

# Should We Hope Apparent Atrocities Are Illusory?

## Exploring a Puzzle in Moral Axiology

JIMMY ALFONSO LICON

[doi:10.48106/dial.v77.i2.04](https://doi.org/10.48106/dial.v77.i2.04)

Jimmy Alfonso Licon. 2023. "Should We Hope Apparent Atrocities Are Illusory? Exploring a Puzzle in Moral Axiology." *Dialectica* 77(2): 1–1.  
[doi:10.48106/dial.v77.i2.04](https://doi.org/10.48106/dial.v77.i2.04).



# Should We Hope Apparent Atrocities Are Illusory?

## Exploring a Puzzle in Moral Axiology

JIMMY ALFONSO LICON

Philosophers have recently turned to axiological questions related to God, and, to a minor extent, related to morality. This paper contributes to the latter project. The world contains atrocities such as famine and war. Can we rationally hope that these atrocities are merely moral illusions? First, we have good reason to hope that moral atrocities are only apparent because our world would be morally worse if they were real. Some critics argue that they know atrocities are real. However, setting aside whether we have such moral knowledge, perhaps we shouldn't hope that atrocities are morally illusory because that outcome would undercut our moral reliability, imply that we have false and unjustified moral beliefs, result in moral opportunity costs, and potentially deny the dignity of victims of (even only apparent) atrocities.

Hope? Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside. You'd better get used to that idea.

—Red, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)

Perhaps the strongest argument against the existence of the traditional conception of God is that the world contains ubiquitous, apparently gratuitous suffering, such as genocides, war, famine, and so forth. Many philosophers have questioned how a powerful, perfectly loving God could allow such suffering, especially when it affects seemingly innocent victims. However, the point here is not to emphasize the atheological implications of the terrible atrocities in the world, but rather to draw attention to them in order to pose an axiological question: Should we, and can we rationally, hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent? This question is axiological in nature and

includes issues like what would make the world objectively better, and what we should and can rationally hope, morally speaking. That is the focus of this paper.

Before we start with that question, though, we should step back to look at the recent emergence of interest in axiological issues across philosophical subdomains. The most prominent example in the literature relates to the question of whether the world would be better objectively if God exists or not. To quickly cover some ground: some philosophers argue that the world would be objectively better for some persons if God exists (Penner and Loughheed 2015), others argue that the world would be objectively worse for some persons if God exists (Kahane 2011; Loughheed 2017), and still others argue the world would be better irrespective of persons if God exists, e.g., the world would be intrinsically better (Davison 2018; Plantinga 2004). Some philosophers have asked, not only whether the world would be objectively better if God existed, but whether we should *hope* He does (Licon 2021). And finally, Kahane (2012) offers broad factors to think better about the value of contrasting viewpoints in metaphysics.

Recent interest in axiology, though focused on God's existence, doesn't end there. Philosophers have, recently and to a lesser extent, explored axiological questions in the moral domain too: one philosopher argues the world would be better if moral realism is true instead of rival views in metaethics (Blanchard 2020). And in applied ethics, (Hendricks 2021) argues that it would be better if the pro-choice position on the ethics of abortion is correct, as it would mean that world is morally a better place, *ceteris paribus* than if the pro-lifers are right about the issue.

This paper adds to recent work by philosophers on questions in moral axiology by examining whether we should, and can rationally, hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent. And we should emphasize, though, an important caveat in this paper: *the author does not take a position as to what to think about the moral axiology of atrocities*. The paper's aim is to explore different reasons on opposing sides of the issue. Our thesis is to explore whether hope against the actuality of moral atrocities is rational by weighing the pros and cons.

The plan of the paper is simple. We begin by examining the nature of rational hope to see under what conditions we can rationally hope for something. From there, we investigate how we can rationally hope for something—that moral atrocities are merely apparent—must necessarily be either true or false. Then we explore three *possible* scenarios in which moral atrocities would be

merely apparent for different reasons. And we conclude by weighing reasons, pro and con, to think we should, and can rationally, hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent. As we shall see, there is a compelling moral reason to hope, and several reasons to hope not.

## 1 Preliminary Issues

The puzzle examined in this paper is whether we should, and can rationally, hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent. This may strike many readers as an odd question considering the seemingly strong evidence we have that moral atrocities are real. However, we should set aside the issue of whether we believe moral atrocities exist—just like we would do when discussing whether it would be better if God exists—but instead explore whether the world would be objectively and morally better if moral atrocities were only apparent. Additionally, we consider whether we can and should rationally hope for this to be the case. We refer to the position that we can rationally hope for moral atrocities to be merely apparent as *aspirational illusionism*.

