

Is the Universe Indifferent? Should We Care?

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Abstract

The scientific worldview is often claimed to reveal a universe chillingly indifferent to human suffering. But it's unclear what it means to describe the universe as indifferent, or what a non-indifferent universe would be like. I suggest that the relevant contrast isn't simply that between God and His absence, nor is the complaint about indifference focused on the lack of a kind of cosmic concern. At its heart is the idea of a mismatch between world and value. Although the causal forces governing our world are 'blind', they nevertheless do partly align with value. Still, our world is so arranged that senseless suffering is depressingly common, and the rosy non-indifferent counterfactual won't contain such evil. I argue, however, that it is a mistake to long for such an alternative: it must either involve an upside-down moral order, or would be a world from which we, and those who senselessly suffer, will be absent.

It is often said that modern science reveals a godless, chilling universe utterly indifferent to human suffering. This idea troubled many 19th and early 20th century thinkers.¹ One of Carlyle's characters describes a "Universe... void of all Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility; it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb to limb".² Bertrand Russell similarly described a godless world governed by relentless "omnipotent matter" that is "blind to good and evil",³ and we can find similar sentiments in authors such as Hardy, Crane and

¹Though Hume's Philo already spoke of "blind Nature" and argued that "the original source of all things is entirely indifferent... and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold..." (Hume, 1779/1990).

²Carlyle (1833).

³Russell (1903). Santayana (1900) similarly wrote that "[t]he existence and well-being of man upon earth are, from the point of view of the universe, an indifferent incident".

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Melville, whose Ahab describes a world that is “oblivious of all suffering man”.⁴ This idea of a universe brutally indifferent to human concerns was central to the horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft, a self-described ‘indifferentist’ who portrayed a world where all-powerful tentacled beings crush the humans in their way as we would swat a fly.⁵

The indifference of the world is still taken to be one of the key lessons of the scientific worldview. Carl Sagan concluded that “the universe seems neither benign nor hostile, merely indifferent”,⁶ and Richard Dawkins similarly writes that nature

“is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous—indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.”⁷

And Susan Wolf remarks that this indifference “makes some people shudder, and leads them to despair”.⁸

The Victorians experienced the indifference of the universe as a shocking discovery. By now, it has become a commonplace of popular culture, even a cliché—a phrase to insert in the lines of your jaded anti-hero when you want him to sound superficially deep.⁹ But being repeated so often doesn’t make the phrase any clearer. In what way is the universe indifferent? What would it even mean for the world *not* to be indifferent? Nor is it clear whether we should regard the indifference of the world, with William James, as a “nightmare view of life”,¹⁰ a hard truth we must somehow learn to accept,¹¹ or, with Nietzsche, as a liberating discovery.¹²

Worries about the indifference of the universe are sometimes conflated with other existential concerns—such as those relating to our supposed cosmic insignificance, the meaning of life, or the threat of nihilism. The concern about indifference, however, is a distinct worry and, indeed, one that is even in tension with some of these other worries. The world might be chillingly indifferent even if our lives do possess value and are meaningful and significant, and to explain what this means, and how it matters, is to clarify a distinctive concern about the naturalist worldview and the implications of atheism.

⁴See especially the closing lines of Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and Crane’s poem ‘A man said to the universe’ and his 1897 story ‘The Open Boat’.

⁵In his 1929 story ‘The Silver Key’, Lovecraft writes that “the blind cosmos grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something and from something back to nothing again, neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness”.

⁶Sagan (1994).

⁷Dawkins (1995).

⁸Wolf (2010), 28. Stanley Kubrick went so far as to describe it as “the most terrifying fact about the universe” (Nordern, 1968).

⁹Besides Kubrick, I could also cite Wislawa Szymborska, Werner Herzog, Roger Waters, Thom Yorke, J. K. Rowling, Alexander McCall Smith—and *Mad Men*’s Don Draper.

¹⁰James (1895).

¹¹Freud (1927) described the coming to terms with this truth as an “education to reality”.

¹²Nietzsche (2003) writes cheerfully of “nature’s magnificent indifference to good or evil”, and Camus’s *The Outsider* ends with Meursault embracing the “benign indifference of the world”. Both Nietzsche and Camus are less sanguine about this in other moments (see especially Camus, 1942/2000).

The indifference of the universe is an arch metaphor of atheism, but we shall see that it's not merely a shorthand for disbelief. I will consider several ways of cashing out this metaphor, and while the world's indifference is hardly a cause for celebration on any of them, we shall see that it would nevertheless be a mistake to wish that the world had *not* been indifferent. Such a wish faces a dilemma. If what you wish is that *our* world wasn't indifferent, what you are really longing for is an upside-down moral order—a world which still contains all that suffering, just with a repugnant rationale tacked on. To wish for non-indifferent world that is also morally compelling is to wish for a world from which that suffering is simply absent. But it must also be a world from which we, and the sufferers who first prompted us to rail against the world's indifference, would also be absent.

1 | THE ABSENT GOD

The alleged indifference of the world isn't, presumably, a *positive* feature it is claimed to have—cosmologists ascribe all sorts of extraordinary properties to the universe, but indifference is obviously not one of them. To describe the universe as indifferent is to make a negative claim, to refer to something missing, to an absence. To get a grip on what is being claimed, then, we must get a grip on what it would be for the universe to *not* be indifferent. We need to characterize the relevant counterfactual.

It's natural to assume that what is absent is the supervising, omnibenevolent deity of theism, and this contrast is often invoked by those who complain about the indifference of the world. James, for example, writes of “the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity” being replaced with that of “an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom.”¹³ Moreover, this sense of indifference to needless suffering obviously plays a key part in the argument for atheism. I therefore accept, and will repeatedly invoke, the following counterfactual:

If God had existed, the universe wouldn't have been indifferent.

However, by pointing to God in this way we don't really explain what it is that's supposed to be missing from our world. First, people who lament the indifference of the world aren't *simply* complaining about God's absence. They are complaining about something that a godless world is missing. But what is missing isn't, or isn't necessarily, God Himself, but something that is supposed to follow from His existence. God's existence may change the world in a wide range of ways, including in ways that needn't be welcome to those who lament the world's indifference.¹⁴ So the idea of God may be a guide, but is not itself the answer. Second, even if the above counterfactual is correct, it cannot be assumed that there aren't *other* ways in which the world could have been non-indifferent, ways that don't involve God. Atheists assume that *our* godless world is indifferent, but that doesn't mean that other conceivable godless worlds must also be. This is important both because, on some views, the very idea of God is incoherent and thus cannot mark a genuine alternative, and because it leaves it open that a sufficiently non-indifferent world might be far less axiologically ambitious or metaphysically extravagant than theism. Third, while I agree that the contrast with theism is natural, I doubt that we need to think of God to experience the world as indifferent. Faced with pointless suffering or injustice—it might be a large-scale horror like the Holocaust but also just that one infant whose cells are metastasizing—we can't help but think that something is wrong with the

¹³James (1895).

