, the fear of the unknown (in the form of racism), as well as war and political upheaval, plausibly also influenced his fiction (Kneale 2006; Houllebecq 2009; but cf. Joshi 2018). Related to the idea of an 'axiological expectations mismatch', events such as sickness, war, famine, and death often upend the course of human lives, contrary to what we would have wanted or expected based on psychological or culturally shaped expectations. The example of Lovecraft thus raises the question of whether such broader experiences might not also contribute to Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists. Granted, sometimes axiological expectations mismatches may be mild, as when a young scientist becomes disillusioned when the reality of science is messier than portrayed in popular narratives (De Ridder 2022). But other times, a more localised challenge, such as war or the loss of a loved one, may provide an axiological expectations mismatch that is psychologically much more impactful than natural selection. Perhaps such experiences might also be part of a larger problem of evil for atheists, as in the Eastern 'problem of impermanence' which Nagasawa (2024, 208) does discuss as a systemic evil.

As noted, our possible dependence on a fundamentally evil system is one aspect of Nagasawa's problem of evil that is not explored in *The Call of Cthulhu*. To explore this aspect, I now turn to Le Guin.

Those Who Walk Away from Omelas

Ursula K. Le Guin is most well known for her *Earthsea Chronicles* fantasy series. But Le Guin also wrote many other novels and short stories, of which *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* is one of the most discussed. Le Guin often used her fiction as a 'safe, sterile laboratory for trying out ideas in, a means of thinking about reality, a method' (Gunn 2014), which makes it philosophically interesting.[10]

In the case of *Omelas*, Le Guin (1975, 275–276) calls it a 'psychomyth' and a variation of an idea found in the works of both Fyodor Dostoyevsky (d. 1881) and William James (d. 1910). James had argued it would be a 'hideous thing' to accept a utopia to be grounded on the condition that 'a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture' (James 1891, 333). In contrast to James, who, Le Guin (1975, 275–276) writes, assumed 'all his readers as decent as himself', Le Guin's imagined city of Omelas is full of people who do accept the suffering of such a lonely soul as necessary for the continuation of their utopia. However, in her story, there are also 'those who walk away', to whom Le Guin calls our attention with her choice of title. Both Le Guin and James, in turn, echo Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In Dostoyevsky's work, Ivan Karamazov famously dissents from any theistic 'higher harmony' of 'eternal happiness' that has as its price 'the torture of one small child' (Dostoevsky 1994, 306–308). Le Guin's story hence draws on theological themes.[11] But compared to Dostoyevsky, Le Guin's work focuses on a secular utopian scenario, making her story a more appropriate comparison to Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists.[12] It is also an interesting contrast to Lovecraftian horror, because Omelas initially

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seems better than our world, even a utopia, if we were to evaluate it solely by the proportion of joy and suffering.

The story describes the seemingly utopian city of Omelas, where people live in peace, full of happy children and 'mature, intelligent, passionate adults' (Le Guin 1975, 278). There are no kings, no priests, and no soldiers in Omelas, yet all live in harmony. And if the utopian city strikes the reader as too 'goody-goody', then the reader should be free to imagine it also includes sex and drugs (though without addiction) – 'if an orgy would help, don't hesitate' (Le Guin 1975, 279). But, at least, 'one thing I know there of in Omelas is guilt' (Le Guin 1975, 279). In sum,

> A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: This is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life (Le Guin 1975, 280).

But, then, the narrator tells us 'one more thing':

> In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. [...] The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting (Le Guin 1975, 281).

For some reason, not disclosed by the narrator, the happiness of Omelas can only continue as long as the child is kept miserable and lonely, with no expression of kindness by others. Children, when they reach the age of understanding, are always brought to see the child, so everyone knows what is happening. But, they also know they cannot do anything to help, lest the happiness of Omelas be destroyed:

> To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed (Le Guin 1975, 282).

Most inhabitants come to accept the suffering as necessary, and live on, finally accepting the 'terrible justice of reality' (Le Guin 1975, 283). In comparison to the darkness of the child 'snivelling in the dark', they even see more clearly the joyful beauty of the flute-player's music in the sunlight of the first morning of summer – and 'it is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science' (Le Guin 1975, 283). However, nothing seems to make this happiness inevitable for the inhabitants of Omelas. Indeed, some cannot accept the child's suffering and leave Omelas without coming back, going to a place 'even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness' (Le Guin 1975, 284).