One compelling reason that strongly supports aspirational illusionism is that, if true, it would make the world objectively and morally superior compared to a world where apparent moral atrocities were real, all other things being equal. However, there are also significant reasons that oppose aspirational illusionism. Before delving into the arguments for and against aspirational illusionism, we must address an initial objection to the possibility of moral axiology.

### 1.1 *An Initial Objection*

Metaethicists widely maintain that certain moral truths are metaphysically and logically necessary. If this is the case, then it would appear that we cannot make axiological comparisons between possible worlds where there are only apparent moral atrocities that are not actual, and possible worlds where apparent moral atrocities are indeed real. This limitation arises because some moral propositions are necessarily true or false. Consequently, there are no possible worlds available to serve as a basis for these comparisons. There is no nearest possible world in which the truth of the proposition ‘genocide is a moral atrocity’ differs from the actual world (Braddock 2017).

How do we address this challenge? One plausible suggestion is to treat aspirational illusionism and its negation as live epistemic possibilities rather

than metaphysical ones. This shift is acceptable since we only require epistemic possibility for rational hope. While this approach may be debatable, it is unclear why we cannot evaluate rational hopes by comparing live epistemic possibilities. After all, some philosophers argue that we can rationally hope for epistemically opaque matters in the past, even if they have been settled as factual (Martin 2014, 68). For instance, Sam can rationally hope that he aced the final exam, even though it has already been graded. Presumably, Sam can have this rational hope because it remains a genuine epistemic possibility for him, even if, as a matter of fact, he did not pass the exam. Therefore, if rational hopes about (even though settled but unknown) past matters of fact can be rational when grounded in live epistemic possibilities, the mere fact that some moral claims are metaphysically necessarily true or false is not sufficient reason to reject axiological evaluations of moral issues. Consequently, we only need to rely on live epistemic possibilities for rational hope, and we will explore that further in the following section.

## 1.2 *The Nature of Rational Hope*

There are a few aspects to assessing the rationality of the hope aspect of aspirational illusionism. For our purposes, an agent, *S*, has a rational hope that *p* if, where the evidence and knowledge is concerned, *p* is a real epistemic possibility, *S* lacks adequate justification to believe that *p* with epistemic certainty, and that *S* desires that *p* (Martin 2014; Meirav 2009; Pojman 1986, 161–163). The epistemic domain of hope, though, doesn't include only the future, since one can rationally entertain hopes about the past to the extent one's knowledge of the past is incomplete. Rational hope can involve past events given that those events are epistemically opaque Benton (2021). However, we cannot have rational hope that past events, where we have adequate knowledge of them, since the past is fixed (Smith 1997), e.g., Mary cannot rationally hope that John was faithful if she knows that he cheated.

Here we face a preliminary worry: there cannot be a live epistemic possibility that something is false if we *know* that it is true, e.g., if Sammy *knows* that it is eight o'clock, then it cannot be a live epistemic possibility for Sammy that it is seven o'clock. We thus face an obstacle to the mere possibility of a moral axiology puzzle: it looks *prima facie* like it cannot be that moral atrocities are merely apparent, *if we know* that there are actual moral atrocities. We will address this issue later on. First, though, we must explain how it could be

possible that moral atrocities are merely apparent given the striking moral appearances we have to the contrary.

## 2 A Few Possible Scenarios

Suppose we can base axiological comparisons on live epistemic possibilities. Even in that case, we still require an explanation for how there could be apparent moral atrocities that are not actual. Given the presence of moral atrocities in the world, we need an account that elucidates the misleading appearances and provides an explanation for how, at least for some epistemic agents, there could exist a live epistemic possibility that these moral appearances are false. It is important to acknowledge that what constitutes a live epistemic possibility for one person may be considered a dead epistemic possibility for another. Evidence and perspectives differ among individuals, leading to varying epistemic possibilities. Let us assume that there are moral facts in the world and actual moral atrocities. While Beth believes in these claims, Sammy harbors doubts about the existence of metaphysical entities such as moral facts. For Sammy, it remains a live epistemic possibility that moral atrocities are illusory.