¹⁴So-called ‘anti-theists’, in particular, offer a list of ways in which God's existence would be unwelcome. See Kahane (2011), (2018) and Loughheed (2020).

world. We can't, for example, help but think: *how can such a thing even grow in a human body, in the body of this cherished being?*¹⁵

To rail against the indifference of the universe is thus not merely to lament God's absence. But the above conditional entails that an indifferent universe is a godless one, and the argument of this paper is pursued from such a standpoint: given that we inhabit a godless world, in what sense is it indifferent and does it matter if it is?

2 | THE WORLD DOESN'T CARE

Understood literally, the contrary of indifference is an attitude of concern. If so, then a non-indifferent universe is a universe that cares.¹⁶ But if by calling the universe indifferent we mean that the universe doesn't care about us, or about anything, then this seems a misleading way to state a banality. To say that universe doesn't care about us isn't to say that it *regards us with indifference*, let alone that it's callous, as Dawkins says—itself an anthropomorphism—but merely to assert the negative claim that it's not true that the universe cares about us. But it's also not true that the universe is sleepy or lazy or left-handed (indeed, it's *also* not true that the universe regards us with callous indifference¹⁷)—and the same is also true of rocks, or the number five. But we don't find the need to list all the properties that things don't have.

We should distinguish two distinct issues here. One is that the very idea of the universe caring is a category error. I'll turn to this in a moment. The other is that it's arbitrary to single out just this one absence out of a vast list. This worry is more easily answered. When no one appreciates our clever joke, we don't rail against the fact the universe doesn't have (that it's not true that it has) a sense of humor. But, understandably, we do care, at least in some moments, about the fact that—in some sense still to be specified—the universe remains silent in the face of senseless suffering. Some absences are just more important than others.

We care about the universe not caring about our suffering. To complain about that is to complain not just that the universe doesn't care, but that it doesn't care about *us*. It wouldn't help much if the universe cared deeply about particles moving about in certain fixed patterns (perhaps our own universe already reflects such concern?) or if it took sadistic pleasure in our agony.¹⁸ We want, to begin with, for the universe to care about things that matter, for it to desire the good, and to abhor evil. So what we have in mind is a kind of moral concern. A universe that was egoistically concerned only with its own interests, whatever these might be, wouldn't address our complaint. But in railing against the world's indifference we're presumably also assuming that *we* matter, at least to some extent, and merit cosmic concern. If, for example, suffering wasn't really bad, or if human suffering, while bad, was just

¹⁵Nietzsche actually thought that it was the rejection of "a world that makes one suffer" that inspired the consoling idea of a more perfect transcendent realm (1967, III, 579). If so, then the experience of an indifferent world is the (or a) source of the idea of God, and obviously can't be explained in terms of that idea.

¹⁶Trisel (2019) interprets the complaint about indifference in this attitudinal sense.

¹⁷For a detailed account of what an attitude of indifference involves, see Lillehammer (2017).

¹⁸See also Trisel (2019). When people describe the universe as indifferent, they often emphasize that it's not even cruel. And perhaps it's harder to fully grasp, or accept, that suffering just pointlessly happens. But it doesn't follow that we'd prefer the universe to be malicious rather than indifferent, or, more generally, that the key feature of an indifferent universe is that it's *mindless*. We'll see below both that mind-full universes can be indifferent and that, on a plausible reading, mindless universes can be non-indifferent.

too insignificant to matter, then the universe would have ignored our suffering even if it *had* cared—and *rightly* so.¹⁹

When people describe the universe as revealed by modern science, they often enough describe it as indifferent *and* remark that in such a vast universe, we humans are utterly insignificant on the cosmic scale. For example, Benatar suggests that when people are concerned about “human cosmic insignificance” they are, in large part, “concerned that the universe (including our own planet and its powerful natural forces) is indifferent to us”.²⁰ But we can now see that these are distinct concerns. When people worry about our supposed cosmic insignificance, they are complaining about a kind of deficiency in us. They think we don’t matter in the grand scheme of things. If so, then, to repeat, if the universe had cared, it would be a mistake for it to care about insignificant us.²¹ By contrast, to rail against a universe that remains silent while the innocent are butchered is to find the universe itself faulty. What disturbs us is the contrast between the horror that we face or witness and a universe that, as Russell puts it, is nevertheless blind to that evil. There’s an obvious tension between holding that senseless suffering doesn’t matter on the cosmic scale while at the same time arguing that, had God really existed, He wouldn’t have allowed such suffering to occur.

On some metaethical views, our supposed insignificance, and the universe’s indifference, might nevertheless be connected. On this view, we, and what happens to us, would have absolute value, and could matter on the cosmic scale, only if some cosmic being cared about us. It’s thus *because* the cosmos doesn’t care that we’re insignificant.²² There are familiar problems with such a view of value. If we don’t already matter, why should a cosmic being care about us? And if it did care about particles moving, or love injustice, would that really make these things absolute cosmic goods? Moreover, if caring can generate value, and significance, why isn’t it enough that *we* care about ourselves, or about each other? In any event, I see no reason to suppose that the complaint about the indifference of the universe is driven by this kind of subjectivism. It can grip a realist with just as much force.

There is much disagreement on what it is for a life to be meaningful.²³ It is therefore harder to spell out the relation between worries about indifference and worries about meaning. Some hold, rather implausibly, that our lives cannot be meaningful if God doesn’t exist; but invoking the world’s indifference would be a rather tortuous way to express such a view. And on many other views, whether lives contain meaning has little to do with such grand features of the cosmos.²⁴ Perhaps an indifferent world presents obstacles to meaningfulness, or rules out certain ways of leading a meaningful life. But even when (or if) the world’s indifference undermines meaning, these would still be distinct phenomena. And the way an indifferent world resists human strivings also opens space for distinctive forms of meaningful achievement.²⁵

¹⁹Mulgan (2015) describes something like such a world.

²⁰Wolf (2010, 28) also seems to assume these concerns go together though she doesn’t explicitly identify them. Szymborska (1996) also runs these issues together.

²¹On some theist views God’s love is supererogatory: He loves us *despite* our insignificance. But it seems to me implausible (even monstrous) to think that instances of extreme suffering that is undeserved could be said to be insignificant from the point of view of a perfectly good being.

²²Williams (2008) seems to express this view; I criticize this way of thinking about significance in Kahane (2014).

²³For thorough discussion of the many approaches currently on offer, see Metz (2013).

²⁴This is implicit in many current views of meaningfulness but see Trisel (2019) for an explicit argument that the universe’s indifference in the attitudinal sense I’ll discuss first is irrelevant to meaningfulness.

²⁵The mismatch between an indifferent world and human aspirations may endow some acts and lives with absurdity. But when I reflect on cases of utterly pointless suffering, I don’t find that my horror and indignation are laced with a sense of absurdity.