All three aspects of Nagasawa's problem of evil are present in Omelas. There is an *epistemic problem*: knowing that the city's happiness depends on the continual suffering of a lonely soul is in tension with regarding the city as a good place. There is an emotive problem: the proper reaction to discovering the truth should be shock and disgust, and acceptance of it would be immoral. There is also a pragmatic problem: there seems to be no way to solve the problem without causing even more suffering, and it is difficult for the residents to imagine what the alternative would be. Despite this, the ending is hopeful, although the realisation of the hope of 'those who walk away' is left ambiguous.

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Le Guin does not directly tell us what point she wants to make through her story. Rather, she leaves it open to the reader's consideration. But beyond her introduction, a clue seems to be provided by her use of the words 'banality of evil', which comes from Arendt's (1963) discussion of Nazism (Case 2022). Normal people, Arendt argued, can participate in and enable an evil system when they merely do their jobs and fail to question the regime.[13] Similarly, in Omelas, people become accustomed to the idea that the child must suffer so others can live as they wish. All that is required for it to continue is their inaction. Perhaps, then, the systems that we readers inhabit may also have a hidden basement, and we are invited to think about what sort of moral cost may be involved in our present way of life. To what extent do our ends really justify the means used to attain them? And, might there be a need to look for a better way to arrange society, leaving our 'Omelas' behind?

Omelas and the systemic problem

In relation to Nagasawa's argument, *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* provides an interesting analogy, because the evil of Omelas is clearly systemic. Compared with *The Call of Cthulhu*, the example of Omelas is better at highlighting the effect of systemic dependence on evil. Even if the overall proportion of suffering in Omelas is relatively low – much lower than in our world – the dependence of its happiness on evil nevertheless clearly makes a difference. In light of Omelas, it seems that, once one realises that one's happiness depends on systemic evil, this should not leave us indifferent. The system's fundamental darkness seems to taint its results and should prompt us to seek a better way. Similarly, one might argue that if our existence and happiness depend on systemic evil in nature, this would also seem to taint our happiness. It would challenge our optimism, our existential gratitude, and our hopes for the future. We should have little motivation to perpetuate such a system, such as by procreating our own species or by protecting wild animals (since they also perpetuate the system of natural selection).

As in the case of *The Call of Cthulhu*, Omelas also functions as a *reductio ad absurdum* of some objections. Le Guin (1975, 283) writes of those who accept the 'terrible justice of reality' and believe that the child's suffering even makes their compassion for other children more beautiful by comparison. Insofar as the reader believes there is something ugly in this attitude, then this would support Nagasawa's (2024, 163) contention that likewise, there is something ugly about making 'smiley faces while, at the same time, recognizing that we are standing on the corpses of countless people and sentient animals'.

The aptness of thought experiments and analogies depends on whether they are relevantly similar to the comparison case (Juthe 2005). There is thus a need to address some of the central differences between Omelas and the alleged systemic evil of natural selection. One potential difference concerns moral responsibility. In the city of Omelas, all adults know about what is happening and choose not to interfere. Therefore, they are not only dependent on systemic evil but also collectively responsible for it. Having personal responsibility for some wrongdoing clearly makes it more morally grotesque to then rejoice in personally not experiencing the same, because this includes benefiting from injustice (Butt 2007; Pasternak 2021). In contrast, lacking the capacity for time travel, we cannot change our evolutionary history, which is a necessary condition for being in control of it and thus morally responsible (see Talbert 2016). One might then argue that moral responsibility creates a difference between our situation and the citizens of Omelas.

However, even if this difference were granted, Omelas would still illustrate that an axiological expectations mismatch can arise between the fundamental nature of a system we depend on and what we believe the world should be like. The nature of the system matters, and a fundamentally evil system can create an existential challenge from a secular

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perspective. The evil of Omelas does not have to be identical to the evil of nature for this fundamental analogy to hold. Moreover, it seems the moral difference is not as great as might seem, but rather points to a way in which Nagasawa's problem of evil might be expanded by including our moral responsibility. As in Nagasawa's problem of systemic evil, the residents of Omelas are likewise not individually responsible for the creation and existence of the system. Rather, they are only responsible for their own reaction to the system. Similarly, while we are not responsible for our evolutionary history, we are responsible for the way we collectively perpetuate the system of nature and continue to use it to enable our continued existence. Hence, if the system of nature indeed is morally evil, then this does also seem to create both a moral and existential challenge for us, as Omelas does for its residents.