How could moral atrocities be only apparent, even for some epistemic agents? Suppose there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent creator of the universe. Many theists already hold that, while there are moral atrocities (in a sense), God allows them to happen as it either (a) prevents greater moral atrocities from occurring, or (b) facilitates something morally good that couldn't be without the atrocity (Licon 2021, 292). By His nature, God wouldn't allow gratuitous suffering to happen since He 'would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering He could, unless He could not do so *without thereby leaving things worse off* than they otherwise would be' (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1999, 117—emphasis mine).

There is a perspective within theism that suggests there are no moral atrocities in a strict sense—morally horrendous events that are morally gratuitous. This viewpoint does not deny that people suffer and die due to events such as famine and war, but rather emphasizes that these events are morally balanced. According to this perspective, God permits these events because there are moral factors that morally counterbalance the suffering and the inherent badness of apparent moral atrocities. In contrast, in a world where apparent moral atrocities lack sufficient moral factors to offset them, we would find them morally atrocious in their gratuitousness, rather than morally balanced as in the theistic framework.

So, there's one sense here where there aren't moral atrocities to the extent that moral atrocities are morally bad events that aren't morally offset by greater goods, i.e., God is morally justified in allowing them. On this scenario, we don't deny that the suffering and death associated with moral atrocities is real, but instead highlight the possibility that this suffering is morally offset by a greater good, and so isn't an atrocity *overall*. We can imagine something similar, even if more radical, if a view like moral nihilism holds: it isn't that there aren't events that happen that we would call *atrocities*, like war and famine, but instead that there are no moral properties in the world that would make them morally wrong or bad.

Perhaps, the reader isn't theologically inclined. There is another, distinct metaphysical scenario where, by some fluke, it just so happens that, contrary to our best moral evidence, e.g., robust moral intuitions, apparent atrocities aren't morally bad, unjust, or immoral. On this view, the mere fact that a recent war was punctuated by horrific events, like genocide, isn't morally good or bad, but morally neutral instead. This metaphysical scenario lacks a good explanation, unlike with the theistic scenario, to explain why it is that apparent moral atrocities are merely illusory.

We could even imagine a further scenario that could motivate our moral axiological puzzle: the world would morally be a better place if we lived in a simulation, and those individuals who appear to suffer an atrocity are in fact simulants lacking moral standing than the world would be if they had moral standing [Bostrom (2003); Chalmers (2010); Crummett (2021)]. In this scenario, apparent atrocities wouldn't be morally bad or wrong since they only happened to individuals lacking moral standing (e.g., perhaps the early hosts in the fictional world *Westworld*).

Many readers will likely consider these scenarios highly unlikely. Despite this, there is a non-negligible possibility that one of these scenarios holds for some of us given what we know and believe about moral matters. One of the major reasons to canvass these scenarios is to consider different ways apparent atrocities might be illusory: it could be that they aren't atrocities *overall* (theistic scenario), as a brute fact there are only merely apparent atrocity (metaphysical fluke scenario), and it could be that apparent atrocities only (or mostly) happen to individuals who lack moral standing because they are primitive simulants, so there was no one actually harmed by them (simulation scenario).

### 3 A Major Reason to Hope

Suppose that despite compelling moral appearances, the world doesn't contain moral atrocities, or even that it contains many fewer moral atrocities than it appears. That is, despite how things appear, there aren't any, or at least far fewer, *actual* atrocities like famine, war, and slavery. And putting aside how clearly counterintuitive this claim is, it should be clear that the world would be a better place were the claim true. It would mean that, despite our moral appearances, there are far fewer morally horrendous events that have happened than would first appear, and thus that the world is a morally better place than it would appear. There would be less injustice, depravity, and so on than had moral appearances been veridical. This point assumes, obviously, that if the world is less unjust or morally bad, *ceteris paribus*, then the world is a morally better place than it would otherwise be had the moral atrocities been actual. And, for our purposes, that assumption looks entirely reasonable.

An illustration would be helpful. Start with theism: many theists hold that if God exists, then the suffering we observe isn't gratuitous—even if they may not agree on the reason why it isn't gratuitous, theists agree that, somehow, God allows the suffering to happen for a good reason, either because allowing it is necessary, with respect to God, to prevent greater suffering from happening, or to yield a greater good. Suppose we think that a genocide is gratuitous suffering, but God exists, and He has allowed the genocide for moral reasons that are beyond our ability to understand. This situation would be morally better *ceteris paribus* than had the same genocide occurred without sufficient reasons to moral offset it.