It's even less plausible that the complaint about the indifference of the universe expresses a worry about nihilism—the view that *everything* is indifferent, in the sense of possessing no value. Russell's omnipotent matter couldn't roll on blind to good and evil if nothing were good or evil. Moreover, if nothing mattered in this sense then the universe would have no reason to care about anything. And neither would we, including about the fact the universe doesn't care about us. That wouldn't matter, nor, for that matter, would all that suffering and injustice.²⁶

3 | COULD THE UNIVERSE CARE?

We can now return to the worry that it barely makes sense to conceive of the universe as literally caring about us, or about anything. What would that even mean? And if it made sense to think that the universe could literally care, how do we know that it doesn't? Maybe it *is* terribly upset about all that suffering. For how would things look like if the universe did care—would we hear a kind of cosmic wailing coming from the sky?

Invoking theism doesn't help since, if God had existed, He would either be outside the world or, in a more expansive sense of 'world', would Himself be a part of it. And the theist cosmos itself—the entire system of natural laws and galaxies—would still be just as indifferent. So even on classical theism it is not the universe itself that would literally care about us but what is, in one sense, a *part* of it. Why then isn't it enough that *we* care about us? Is it that we don't care enough, or in the right kind of way? What does adding God add exactly, caring-wise?

Now a perfect being would care perfectly: He would notice, and care about, everything, from horrific suffering to our slightest discomfort, even a sparrow falling. We humans obviously don't, and can't, care like that: there is, first, suffering no one knows about, and suffering that is known, but treated with (genuine) callous indifference, and we often enough care wrongly, elevating the shallow and the wicked and dismissing what has genuine value. It would be nice if there were such perfect caring in the world. But when we rail against the indifference of the universe, we aren't particularly concerned with, say, suffering unknown to anyone except the sufferer. We are typically concerned with instances of suffering we *do* know, and care, about. Moreover, it seems doubtful that if we cared more, and cared better, then the sense of an indifferent world would disappear. On the contrary: we would be doing all that caring precisely *against* the background of chilly cosmic indifference.

Is the idea, perhaps, that we want someone *other*, someone *non-human*, to care about us? But why would this be better than us caring about ourselves, and about each other? And suppose there actually is somewhere in our galaxy a super-benevolent extraterrestrial civilization that observes our every action with great concern, feeling sad for our pains and failures while cheering our triumphs. Would that really answer our worry about indifference? Or perhaps we want the caring to come, not just from someone else, but from the very foundation of the universe (whatever that means)? But it's not clear why this should matter—from where the caring issues rather than whether there is caring, and enough of it.

So it seems doubtful that the complaint about the indifference of the universe really has this attitudinal focus. On this reading, it just amounts to a bombastic way of saying that there should be more, and better, caring out there. And it wouldn't mark a categorical or metaphysical contrast between our world and the alternative we supposedly desire. In fact, that more caring alternative could probably be realized, at least to a large extent, within a naturalistic framework, and perhaps even by us.

²⁶See Kahane (2017).

I wrote above that we can't tell, just by looking around us, whether the universe feels concern about us. Yet when people rail against the world's indifference they are responding to something they think they can observe around them. Nor would knowing that there is such perfect cosmic care out there dissolve our sense that something is awry with the world. And while it would be nice if there were an all-seeing cosmic carer, such a scenario also has a sinister side: it's as if there's a secret stalker out there closely following the ups and downs of our lives, our upset tummies and petty fantasies—do we really want this constant exhaustive attention from a distance?²⁷

4 | VALUE CORRESPONDENCE

What we want then, isn't bare cosmic concern—not even of a perfectly good, omniscient and omnipotent being—but the kind of concern that manifests itself in the world itself. We don't want a being that silently (or for that matter loudly) weeps for us, but a benevolent force that intervenes, that prevents, or at least rewards and punishes. As physicist Steven Weinberg writes, what makes the scientific worldview chilling is that it teaches us that “there is no correspondence between what we think is the moral law and the laws of nature,”²⁸ and this is surely also what Carlyle and Russell mean when they speak of an “immeasurable Steam-engine” or “omnipotent matter” blindly “rolling on”. The problem with the world, then, isn't so much that it doesn't care, or that it regards suffering with callous indifference, but that it operates ‘blindly’, in line with laws that have no regard for good and evil. Stuff happens, and that's the end of it. And unlike a lack of care, this mismatch between value and the world is a straightforward (negative) property of the world, something that, for non-believers, is amply confirmed by a quick look around.²⁹

Nevertheless, this idea of a mismatch between world and value requires unpacking. We can again begin by considering the contrasting theist world. Here there is still that perfect attitudinal caring we have been discussing, but God's care is reflected in the world itself, so that *all* that occurs is *supremely* good, and is so *because* that would be for the best. Such a world would, on some views, offer complete overlap between the true and the good.³⁰

But correspondence with value is a matter of degree. It can be a lot weaker than the perfect correspondence described by some forms of theism. Consider the fine-tuning argument. Life, it's widely held, could arise only in an extremely narrow range of values in several of the fundamental physical constants. But—so the argument goes—it's implausible that these constants have these values as a mere coincidence; a better explanation is that they were set for the purpose of bringing life about. While this argument needn't mention value, it can be stated in terms of value: the universe is fine-tuned, it could be argued, to make it possible for things of value to emerge within it.³¹ Now theists recruit these considerations in support of theism, but the kind of correspondence with value directly

²⁷See Kahane (2011) for the worry that God's existence would deprive us of privacy.

²⁸Weinberg (2008).

²⁹Weinberg contrasts the laws of nature with the moral law, but moral laws only apply to agents and, as we shall see, a non-indifferent world needn't involve agency. The problem with the world is that it's such that evil regularly occurs in it, not that such evil is permitted by a non-existent agent. Even if such evil makes us wish that God had existed, we wish Him to be there, dutifully preventing that evil, because that would be *better*. I'll therefore understand the mismatch in axiological terms.

³⁰This would be so on a Leibnizian picture. But some theists deny that there is a best possible world or hold that the introduction of free will opens the door for local deviations from the good. On the latter view, even devout theists could wish that the world had exhibited even greater correspondence with value.

³¹Leslie (2013).

established by the argument is absolutely minimal: that the universe is such as to make it possible for *some* value bearers to appear in it, at some place and at some point. That's compatible with the vast majority of the universe being empty of value, as seems to be the case, as well as with pretty nasty stuff happening to those few value bearers, who may also soon vanish.