In other respects, differences between our situation and Omelas might even intensify the problem for us. For the residents of Omelas, an alternative way of life seems inconceivable, but they still have a way of leaving the city. Some commentators have even pointed out that the dissidents may not need to leave but might rather 'stay and fight' for change (cf. Jemisin 2018). But it seems far more inconceivable how, from a secular perspective, we could escape our dependence on biological nature or change the system of nature, although the transhumanists may try (e.g. Lombardo 2016). The impossibility of escaping our dependence on the biosphere intensifies the axiological mismatch and the existential problem of evil for us, if we indeed believe that the system of biology is fundamentally evil.

Hence, Omelas illustrates how dependence on a fundamentally evil system could create a problem of evil from a secular perspective. But what remains to be seen is whether the suffering in nature, the systemic problem of evil, similarly makes our existence depend on evil. Again, how we conceive of the problem of evolutionary evil for theism seems to make a difference. On standard accounts of the problem, natural selection is indeed seen as an extremely cruel process, akin to putting animals in a cage to fight each other for scraps of food (Kojonen 2022, 396–398). If our existence depends on such a process, then it depends on systemic evil, just as in Omelas. It seems, then, that the problem of evil for atheists is intensified in accounts that emphasise the cruelty of natural selection, for example, as a way of arguing against theism.

However, this picture of natural selection may be too negative. In Omelas, the happiness of the city depends unambiguously on a moral evil. There are no redeeming qualities to the suffering of the lonely child in the basement; their life is full of misery with no room for happiness or comfort. In contrast, Oppy (2024, 347) argues that natural selection is just 'the differential survival and reproduction of individuals due to differences in phenotype'. And hence, natural selection does not necessarily involve suffering. Likewise, I have also argued that evolution mostly results from animals living normal lives (Kojonen 2022, 399–400). Yes, animal lives involve competition and violent struggles between predator and prey, but also a great deal of cooperation and happiness (see also Nowak and Coakley 2013; Peels 2018; Wahlberg 2024). Thus understood, the problem with evolution is not natural selection or evolution in general, but perhaps particular cases of limited resources or certain forms of life.

If these responses succeed, this would probably be acceptable to Nagasawa. In that case, after all, the severity of the evolutionary problem of evil for theists would also decrease (Nagasawa 2025, 386). This would be good news for both theists and atheists. However, Omelas also provides potential for a further defence of the evolutionary problem of evil. Supposing that evolution mostly results from animals living their regular lives, one might still argue that, as good as it is (Wahlberg 2024), leaving animals to live their lives autonomously also has a systemic cost. Even an overall beneficial system of natural selection and competition could still make it statistically inevitable that some animal lives will include a relatively greater portion of misery. These animals, then, might be the cost

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of the system, akin to the lonely soul hidden in a basement in Omelas. This might help defend Nagasawa's (2025, 387) contention that there is at least to some degree a 'lawlike systemic connection' between natural selection and suffering. On balance, this picture of nature would still be more positive than many presentations of the evolutionary problem of evil, since on this understanding, evil is not equally fundamental to evolution, being a statistical by-product rather than the fundamental driver of evolution. But perhaps it still creates a challenge.[14]

Conclusion

The idea for this article came from noticing that fiction deals with the same kind of experiences of axiological expectations mismatch that Nagasawa's problem of evil is based on. I then thought of an experiment: What might happen if we put Lovecraft and Le Guin into dialogue with Nagasawa? The process was rewarding, and it seems to me that both examples illustrate the power of literature in allowing us to imagine alternative worlds and thereby test our philosophical assumptions.

Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu* shows how a hostile cosmos could, in principle, break optimism. It also shows that an axiological expectation mismatch could arise from a wider range of phenomena than Nagasawa discusses. Le Guin's *Those Who Walk Away from Omelas* shows how discovering dependence on hidden suffering can morally taint even a seemingly utopic society and challenge existential gratitude. One might even have a moral responsibility not to participate in such a system. In both stories, we see an axiological expectation mismatch, just as in Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists. In these imagined worlds, there is an epistemic clash between human expectations and what reality is really like, an emotional difficulty because this reality is hard to live with, and a pragmatic difficulty because changing fundamental features of our reality seems hard to imagine.