This doesn't mean that genocide isn't bad—of course it is, hence the need for offsetting moral reasons—but that the world would be a better place, than it would otherwise be, if there were sufficient moral reasons to allow the genocide than if the genocide occurred in the absence of such reasons. Some philosophers have argued this is a good reason to hope theism is true (Licon 2021). A similar point holds of moral atrocities: the world would be morally and objectively better, *ceteris paribus*, if moral atrocities were merely apparent—the result would be less injustice and gratuitous suffering in the world than there would be otherwise.

We can reasonably assume that suffering and death from war, disease, and famine are morally bad to the extent that they aren't morally offset, i.e., they aren't necessary to produce a greater good, or prevent greater evil. If moral atrocities are morally illusory, the world would morally be a better place,



*ceteris paribus*, than if they were actual. So, we have strong reason to think that the world would be a better place if moral atrocities were illusory.

However, we may question why we should *hope* that moral atrocities are illusory even granting that the world would be a better place if they are. The connection between the world being a better place if something is true, and hoping that it is true, is fuzzy, e.g., even if the world would be a better place if atrocities were morally illusory, it might be we still cannot rationally hope that they are since we know otherwise. Here though we do have a strong intuition that there is a defeasible connection between them. We can state that intuition as follows,

(ABP) If S has solid reason to believe that  $q$  would make the world morally better than not- $q$ , and  $q$  is a live epistemic possibility for S, then S defeasibly<sup>1</sup> can and should hope that  $q$ .

How does (ABP) work? We know knowledge and maximal credence undercuts hope: to know that  $p$  is to foreclose the rational hope that *not-p*. For example, we cannot rationally hope we went to the best high school if we know that we attended the worst. We cannot rationally hope that  $p$  without reasonable belief that the truth of  $p$  would make the world objectively better than if  $p$  were false. Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to aspirational questions,

(1) Would the world be better if X is true?

And,

(2) Should we hope X is true?

While there is often a strong, defeasible connection between something making the world better and hoping it is true, there will be cases where the truth of something would make the world a morally better place than if that something was false, but where, for whatever reason, we cannot rationally hope that that something was true. We discuss reasons for that sort next.

---

<sup>1</sup> There may be cases where it is epistemically and axiologically permissible to hope that  $p$ , but where there are other, stronger reasons to hope that not- $p$ , e.g., the would be morally icky to hope that  $p$ . The nature of the defeasibility operating in this bridging is part of the (indirect) issues at play in this paper, and in discussions of moral axiology more broadly.

## 4 Some Serious Reasons Not to Hope

The world would be a better place if moral atrocities were merely apparent. However, even while the world would be better, it is a separate question whether we should, and rationally can, hope that apparent moral atrocities aren't actual. We just examined the best reason in favor of adopting aspirational illusionism: the world would turn out to be a morally and objectively better place than it would seem based on our moral appearances. There are, however, several reasons not to hope that atrocities are only apparent. We begin with the fact that many people believe they *know* that apparent atrocities are actual.

### 4.1 *We Have (Salient) Moral Knowledge*

Some readers will no doubt be puzzled by this puzzle in moral axiology. 'Surely', they will say, 'we can't rationally hope that apparent moral atrocities really aren't since we *know that they are!*' This is a reasonable response to the question of whether we can and should rationally hope that atrocities are morally illusory. We may think that the world would be a better place if atrocities were morally illusory, but that we cannot rationally hope this as we know otherwise. And this reason, among others, is exactly why (ABP) has a 'defeasibility' clause governing both whether we can, and whether we should, hope that something is the case.

Some issues, like the moral status of murder, will be less contentious than, say, the moral status of abortions, the ethics of markets in blood and organs, etc. It is likely that many readers think the issue of whether *atrocities are morally illusory* fits the bill: we know that what we think is a moral atrocity, even if not invariantly, is usually a moral atrocity. As the philosopher, Michael Huemer, argues in *The Problem of Political Authority*:

[It] is false that in general we do not know what is substantively morally correct. *Sometimes* we do not know what is substantively just. But often we do know. I do not know, for example, whether a ban on abortion would be unjust. But I know that the Jim Crow laws were unjust. (Huemer 2013, 172—original emphasis)

And the philosopher, Perry Hendricks, in evaluating whether we should hope that the pro-choice or pro-life position on abortion is correct, argues that because the abortion issue is highly contention, we should hope that the

pro-choice position is correct since that would make the world morally better compared to a world where the pro-life position on abortion is right—if the pro-lifers are correct, then that would presumably mean millions of fetuses are murdered in the womb each and every year, and who would hope for that? However, he doesn't think we can extend this axiological thinking generally to morally repugnant practices that are more certain to actually be moral atrocities, since,