These are, roughly, two ends of a spectrum. Value correspondence can vary, in this way, both in spatiotemporal scope and in the likelihood of good outcomes, as well as in the amount of good these outcomes realize. In some conceivable universes, extraordinarily good outcomes are a near certainty in just a few locations, whereas in others there is everywhere a modest chance that minimal good will be realized.³²

5 | CORRESPONDENCE CAN BE MINDLESS AND EVEN BLIND

On the theist view, there's a match between world and value *because* the world was created by a perfectly good, loving being. But there would be such a match even on conceptions of God on which He is impassible or not even a person; value correspondence doesn't require attitudinal care. It doesn't even require intention, purpose, or mind of any sort. A world wouldn't be indifferent in the value-correspondence sense even on a Platonist axiarchical view on which it is goodness itself that is the driving principle of the world,³³ or on some forms of objective idealism. It's natural to similarly understand the idea of Karma as an impersonal cosmic principle of correspondence to value. Conversely, a universe that is thoroughly permeated by mind and purpose can still be indifferent in both the value-correspondence and attitudinal care senses. This is how things are on many pre-modern, 'enchanted' views of the world. The Greek gods cared mostly about themselves, and in both attitude and action, were often profoundly indifferent to human suffering.³⁴

Even on the axiarchical view, and presumably also on the Karmic picture, better things are more likely to happen *because* they are better, even if there is no intention, design, or literal purpose involved. But when we ask about the degree to which a given world corresponds to value, we need to distinguish between the degree to which the world tends to realize what is good (and not to realize the bad), and what explains this correspondence. The theist universe is such that this correspondence isn't only complete, but is also entirely explained by a value-responsive force;³⁵ this is also true of more impersonal Platonist or Karmic views. There *is* good *because* good is good. Call this *grounded value correspondence*.³⁶

³²There are variants of theism that imply only limited value correspondence. For example, both Mill (1874) and Hartshorne (1948) proposes conceptions of God on which He is supremely good yet of limited powers.

³³Leslie (2013).

³⁴The horrors enacted in Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* lead to a confrontation, in the play's concluding lines, with "the great indifference of the gods". For Bernard Williams, a defining feature of the work of Sophocles and Thucydides is their portrayal of humans dealing with "a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself is not well adjusted to ethical aspirations." (Williams, 1992, 163).

³⁵On some views, God creates value rather than responds to it.

³⁶We earlier rejected the idea that the complaint about indifference assumed a kind of subjectivism. However, to the extent that this complaint is concerned with grounded value correspondence, it actually presupposes a strong sense in which value is part of the 'fabric of the world', to use Mackie's phrase (though note that even robust value realism doesn't entail any correspondence between world and value).

However, the degree to which a world corresponds to value, and what underlies this correspondence, are different things. The source of the correspondence might be mere chance, things improbably lining up so as to align to the good. That's one response to the fine-tuning argument—we're just so lucky. Or think about the multiverse hypothesis. If this hypothesis is true, there probably already are worlds out there that realize utopia out of sheer chance. Call this *de facto value correspondence*.

But there is also something in between value itself explaining the correspondence and it occurring by an extraordinary stroke of luck. When something is good or bad, that value property supervenes on some natural (non-evaluative) property, such as an episode of pleasure or pain, a certain distribution of resources, etc. And there can be a perfectly good explanation of why certain outcomes that *are* good are more probable than inferior alternatives—so long as there's a good explanation of why certain natural properties are more likely to be realized compared to alternatives. But that explanation needn't at all mention the fact that these natural properties also happen to be good-makers. So there can be causal patterns that 'blindly' tend to the good. In such worlds, the occurrence of good needn't be an astonishing coincidence. It might even be highly probable. But it would still remain a kind of higher-order coincidence that the causal patterns holding in these worlds happen to align with the good.³⁷ Call this *dispositional value correspondence*.

Let us return to the world we actually occupy. Recall that we're assuming that we don't inhabit God's creation, and that the universe, and the laws that govern it, don't reflect purpose or value. This doesn't mean that responsiveness to value is completely absent from our universe. After all, there's us, and perhaps others like us elsewhere in the universe. But it goes without saying that the degree to which we make the world around us align with value is embarrassingly modest. And we anyway occupy only a tiny portion of the universe.

Beyond that, there's just nature—the blind forces of the physical world, including the brutal evolutionary process, the immediate pretext for Dawkins's description of nature as "pitilessly indifferent".³⁸ However, it's plainly false that there's absolutely *no* correspondence between value and what happens in the world. Our world does exhibit a significant degree of dispositional value correspondence. Even the notoriously value-blind natural selection involves causal patterns that tend towards value. Setting aside the question of the emergence of the very first lifeforms, the evolutionary process is one in which ever more living beings, and kinds of lifeforms, are continuously generated, in which over time the complexity of these forms of life increases, and in which the capacity for consciousness—including for pleasurable states—eventually arises and, later on, that for higher cognitive functions, making possible things like knowledge, morality and love. And these—sentience, positive experiences, rational capacities, perhaps even life itself—are precisely the sort of things that are taken to possess intrinsic value.³⁹

To be sure, these value-tending causal patterns are fairly high-level, and hardly written into the fundamental laws of nature. Nor do we know how robust they are. We don't know whether the emergence of life on Earth is an improbable accident or a cosmic commonplace, and whether, once life emerges, it will inexorably lead to sentience and sapience. Still, we are the products of, and sustained by, causal patterns that tend, to some extent, in the direction of value. These regularities may be

³⁷ A *kind* of coincidence, since arguably there's a necessary link between value and value-makers.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Enoch (2010) highlights the (blind) "connection between evolutionary forces and value"—he focuses on the good of survival—but he's interested in epistemic questions about the relation between value and the truth of the evaluative *beliefs* that were shaped by these evolutionary forces.

peculiar to little Earth but the complaint about indifference is itself concerned with the disappointing local arrangements, not with the gigantic axiological desert that seems to surround the solar system.⁴⁰

So focusing for the moment on the question of bare value-correspondence, the complaint about indifference couldn't be that there is no such correspondence whatsoever, but that it's somehow insufficient. But it's not so easy to say in what way. Presumably, what troubles us isn't that things aren't perfect—that, say, an awesome mountain view isn't even more amazing. Presumably, what most troubles us isn't that the trends towards good aren't stronger, but that they are accompanied by opposing patterns tending to the bad. There is, for example, the second law of thermodynamics, the tendency of matter to move from order to disorder. And most obviously, the evolutionary process not only fails to maximize good but has a kind of nastiness inherent to its logic: fierce competition for scarce resources leading to predation, disease, starvation which in turn lead to rampant suffering and early death. In the case of wild animals, this may lead to numerous lives which contain more bad than good.⁴¹ But grim as that may be, that's unlikely to be the primary focus of the complaint; those who lament the world's indifference tend to focus on human anguish. And few think that most human lives are so bad that they aren't even worth living. So the complaint couldn't be that the overall balance, in most human lives, tends to the negative. Nor are we in a position to say that the balance of value on Earth is overall negative. We cannot even confidently calculate that balance as of now, and, for all we know, the future might be very bright. In fact, for all we know, there might be numerous prosperous civilizations scattered across the cosmos which, put together, add up to a fantastically positive overall picture. The causal patterns governing our universe might even make such a favorable overall balance likely. Yet these points don't seem to me to remove the sense that our universe is chillingly indifferent.

When people rail against the indifference of the world, they primarily seem to have in mind instances of horrific suffering, and other harm, that is undeserved, uncompensated and which, when inflicted by others, also often goes unpunished—the so-called 'gratuitous evil' that drives the argument from evil.⁴² When the majestic figure of God is removed from the crime scene, that evil remains, as does the sense that something is wrong with a world in which such evils can, and often do, occur. Not as entertainment for some sadistic deity, but because that's just the way the world happens to be set up.