The point of the analogies is not that reality is exactly like Lovecraft's horror story or Le Guin's Omelas. However, if the starkest descriptions of evolutionary evil are correct, then this would indeed put us, in many respects, in a situation similar to that of these thought experiments. But if the assumptions of the evolutionary problem of evil are challenged, which would help atheists deal with the existential challenge, then it seems the problem will also be that much weaker for theism. This illustrates that there is a link between the evolutionary problem of evil for theists and Nagasawa's problem of evil for atheists.

Dialogue with the imagined worlds of literature does not determine what our world is like – that requires studying our own environment. But literature does help sharpen our questions and helps map where existential optimism might be warranted, and how it might be shaken.

Notes

1. The short stories of Lovecraft and Le Guin function here as thought experiments, and the arguments of the article can be followed without acquaintance with the original works. However, this bypasses one benefit of the literature in comparison with traditional thought experiments. Whereas thought experiments can be quite isolated, literature better allows for immersion into an entire alternative world (Mikkonen 2015). This brings philosophy closer to what Stump (2010, 40–63) has called 'Franciscan knowledge'. Nagasawa also acknowledges that such experiential and narrative knowledge has commonly played a role in discussions of the problem of evil – for instance, he references Schopenhauer's idea of bringing optimists on a tour of hospitals and prisons, as well as Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), in which the Leibnizian optimism of Dr. Pangloss meets a cavalcade of suffering and imperfection in the world (Nagasawa 2024, 130–131; see further Strickland 2010).

2. Nagasawa's definition of optimism is modest, as it does not require, for example, believing that we are living in a Leibnizian 'best possible world'. Nagasawa even argues that this style of optimism may be compatible with seeing our world as the 'worst possible world' (Nagasawa 2024, 143). The minimalistic attitudes of existential gratefulness

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and hope he describes are also compatible with modest forms of pessimism, or meliorism, as a middle ground between optimism and pessimism (see, e.g., Fiala 2021).

3. Towards the end of his book, Nagasawa (2024, 195–230) switches gears and writes of the 'problem of impermanence' as a version of the systemic problem of evil, for Asian religions. However, the features he discusses, such as death and lack of control, are also problems that affect Westerners. As Aakko (2024, 128) points out, the precise extent of the systemic problem and the relation of the epistemic and practical problems of evil are not quite clear, and the problem of impermanence seems to shift towards the existential side.

4. As Bialecki (2022, 435), Lovecraft's world includes a 'rejection of morality as having any metaphysically derived ethical charge. This was a world that contained the monstrous, the alien and the inhuman – but not evil'. One might thus argue that Lovecraftian monsters cannot be an example of the problem of evil. However, there may certainly be a problem of evil from the point of view of Lovecraft's human characters, and an 'axiological expectations mismatch', which is what is relevant for Nagasawa's argument.

5. Lovecraftian ideas have also been used as metaphors for other problems facing humanity. Writing on the philosophy of education, Lysgaard (2019, 95) argues that adopting a 'dark pedagogy' that works in the Lovecraftian 'twilight zone between denial and insanity' is required for teaching students about environmental problems, sustainability, and climate change. This is because teachers must help students to face not only current problems but also more fundamental facets of reality: 'We humans only exist as the result of coordinated mass murder on other fellow beings' (Lysgaard 2019, 102) and we face a 'neo-nihilistic horizon' because of the 'truth of extinction' – knowing that eventually the stars will burn out and all life will end (Lysgaard 2019, 100). This then provides something of a challenge to teachers, who must help their pupils become psychologically well-functioning adults.

6. The *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, as used here, are not meant to establish by analogy that our world really suffers from the problem of evil for atheists, but to test philosophical objections. The idea is that if certain philosophical objections against Nagasawa's argument were credible, such as the possibility of local optimism, then these should also apply in the Cthulhuverse. However, since these do not seem to eliminate the problem of evil in the Cthulhuverse, then this indicates a weakness in the objections. The extent to which our world suffers from the problem of systemic evil is then a separate empirical question. For further examples of this way of using thought experiments as *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, see Kojonen (2021, 79–86), and note 8 of the present article.