[It] does not make sense to hope that slavery is just because we know that slavery is unjust. It does not make sense to hope that something you know is false turns out to be true; it makes no sense to hope, for example, that the Seahawks won the 2006 Superbowl. In other words, hope that  $p$  entails that we do not know that  $\sim p$ . But we (or, at least, most of us) know that slavery is not justified, and hence we should not hope slavery is justified *even though the world would be better if it is*. The same goes for Nazis and rapists: we know that the Nazis were wrong, and we know that rapists are wrong. So, though the world would be better if Nazis and rapists were right, it makes no sense to hope that they were. (Hendricks 2021, 785)

So, if that's right, then even if the world would be better, we cannot rationally hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent. One important fact overlooked by Huemer and Hendricks is that not everyone agrees that we know, for example, that Jim Crow laws are wrong—just as some may hold that the permissibility of abortion is obvious, but that the moral status of unjustified killing remains up for grabs morally speaking.

Here we are not talking about racists, or other moral degenerates, but those who either doubt that we have moral knowledge of *any* kind (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001), or folks who, although they fall short of endorsing views like moral skepticism and nihilism, recognize that they could be wrong about their moral views, even if they assign a low credence to such a possibility. Or we could hold that it is *likely* the case there are objective moral facts, but still accept that there is a non-negligible probability there are no objective moral facts. For many people, the possibility that there no or fewer moral atrocities than our moral appearances bear witness is a stable and live epistemic possibility as a consequence of their more mundane metaethical views.

Even many folks who take themselves to know that there are moral atrocities that aren't merely apparent may still believe that there are genuine moral

atrocities, with robust justification, who accept that it is possible—perhaps with a probability slightly higher than zero—even if highly unlikely, that there aren't moral atrocities. With respect to those folks, we can ask the question whether they should, as it looks like they can rationally, hope that apparent moral atrocities are illusory. As it happens, there are reasons, both epistemic and moral, that cut against aspirational illusionism, even for folks for whom the position is a live epistemic possibility.

#### 4.2 *Less Reliable Moral Cognition*

We should care, as both epistemic and moral agents, about the reliability of our moral cognition (Dogramaci 2017; Braddock 2016). If our moral cognition is unreliable, or even less reliable than we believe, then the result will be that we have a greater number of epistemically unjustified beliefs than we realize. And, in turn, those beliefs will, in principle, influence which actions we think are morally permissible—to the extent that we act according to what we think morality requires. We take a moral risk when acting on moral cognition with diminished or low levels of reliability: we could sincerely believe, say, that the consequences of our actions aren't nearly as bad as we think because the reliability of our moral cognition is less than what believe.

And to the extent we want to minimize moral risk (within reason), this cuts against aspirational illusionism. Suppose that the world we reside in is filled with only apparent moral atrocities: there is nothing unjust, immoral, or morally bad about atrocities, despite moral appearances to the contrary. A serious epistemic and moral consequence would, of course, be that our moral cognition is less reliable than it would be otherwise. After all, consider that nearly universally, at least in morally enlightened societies, we take it as a moral given that famine, war, genocide, and the like are moral atrocities that should be prevented or mitigated as best we can. However, if these atrocities are only apparent, then our moral cognition—e.g., our moral intuitions about what morality requires of us—are even more unreliable than we realize.

It would be a huge miss, by our moral cognition, to be so deeply wrong about the moral nature of atrocities in that they look like brutalities beyond imagination that require our attention and effort to prevent and mitigate. We would thus be hoping for a world where, apparently, the most pressing moral issues and concerns are mere illusions. It would be hard to see how our moral cognition could be anything but unreliable if we are wrong about the big moral stuff.

To hope that our world is such that atrocities are morally illusory would be to hope for a world where we take serious moral risks, unwittingly, due to the unreliability of our moral cognition. And where our moral cognition is so unreliable that we must worry with every action whether it really is morally required of us, or whether the action we forego really is morally prohibited.

Not only that: if we lived in a world where our moral cognition is unreliable to such a degree, we see moral illusions almost everywhere, and would be left wondering what moral actions we should take. However, those actions would be highly morally risky too since they are based on moral intuitions that are generated by our unreliable moral cognition. So, while a world with less injustice would be better than a world with more injustice, *ceteris paribus*, we should bear in mind that to hope we live in such a world is to hope that we have less reliable moral cognition, and take greater moral risks, than we realize based on our moral appearances.