6 | WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

When we consider horrors such as slavery or the Holocaust, or the smaller scale tragedy of a child consumed by cancer, surely what we want, in the first instance, is that all these people didn't have to endure such horrific harm. As we saw, this desire could be fulfilled even in a world in which there is little relation between value and the causal forces operative in that world. Even in such a world, there could be still *de facto* value correspondence: an incredible series of fortunate coincidences could have kept that child, and others, safe. When we rail against the indifference of the world, we don't merely complain that we weren't so lucky, but that the world is such so as to *require* luck—a lot of luck—to

⁴⁰I wrote earlier that worries about cosmic significance and about the world's indifferent aren't just distinct, but in tension. To the extent that the world's indifference to value means that rational beings such as us are exceedingly rare in the cosmos, then this indifference would actually make it possible for us to be massively *more* important, on the cosmic scale, than we would be under theism (see Kahane, 2014).

⁴¹Ng (1995).

⁴²See e.g. Stump (1985), Howard-Snyder & Howard-Snyder (1999).

avoid such terrors. Or put differently, if a child continuously escaped harm through such a series of coincidences, we'd of course feel relief but, looking back, we'd still wish the child wasn't even subjected to that Russian roulette, that it was safe throughout. We don't just want there to be less bad, but for the world to be governed by causal patterns that robustly tend away from bad or even preclude it.

A world exhibiting such regularities will tend to yield better outcomes. But how much do we value such dispositional value-correspondence over and above the value it in fact produces? Would we prefer a world that has more evil than ours but where that evil is just really bad luck in a world that tends more strongly to the good? I suspect most of us would prioritize first-order value over the background arrangements that produce it, though we'd still prefer the background arrangements to strongly lead to the good, if the first-order value is held more or less fixed. That is to say, indifference most matters to us, not in itself, but instrumentally, because of its typical first-order effects.

Causal arrangements that strongly tend to the good could be favorable even if we needn't refer to value to explain why they hold. Do we also care about grounded value correspondence, over and above the existence of robust value-leaning causal patterns? I again suspect we do, but I again also suspect that we see this as less important. It would be nice if we lived in a world that was literally shaped by value. But when, looking around us, we observe a depressing mismatch between world and value, what we directly have in mind is just dispositional value correspondence. Having goodness itself, or a powerful being fully attuned to the good, directly calling the shots may make it more likely that a world would realize a high degree of value correspondence, but, to repeat, these are independent variables. Would we prefer a world which contains more evil than ours, and which is governed by causal forces with a weaker tendency to the good, if it was governed by a well-intentioned but fallible deity? It's even less clear to me that we much prefer the underlying explanation to involve agents and purposes as opposed to impersonal forces. And that the correspondence has its source in an attitude of care seems to me least important.⁴³

I have argued that the complaint about the indifference of the world is primarily concerned with the mismatch between world and value and, especially, with the fact that our world is causally arranged in a way that makes pointless suffering not just possible, but common. A non-indifferent world would be one where things are arranged differently. At the minimum, it would be one where pointless evil is contrary to the causal currents shaping such a world. If such a world contains far less senseless suffering and harm, it will obviously be overall far better. And it would also possess the further, higher-order good of being organized so as to align with the good. Such a rosy world seems incredibly appealing. But to decide whether we should long for such an alternative we first need to spell out further what such a world would really be like. We shall see that there are two very different ways in which such a counterfactual could have been realized. And I will argue that neither can satisfy what we most care about, when we rail against the world's indifference.

7 | THE THIS-WORLDLY COUNTERFACTUAL

For many of us, it is perhaps easiest to approach this question by asking

What would it have been like had God existed?

⁴³I concede that some will rank these factors higher. James (1896), for example, wrote that “[a]t a single stroke, [theism] changes the dead blank *it* of the world into a living *thou*”.

This also has the advantage of envisaging a world that fully realizes ‘non-indifference’ in all of the senses we have discussed: supreme value correspondence that has its source in a perfectly good, loving being. But God Himself, and these further elements, won’t play an important part in the argument I’ll put forward, which extends to any counterfactual from which senseless suffering is largely absent.

The counterfactual where God does exist (or where robust value correspondence holds in some other way) can, however, be understood in two radically different ways. It’s natural to assume that this counterfactual relates to the way things would have been if theists *were* right about the actual world. Call this the *This-Worldly Counterfactual*. This possibility is identical in content with what actual theists believe to be true, but here regarded as a counterfactual. We’re not considering the epistemic possibility that we atheists are actually wrong, and God *does* exist. No, we’re assuming that theists are wrong, and the world *is* indifferent, and asking what it would have been like *had* they been right, and it wasn’t.

The This-Worldly Counterfactual describes a world very much like ours—a world that *appears* to be indifferent to good and evil. Yet, somehow, this is an illusion. The world really is shaped to correspond to value, is indeed overall superlatively good, perhaps even as good as it gets. Such a world would still contain all those familiar horrors—the suffering of trillions of sentient beings over millions of years of natural selection, disease, war, slavery, genocide, injustice and all that. Yet now these evils are somehow not gratuitous but justified in the service of some higher good—and perhaps each and every victim is amply compensated in a transcendent realm.⁴⁴ Such a world would have contained all the first-order evil we see around us, but, because these horrors only take place for a good reason, and may be compensated—reflecting an underlying correspondence with value—such a world seems massively better than ours. It would also, in virtue of that supposed compensation, be better *for* all the victims of those horrors.

It’s natural to assume that when atheists consider how things would have been had God existed, they should have in mind the This-Worldly Counterfactual.⁴⁵ But I’ll argue that this isn’t the relevant alternative.

We start out railing against the indifference of the world. When we wish that the world had been different, we presumably wish for a world where all these horrors won’t be allowed to occur, where someone or something would intervene to stop them. Yet in the This-Worldly Counterfactual the world is such that all these horrors *still* occur. It’s just that, in some inscrutable way, they now play a necessary part in an invisible benevolent order. Atheists reject the idea that these horrors *in fact* play such a part—because they don’t see how that *could* be the case. But this counterfactual invites us to conceive a possibility where such horrors nevertheless can, and do, play such a part. Theists, who take themselves to be describing the actual world, understandably try to interpret it in such terms. What isn’t clear is why atheists would want to engage in this project. And if we set the example of God aside, and simply try to conceive a counterfactual where world and value are closely aligned, it would be even odder to assume that such a world would still contain things like the bubonic plague or child abuse, now understood to be somehow unavoidable.

⁴⁴See, for example, Stump (1985) and McCord Adams (1999).

⁴⁵This assumption dominates the current debate about the axiology of theism. See e.g. Kahane (2011), Kraay and Dragos (2013), Kraay (2018), and Lougheed (2020) (though see Tooley (2018) for a contrasting view).

I’ll go on to argue that this assumption is problematic—and if that is correct this may require a reconfiguration of that entire debate. See also fn. 57.