7. Lovecraft, 'In Defence of Dagon'. Quoted in Lovecraft 1999, xx. In such passages, Lovecraft's expressions seem curiously similar to Otto's 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans', although Lovecraftian horrors in their absurdity are meant to be the opposite of holy, an anti-mythology (see further Hunter 2021).

8. My argument here is inspired by recent discussion of sceptical theism. Hendricks (2025) discusses an argument from the possible amounts of evil against sceptical theism, using a 'Horrifying Cosmic Trip' as a thought experiment. Sceptical theists respond to the problem of evil by arguing that God could have unknown reasons for allowing evil, and our lack of knowledge of such reasons gives no probability of their non-existence. But, if this were true, then it seems no amount of evidence could count against God's goodness. Not even if we were taken on a 'Horrifying Cosmic Trip', a tour of the universe in which we visit planet after planet full of unimaginable horrors, would we have even a smidge of evidence against God's goodness. But this is an unintuitive conclusion, so it seems sceptical theism should be abandoned, and even a smaller amount of evil should count as some evidence against God's goodness. Sceptical theists respond to the argument in different ways. Hendricks (2025, 248–254) argues that the common-sense view is wrong, and that the amount of evil indeed does not matter for sceptical theism. In contrast, McBrayer (2025) argues that there may be some threshold of the amount of evil, beyond which sceptical theism would begin to seem implausible, but our world does not arise over that threshold. McBrayer also argues that there should be some minimum threshold of minute evils and imperfections, below which evil does not count as evidence against God.

9. In Kojonen (2022), I argue in this vein that evolution does not make the problem of evil worse, and that both the problem of scale and the problem of natural selection's cruelty can be responded to. I do not claim that this solves the problem of evil for theists on its own, but it does change our understanding of the severity of the problem. For discussion of the argument in Kojonen (2022) in relation to other views about evil in evolution, see Marsh (2026, section 3.1). Wahlberg (2024) defends the fittingness of evolution as a method of creation more explicitly by reference to the value of autonomy.

10. Le Guin's use of science fiction as a test of ideas calls to mind the common description of philosophical thought experiments as the 'laboratory of the mind' (e.g. Brown 1991).

11. I also detect other theological echoes in the theme of leaving Omelas, a city fundamentally built on sin. This calls to mind, for example, Abraham's departure from Ur, 'even though he did not know where he was going' (Hebrews 11:8 NIV), Israel's exodus from Egypt, and Revelation 18's call for the people of God to leave Babylon. It is difficult to know if these are intended allusions, but Le Guin was plausibly familiar with such religious ideas and experiences. Growing up in Berkeley, many of Le Guin's parents' friends were Jewish intellectuals exiled from Europe (Freeman 2018). Le Guin herself was an atheist and even accepted an award from the Freedom of Religion

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Foundation (Le Guin 2009). This is perhaps why the absence of priests is a positive feature of the utopia, although the idea that 'the victory that they celebrate is life' (Le Guin 1975, 280) calls to mind the Jewish toast 'L'chaim'.

12. In terms of present categories, Ivan Karamazov's argument is plausibly an example of antitheodicy directed against theism, whereas Le Guin's work is a secular antitheodicy (see further Pihlström 2026, 71–90).

13. In current discussion, Sharpe (2023) has argued Arendt was misled by Eichmann's performance of banality at his Jerusalem trial, and in reality, Eichmann was not simply a conformist but a fanatical Nazi. This has little bearing on Le Guin's thought experiment, but is important to note for purposes of historical accuracy.

14. One of Nagasawa's themes is to highlight the existential cost of the problem of evil. It is thus worth noting that the rejection of systems which have the statistical probability of creating suffering also has a substantial existential cost. For example, arguably by participating in the system of traffic by driving cars we increase the risk of accidents, although not allowing vehicle use would also create harm (Abebe 2024; Wolff and Hayenhjelm 2012). One way of trying to navigate the problem would be doctrine of double effect, according to which it might be permissible to create a risk of harm as a foreseen side effect of bringing about a good result (see McIntyre 2023). But this is then quite similar to evolutionary theodicies that appeal to the value of animal autonomy and other benefits (e.g. Peels 2018; Wahlberg 2024).

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