#### 4.3 *Many Ungrounded, False Moral Beliefs*

There are epistemic costs to aspirational illusionism too. As epistemic agents, ideally, we want to avoid or discard false beliefs, and acquire true ones. We should want to avoid false beliefs to avoid the bad consequences of those false beliefs. To have false beliefs, as least related to what matters to us like survival and navigation, without the negative consequences of those false beliefs, would likely require ‘all manner of compensating false beliefs to make’ the original false beliefs ‘fit with what else we know’ (Joyce 2001, 179). The hitch, among others, is that often our beliefs influence not only our actions, but also other beliefs that we are likely to take onboard. If we have a false belief that *tigers are harmless cats who love to play chase*, then in an environment with many tigers, this false belief may get us killed. That false may not get us killed, however, if we have a false, but compensating belief that *tigers like it best if we avoid them entirely to make the chase more challenging* (Plantinga 1993, 225–226).

We never know if, when, or how a belief will be called into action—where we must rely on the belief to achieve an important and valuable goal—and ‘given this, it is better that [the beliefs we form are] true than false’ (Joyce 2001, 179). This is one of many reasons why it matters whether our beliefs are true. And yet, to hope that moral atrocities are apparent is by implication to hope that we have a large inventory of false beliefs, ungrounded salient moral facts. Even if we don’t recognize it, we would then have many moral

and non-moral beliefs about moral atrocities that would be false. To hope that apparent moral atrocities aren't actual is to hope, by implication, that many of our beliefs about history, public policy, and of course, moral beliefs themselves are false. This isn't to claim that people who hope the world is morally better than it looks intend to hope for the epistemic costs of their hopes, but it would be one of the costs nonetheless of their view, even if they don't realize such would be an (unfortunate) implication.

#### 4.4 *Opportunity Costs*

There would be many moral, practical, and cognitive opportunity costs if the world is such that apparent atrocities are merely illusory (Buchanan 1991). If the world is that way, it means that many moral problems that aren't atrocities are neglected, to varying degrees. This is because we spent substantial amounts of time, resources, and effort trying to prevent, mitigate, and address atrocities when it was morally unnecessary, given aspirational illusionism, and those resources would be wasted. Let's start with the moral opportunity costs.

First, the moral opportunity costs of trying to prevent and mitigate merely apparent atrocities would be very high. There are many events in the world that are morally wrong, but that fall short of moral atrocities, which have received less attention and resources because some of the attention is diverted to addressing merely apparent atrocities. So, to hope that the world is such that there are fewer or no moral atrocities is to hope that the world is such that we've wasted time and resources attempting to mitigate and prevent events that should have been applied elsewhere. For instance, there are no doubt many small evils in the world, which aren't moral atrocities, but that we could have mitigated had we focused more of our energies there, instead of mitigating apparent atrocities.

To hope the world contains no actual atrocities, only apparent ones, would be to hope that we wasted many opportunities trying to prevent war and genocide, rather than focusing on small, but morally bad and evil events like bad headaches, heartbreak, discouraging bullying, and whatnot. By example, it looks like in aggregate, enough small evils and suffering would amount to a moral atrocity (as related to the problem of evil, see Case (2020)). There are many people who suffer, where it falls short of a moral atrocity, whose, say, bellies hurt and teeth ache, and could be helped if we spent resources on them, instead of mitigating merely apparent atrocities.

Next, consider that we are limited epistemic agents—we only have so much time and cognitive resources to shift through beliefs and memories to find what we need. The more that is stored in memory, *ceteris paribus*, the more records our cognitive systems must shift through to find the needed record. Though limited epistemic agents like us may have, practically, a nearly endless storage capacity and assuming that ‘there are obvious advantages of having virtually unlimited capacity in that domain, the limitations on retrieval access can be viewed as a necessary filter. In the interest of speed, accuracy, and avoiding confusion, *we do not want every item in our memories to be accessible*’ (Bjork and Vanheule 1992, 157—my emphasis).

We do not want to recall every memory and belief because doing so would clutter our cognitive lives too much past the point where those records are useful. And if we stored numerous false moral beliefs, given aspirational illusionism. We should avoid storing false beliefs, not only to avoid wasting resources in retrieval, but because ‘retrieved records will often trigger additional thoughts [...] retrieving more records generally requires additional thinking’ (Michaelian 2011, 411). So, if atrocities aren’t actual, there are weighty cognitive opportunity costs that result from spending cognitive resources to solve moral problems that wouldn’t be real.