I said that atheists have no reason to engage in the project of constructing a parallel version of the actual world in which the familiar terrestrial horrors are in line with the plans of a perfectly good god. In fact, atheists are already *committed* to rejecting this project. After all, the argument from evil is central to the case for atheism; it's presumably also high on the list of those who find the world chillingly indifferent.⁴⁶ And in its different formulations, the argument from evil assumes that,

If God had existed, we wouldn't (or it's highly unlikely that we would) observe all or most of the seemingly gratuitous evils we see around.

This conditional clearly doesn't refer to the This-Worldly Counterfactual but to a world that is *very* different from ours; call it the *Other-Worldly Counterfactual*. But if atheists are committed to this other counterfactual in arguing *for* atheism, why should they then turn to the This-Worldly Counterfactual when asking how things would be like if God *had* existed?

Consider next *why* atheists accept the above conditional. They hold that God couldn't have sufficient moral reasons to permit horrors such as chattel slavery and the Holocaust to happen. Yet the This-Worldly Counterfactual is a world in which it somehow is morally justified, and better, to let horrors such as chattel slavery and the Holocaust to happen. *Without* giving up our conviction that such horrors aren't in fact justified or better, we're imagining a counterfactual in which they are. So we seem to be conceiving a counterfactual in which morality, and value, are *radically different from what we take them to be*.

If this is right, then several things follow. First, despite seeming superficially very similar to the actual world, the This-Worldly Counterfactual is in fact a very distant possibility and, likely, even an impossibility.⁴⁷ Consider an analogy. When we ask how things would have been had the Holocaust not occurred, the relevant counterfactuals are ones where historical events take a very different course because, say, Hitler never rose to power. We don't, and shouldn't, have in mind a counterfactual that is superficially far more similar to actual history but where Holocaust deniers are right.

Second, when we wish for a non-indifferent world that doesn't contain the gratuitous suffering we see around us, we wish for a world that doesn't contain suffering that is gratuitous according to *our* normative standards. So it's of no use to be offered an alternative in which no suffering is gratuitous according to normative standards that we reject.⁴⁸ And those of us who find theodicies morally objectionable or even, with Galen Strawson, think that "genuine belief in [an omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly benevolent] God... is profoundly immoral: it shows contempt for the reality of human suffering, or indeed any intense suffering",⁴⁹ would find the This Worldly Counterfactual—and any clear-

⁴⁶To see the world as indifferent is to reject theism. We are therefore simply assuming here a perspective that rejects the proposals made by the various theodicies and defenses (though this is compatible with accepting that belief in theism is reasonable).

⁴⁷Such a counterfactual would describe an impossible world if fundamental moral claims state necessary truths, as many think. For some, this would already rule out such a counterfactual as an object of longing. But even if it makes sense to long for the literally impossible, the rest of this section aims to show that this is also a deeply unattractive impossibility. Now, atheists who hold that the concept of God is incoherent will admittedly see *any* counterfactual in which God exists as referring to an impossibility. But the focus on God is just for convenience. Robust value correspondence could have been realised in many other ways; the argument of this section also applies to such non-theist forms of non-indifference.

⁴⁸Theists who attempt to reconcile the horrors we see around us with the existence of an omnipotent, perfectly good God sometimes concede that they are invoking value claims that may appeal only to those who already belong to a certain religious tradition (see e.g. McCord Adams, 1999). But most atheists would also reject the more generic normative claims made by the various theodicies/defenses.

⁴⁹Strawson (2012).

eyed longing for it—rather unpleasant. In fact, a world governed by such alternative normative standards sounds deeply unappealing even if, when evaluated *according* to these standards, it comes out as superior to ours.

Third, if it made sense to give up our own evaluative framework when we evaluate alternatives to our world, then we could easily conceive of counterfactuals that are ‘better’ in this way without having to bring in heavy supernatural machinery. Why not just conceive of a world where the Nazi ideology is correct, or where murder isn’t bad? Such evaluative schemes, applied to the events of our world, would yield what is, internally, a far better world than ours. But it would be morally insane to regret that our world isn’t like *that*.⁵⁰

8 | THE OTHER-WORLDLY COUNTERFACTUAL

So we shouldn’t think of the non-indifferent alternative as a version of ours with an added benevolent backstage. Now, we have a reasonably good grip on what the This-Worldly Counterfactual involves. When we turn to what I called the Other-Worldly Counterfactual—a world where good reigns and, because of that, the familiar evils we observe around us *don’t* occur—there’s far less to build on. We are asking: given that the world we find around us *isn’t* one that, say, God would create, had He existed, what kind of world *would* He create? Since we are asking what a non-existent being who is also unimaginably superior to us would create, it’s hard to be confident about the answer.

The central constraint on such a counterfactual is negative: that such a world wouldn’t contain pointless evil, and that this will be realized in a far stronger sense than that assumed by theists: that all, or most of what atheists assume to be instances of pointless evil in our world would be absent from that counterfactual. There would be no Holocaust, no slavery, no Black Plague, nor the mass suffering and death, over millions of years, associated with natural selection.

Whether any badness would exist isn’t as obvious. Perhaps some degree of suffering and wrongdoing must be present if there is free will, or for rational beings to be able to fully grasp the contrast between good and bad, right and wrong (though bear in mind that we’re operating here on the assumption that the free will defense fails). Perhaps there will be something like physical pain but perhaps it would be replaced by a happier way of monitoring one’s bodily functioning. Or, perhaps, there would be no bodies at all—only pure spirits. It’s hard to say.

We can, however, make some conjectures. For example, why should sentient and rational beings gradually evolve over millions of years—even *sans* senseless suffering and mass death—rather than being directly created? So such a world is likely to follow the traditional creationist story—ridiculous as a literal account of the actual world but, considered axiologically, vastly superior to natural selection. Or, as Michael Tooley rightly suggests, it’s hard to see why God’s creations would endure hardship in an Earthly realm before being whisked to the afterlife—it’s much more likely that they would go straight to blissful heaven.⁵¹

To the best of our ability, we have been trying to imagine the perfect world.⁵² In any event, our own miserable world seems depressingly inferior to *any* world that realizes value correspondence to a

⁵⁰My key point here is that the This-Worldly Counterfactual isn’t the relevant alternative to those who see the actual world as indifferent. But what I say should also make it clear that this counterfactual is also unattractive from such a perspective. To fully make this further point, however, I would need to engage more closely with various theist theodicies/defenses, as well as with work on the ‘axiology of theism’ (see Kraay, 2018); this is a challenge that I address elsewhere.

⁵¹Tooley (2018).

⁵²For an argument to the effect that a perfect world, while supernatural, will nevertheless be godless, see Kahane (2018).

considerable degree. But there's a snag. There is a sense in which such worlds are simply *too* good. Not just too good to be *true*, as atheists argue, but even too good *to be wished for*.