We have reviewed some of the problems and costs with aspirational illusionism. There remains, though, something off-repellant about the hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent, but it is one that is difficult to flesh out. We attempt to unpack it in the penultimate section.

#### 4.5 *Moral Repugnance*

There is an indirect, but still valuable, reason against aspirational illusionism. The world would be a better place if atrocities were merely apparent in the sense that the world would be morally less bad, *ceteris paribus*. Nonetheless, there is something morally repugnant about hoping that atrocities are merely apparent, even if the world would be better for it. This is deeply puzzling: there appears to be an obvious axiological bridging principle that we should—or at least we are permitted to—hope that something is the case if we have good reason to believe it would make the world a better place, and it is an epistemic possibility. On its face, it is puzzling why hoping so would be repugnant. Perhaps, though, there are a couple solutions to the puzzle.

The first solution is the most obvious: while the world would be a better place if atrocities were merely apparent, some of us cannot rationally hope

that is the case since we believe we know that atrocities cannot be merely apparent. Even if the world would be a better place if atrocities were morally illusory, some individuals cannot rationally hold aspirational illusion given their firm belief that they have moral knowledge to the contrary.

There are individuals who, even though they aren't moral skeptics or moral nihilists, don't take themselves to have moral knowledge; they believe, however, there are solid moral reasons, and moral evidence (e.g., moral intuitions), to believe that apparent atrocities are actual. Should we conclude that such agents could rationally hope that atrocities are only apparent? My strong intuition here: there is something bizarre about someone with strong evidence that apparent moral atrocities are actual, hoping they are only apparent. This intuition, though, is puzzling: if an epistemic agent had good reason to believe that moral atrocities were actual, and not merely apparent—they find arguments for moral skepticism slightly convincing—it looks like they're still in a position, given the world would be morally better if so, to hope that moral atrocities are merely apparent. So why the strong intuition otherwise?

Here's a tentative explanation: perhaps the reason the author has a strong contrary intuition is that humans are deeply moral creatures: most of us, for various reasons, have a strong sense of right, wrong, justice, and fairness, to name but a few. Our moral identity, and how we morally evaluate our life events helps to shape a fundamental and abiding aspect of our psychological identity: it matters not only how we treat others, but how others treat us, and how we are seen each other as moral agents (Hardy and Carlo 2011; Sauer 2019).

Whether this moral sense is merely the product of evolutionary and cultural process, or partly the result of something more metaphysical is beside the point: we clearly have a deep sense of justice, fairness, and right and wrong—one that cannot, for most of us, be easily ignored or forgotten. It would be hard for many of us to ignore the fact that we were mugged on the way home from a play by an assailant with a knife. It isn't simply that we were scared that it would happen again, but that the mugger profoundly wronged us with his actions—he didn't simply violate our sense of safety, though he did that too, he violated our moral sense of agency.

Imagine you were told, by someone you respected, that the violent mugging you endured was merely illusory and thus, despite how it appeared to you, it was a morally neutral event. (We will assume that a violent mugging is, at least, a minor atrocity—if you object to this, then pick your favorite example). The mugger didn't actually harm you, despite your feelings of betrayal, and




the resulting trauma. To be told this by someone you love and respect, even if accurate, would be hard to square with the profound sense of injustice you felt as a result of the mugging. This isn't to claim everyone would feel this way about the issue, but it is likely many people would. There's an odd sense in which hoping that apparent atrocities are illusory undercuts an important and deep respect for people as moral agents.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper asked whether it would be rational to hope that atrocities like war and genocide are merely illusory. Even if basic moral truths hold necessarily, axiological judgments are based on live epistemic possibilities, not metaphysical ones. For agents who lack salient moral knowledge that apparent atrocities are actual, we can rationally ask whether they should hope they are. We explored a solid reason to hope so: if atrocities are only apparent, then the world is objectively and morally better than it would otherwise be if they were actual; but, if atrocities aren't merely apparent, then the world is as morally bad as it appears, and perhaps worse.