9 | VALUE CORRESPONDENCE AND NON-IDENTITY

It's natural to assume that, had the universe not been indifferent, someone or something would have stepped in to prevent the horrors that stain human history. That, say, if God had existed, then the Nazi trains heading to Auschwitz would stop in their tracks, or Hitler's speeches would turn into unintelligible garble. Tooley asserts, in this vein, that in such an alternative world, God "would have acted to prevent Stalin and Hitler from performing [the horrific deeds they had done, and made others do]."⁵³

But this isn't correct. Not because God, had He existed, *would* let Hitler and Stalin do all these horrid things. But because, if God had existed, there almost certainly *wouldn't have been Hitler and Stalin, nor anyone like them*.

The very existence of Hitler and Stalin only makes sense against a long background story of earlier conflicts, atrocities, oppression and injustice, which in turn came about because of even earlier evils, and so forth, all the way to the earliest humans—and *Homo sapiens* itself, surely, only makes full sense against the specific path terrestrial evolution took—with each evolutionary step relying on bloody competition, and the rampant suffering, death and extinction of numerous sentient beings.

In other words, for Hitler and Stalin to even appear on the scene a massive amount of prior evil had to have occurred—evil that *wouldn't* have occurred had a supremely good God had existed, or had the world realized robust value correspondence via some other mechanism, whether purposive or blind.

And this applies not only to Hitler and Stalin but also to their victims, and, of course, to us. It applies to everyone who actually exists or had existed. We don't need to rely here on the familiar point about small changes in the timing of conception leading to different people being born.⁵⁴ It's even more obvious that people won't get born if their parents never met or didn't even exist. And any significant improvement to history would change which people conceive children and therefore who comes to exist next.⁵⁵ Thus, a counterfactual in which, say, God (or for that matter a surprise storm) prevented a Neolithic massacre, would also be one from which pretty much everyone who actually exists or had existed would be erased.

I developed this point by considering ways in which actual history could have been improved. But that's already conceding too much. We are, after all, starting from scratch, and there's an infinity of possible persons that God (or the Form of the Good) could bring into existence. In this rosy counterfactual scenario, why on Earth would God ever pick us out of this multitude? Are we really so great, do we really stand out? You might object that if it's *possible* for God to choose to create us, however improbable that may be, then there is that counterfactual where He does, and on which our wishes can focus. But now we're no longer simply wishing for a non-indifferent world—a fantastic enough possibility—but for one in which, on top, an unimaginable improbability occurs. But even this would be conceding too much. We're presumably not the best of that immense crowd, or even particularly good. To imagine God, or some other value-tracking force, nevertheless choosing us is to imagine a world that does *not* really correspond to value. This is another way in which the world 'caring' about the good, and the world 'caring' about us, can come apart.

⁵³Tooley (2018).

⁵⁴See Parfit (1983), to whom the argument of this section is obviously indebted.

⁵⁵Adams (1979); Smilansky (2013); Kahane (2019).

For argument's sake, suppose that we, and other actual people, would nevertheless somehow still exist in that rosy counterfactual. Still, growing up in such a profoundly altered world, with redrawn history, social arrangements, and, very likely, psychology and even physics, would mean that we would be so utterly unlike our actual selves that it's doubtful that there would be enough there to sustain genuine prudential concern. Even if we could exist in that utopia, we wouldn't exist in a sense that we care about.

So far, I've been writing as if that rosy Other-Worldly Counterfactual will be populated by humans like us. But that's also highly doubtful. Just as we individually don't stand out of the multitudes of possible beings, neither does our undistinguished species. It seems plausible, if not obvious, that God would choose to create rational beings of some kind. But that He would then go on to create *Homo sapiens*, the idiosyncratic product of natural selection, isn't remotely plausible. To imagine that God would nevertheless create humans is precisely to imagine God making entirely arbitrary, even senseless choices. Not only not creating the best option, or a superlatively good one, but an undoubtedly inferior one. That is to say: *not* acting as a perfectly good being would. In the counterfactual we're considering, God and humanity are incompatible.⁵⁶

A non-indifferent world, whether governed by God or shaped by some other benign force, was attractive because, by assumption,

Had the world been non-indifferent, it won't contain the pointless evil that blights our world.

We just saw, however, that

Had the world been non-indifferent in the otherworldly sense, none of us, nor the victims of great misfortune or injustice, would have come to exist.

But what prompted us to rail against the indifference of the world was precisely the plight of these victims, and I suggested earlier that what we most care about is for them not to have been subjected to the horrors they had actually endured. But a non-indifferent world would satisfy this wish only in the perverse sense that neither these horrors *nor* these victims would have existed. More generally,

Had the world been non-indifferent, this wouldn't have been better for any existing human (unless their lives weren't even worth living).

The only reason we have to wish that our world hadn't been indifferent is thus purely impersonal, since although such a world would have been far better, it wouldn't have been better *for* anyone.⁵⁷ And there are numerous far less dramatic, and less fantastic, ways in which things could have been better for the victims of various tragedies—alternatives in which they are spared these indignities, and live decent lives. Nor

⁵⁶Theists must assume that God has good reasons to create animals, and that the lion will one day lie with the lamb. But it seems to me even less likely that, if God had existed, He would create non-rational beings, let alone lions, lambs, sharks and skunks.

⁵⁷This again has surprising implications for the debate about whether we should want God to exist (see Kahane, (2011); Kraay and Dragos (2013); see also fn. 45 below): while the Other Worldly Counterfactual likely supports *impersonal pro-theism*, the view that the world as a whole would be better if God exists, my argument here also suggests that atheists can easily reject *personal pro-theism*, the view that God's existence would have been better for *us* (though of course it will still be good for the other individuals who populate that counterfactual).

because God diverts the bullets, but because, say, some actual people had been a bit more kind, or less cowardly. When we are outraged by pointless suffering, or by past horrors, we should focus on those counterfactuals.

What about all those people, and animals, whose lives weren't even worth living and thus *would* benefit from such an alternative? I suggested that not that many humans fall in this category. But more importantly, there are again many nearer counterfactuals that would be *much* better for them, say, where slavery was abolished earlier, or some plague was averted. We should again focus on these realistic counterfactuals, not on rosy fantasies that offer relief only by erasure.⁵⁸

10 | THE PROBLEM WITH DIVINE INTERVENTION

Let's return to the image of a supernatural someone intervening to stop Hitler, or saving that dying child. Why couldn't there be a world which, while perhaps far from perfect, would at least still contain us, and the victims of malice or misfortune—yet coupled with benevolent forces that prevent great harm? That's probably what most people vaguely have in mind, when they complain that the world is indifferent. Such a counterfactual describes a world that is largely indifferent to *who* comes to exist, allowing a range of inferior beings to come about regardless of their value, or potential for value, but where things are so arranged that *once* these beings appear on the scene, they are treated well (or at least not treated too badly).

This is a lopsided way for a world to correspond to value. But there's a larger problem. It's fairly easy to imagine such an intervention occurring once: a certain catastrophe averted, a war prevented, etc. We can even imagine a world where such miraculous interventions start to take place around the globe at a particular point in time. But for reasons already discussed, it's much harder to make sense of the idea that these interventions could regularly occur *across* time while still holding fixed the identities of actual people. Again, if such interventions begin early in evolutionary history, then it's almost certain that humans wouldn't even evolve. And if we discount all that sentient suffering over millennia and imagine the interventions beginning only when we humans arrive, history, and human life in general, would still change so dramatically so as to make it incredibly unlikely, if even coherent, that the actual personages of past and present will remain in the story.

Now, this won't be a problem if we retreat to the idea of a single point of intervention. But now we are basically imagining a universe weirdly fine-tuned for certain people (or in the egocentric version of the scenario, for us) to arrive on the scene, even though there's nothing that axiologically marks these people (let alone us) for special attention—a world holding its breath (closing its eyes) in the face of millennia of horrific suffering and suddenly stirring into action when certain people finally show up. While such a world would obviously be better for these people, it would be even *more* arbitrary than the actual world. This is the crudest wish-fulfilment, not a vision of an alternative, more favorable metaphysical scheme. It most certainly isn't something we can call a caring universe.

⁵⁸But can't we identify a Goldilocks zone with value correspondence that's neither too little to be worth wanting nor too much to mean that none of us would come to exist—perhaps a world governed by Mill's supremely good but rather underpowered deity (Mill, 1874)? This will have to be a version of the This Worldly Counterfactual, if substantially less ambitious: things proceeding as they actually did in the natural world, but perhaps with a hidden reparative supernatural backdrop. So there's still all this senseless evil in the world, evil which that deity is powerless to prevent, but everyone then goes on to a blissful afterlife. But on such a picture the world we know would *still* be just as indifferent. And I'm not sure I can make principled sense of the idea of a deity who cannot intervene in the natural world but can still provide eternal bliss. If I suspected that Mill's deity actually existed, I'd be rather worried about what the afterlife might hold...

There is, however, one scenario that at least approximates the possibility I just described, of a world history leading to us and then suddenly dramatically lurching in the direction of greater correspondence between world and value once we arrive on the scene, yet without being an embarrassing narcissistic fantasy. In the face of an indifferent world, *we* could all begin to impose greater value correspondence from now on, to the best of our ability. Such a scenario requires no divine intervention, or caped superheroes. But, needless to say, it is also almost as fantastic.

11 | CONCLUSION

Bernard Williams was often scathing about philosophy that aspires to be edifying, or to deliver ‘good news’.⁵⁹ Religions don’t need philosophy to offer their good news. But philosophers can try to help. Leibniz’s theodicy is an obvious example, even if it’s not written in the style of an inspiring sermon. Leibniz tells us that although it can *seem* as if removing the awfulness we see all around us would have made things better, this is just an illusion, an illusion due to our inability to see the big (the biggest) picture, and the intricate interconnections between things; in fact, the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, and removing evil from it would actually have made things worse.⁶⁰

Those who believe that the world is indifferent reject this story, and the elaborate defensive constructions that it continues to inspire. There is no secret plan that explains (or explains away) the awfulness, no reparative transcendent realm. For many atheists, the very idea that the horrors of the world are building blocks for greater good seems distasteful.

My argument here is not intended as good news. Certainly, not good news about the world. It’s not just that our world isn’t the best of all possible ones. It’s not even close to being the best that was realistically possible *within* the naturalist framework. There are countless ways in which things could have been better, much better. Now the negative fact that we inhabit an indifferent world doesn’t literally explain—at least not in an informative way—why this or that horror had occurred, but it does suggest how things could have been arranged so as to rule out such senseless suffering. The very structure of the world could have been better: we can easily enough conceive of counterfactual non-indifferent worlds. It is only natural to wish that we had inhabited such a world instead of the bleak universe revealed by science. I have argued, however, that such a wish is a mistake. Nietzsche famously excoriated the desire for the otherworldly.⁶¹ But my argument doesn’t dismiss such rosy supernatural alternatives because they are unreal, or too fantastic. Nor does it deny them their value. Yet although we can wish that things had been better in this or that way within the naturalist system, we should not wish that system itself away. It is a familiar fairy-tale trope that our wishes can be satisfied in twisted, unwelcome ways. But this wish—this wish for a non-indifferent world where the victims of senseless suffering would be spared—can *only* be satisfied twistedly.⁶²

There is one way in which my argument for this conclusion echoes Leibniz’s. When we step back, we find that our imagined improvements—not so much to what’s *in* the world, but to the way the world *works*—are not really so attractive. The dilemma I presented to those who long for a non-indifferent world involved constraints of two kinds. On one side is the circle drawn by morality, by the moral values we hold dear. On the other, that drawn by our identity, and that of those whose suffering horrifies

⁵⁹See Williams (1982), (2009).

⁶⁰Williams (2009).

⁶¹Notice that unqualified Nietzschean affirmation of the actual, a refusal to contemplate *any* alternatives to any of it, including to great suffering, would also subvert our moral values—as Nietzsche was of course well aware.

⁶²If theism is itself, at least in part, the product of wish fulfilment, there is irony here that I needn’t spell out.

us. When we try to sketch out a genuinely non-indifferent world, in the sense of a serious principled alternative to our kind of world (as opposed to mere shallow wish fulfilment), we find that the two circles do not overlap. If the imagined non-indifferent world contains us—if it's a massively improved version of *our* world—then it must upend our dearest moral values; we get, not the Form of the Good, but good deformed. But if we have in mind a world shaped by the true good, it no longer makes sense to suppose that it would have contained us, at least not in any sense worth wanting.

In a famous passage, Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov says that, in the face of horrific evil done to the innocent, he “hands back his ticket of admission to the universe that God has created”. Our situation is the reverse. Our existence is so entangled in the evil and imperfection of our world that we just couldn't gain admittance to the wonderful, evil-free universe that God *would have* created, *had* He existed.⁶³ We came to exist as an accident, in a world that doesn't care whether we exist, or what happens to us. But this indifference is a condition for our very existence.

This is nothing to cheer. But I hope that this realization offers, not consolation, but a reconciliation of a sort. Not Leibnizian reconciliation with the evil in the world. As I said, within the parameters of the natural world there are numerous ways in which things could have been better for those who suffered. But although the world itself, its governing principles, could also have been better, a genuinely better world, a *non-indifferent* universe, would not have been better for any of those sufferers. Our universe may be a disappointing discovery, it may seem inhospitable, but in a sense it's also our only home.⁶⁴

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⁶³Leibniz argued that we shouldn't complain that God allows sin since “if God had... removed sin, a very different series of things, very different combinations of circumstances and people and marriages, and very different people would have emerged”; we owe our very existence, Leibniz says, to this divine “toleration of sins” (see Adams, 1979). My argument here is different: we're assuming that if God had existed, He *would* have removed 'sin' in the way Leibniz describes, but still leading to the same result: the erasure of all actual people.

⁶⁴I am grateful to Kirk Loughheed, Christopher Cowie, and an anonymous referee for extremely helpful comments.

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How to cite this article: Kahane G. Is the Universe Indifferent? Should We Care?. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2022;104:676–695. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12796>