In contrast, there are some reasons we either should not or cannot rationally hope that atrocities are merely apparent. The most obvious: some individuals *know they are real atrocities*. However, even for those who lack such moral knowledge that atrocities are actual, there are reasons that cut against the hope: our moral cognition would be less reliable than it would be otherwise, we would have many false, epistemically ungrounded moral beliefs, and we would have wasted resources trying to address merely apparent atrocities. Not to mention one final reason: there is something morally suspicious about hoping moral atrocities are only apparent that is deeply undignified with respect to victims of atrocities. So, while it isn't clear what we should hope for, what is clear is that moral axiology is worth further exploration.\*

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

 000-0001-9451-291X

School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, Arizona State  
University

Jimmy.Licon@asu.edu

---

\* Thanks to Liz Jackson for reading the manuscript and offering insightful and useful feedback that seriously improved the paper. My errors that remain are my own.

## References

- BENTON, Matthew A. 2020. "Epistemological Aspects of Hope ." in *The Moral Psychology of Hope*, edited by Claudia BLÖSER and Titus STAHL, pp. 135–152. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- . 2021. "Knowledge, Hope, and Fallibilism." *Synthese* 198(suppl. 7): 1673–1689, doi:[10.1007/s11229-018-1794-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1794-8).
- BJORK, Robert A. and VANHEULE, Marc. 1992. "Retrieval Inhibition and Related Adaptive Peculiarities of Human Memory." in *Advances in Consumer Research*, volume 19, edited by John F. SHERRY and Brian STERNTHAL, pp. 155–160. Duluth, Minnesota: The Association for Consumer Research.
- BLANCHARD, Joshua. 2020. "Moral Realism and Philosophical Angst." in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, volume XV, edited by Russ SHAFER-LANDAU, pp. 118–139. Oxford: Oxford University Press, doi:[10.1093/oso/9780198859512.003.0006](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198859512.003.0006).
- BOSTROM, Nick. 2003. "Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53(211): 243–255, doi:[10.1111/1467-9213.00309](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00309).
- BRADDOCK, Matthew. 2016. "Evolutionary Debunking: Can Moral Realists Explain the Reliability of Our Moral Judgments?." *Philosophical Psychology* 29(6): 844–857, doi:[10.1080/09515089.2016.1163667](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2016.1163667).
- . 2017. "Debunking Arguments from Insensitivity ." *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 7(2): 91–113, doi:[10.1163/22105700-20171195](https://doi.org/10.1163/22105700-20171195).
- BUCHANAN, James M. 1991. "Opportunity Cost ." in *The World of Economics*, edited by John EATWELL, Murray MILGATE, and Peter NEWMAN, pp. 520–525. The New Palgrave. London: MacMillan Publishing Co., doi:[10.1007/978-1-349-21315-3\\_69](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21315-3_69).
- CASE, Spencer. 2020. "Small Evils and Live Options ." *Philosophia Christi* 22(2): 307–321, doi:[10.5840/pc202022226](https://doi.org/10.5840/pc202022226).
- CHALMERS, David J. 2010. *The Character of Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195311105.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195311105.001.0001).
- CRUMMETT, Dustin. 2021. "The Real Advantages of the Simulation Solution to the Problem of Natural Evil." *Religious Studies* 57(4): 618–633, doi:[10.1017/S0034412519000726](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000726).
- DAVISON, Scott A. 2018. "God and Intrinsic Value." in *Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism*, edited by Klaas J. KRAAY, pp. 39–46. London: Routledge, doi:[10.4324/9781315210995-2](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315210995-2).
- DOGRAMACI, Sinan. 2017. "Explaining Our Moral Reliability." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98(S1): 71–86, doi:[10.1111/papq.12153](https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12153).
- HARDY, Sam A. and CARLO, Gustavo. 2011. "Moral Identity: What Is It, How Does It Develop, and Is It Linked to Moral Action?" *Child Development Perspectives* 5(3): 212–218, doi:[10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00189.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00189.x).
- HENDRICKS, Perry. 2021. "The Axiology of Abortion: Should We Hope Pro-Choicers or Pro-Lifers are Right?" *Ergo* 7(29): 774–788, doi:[10.3998/ergo.1126](https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.1126).

- HOWARD-SNYDER, Daniel and HOWARD-SNYDER, Frances. 1999. "Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36(2): 115–130.
- HUEMER, Michael. 2013. *The Problem of Political Authority. An Examination of the Right to Coerce and the Duty to Obey*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- JOYCE, Richard. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511487101.
- KAHANE, Guy. 2011. "Should We Want God to Exist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82(3): 674–696, doi:10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00426.x.
- . 2012. "The Value Question in Metaphysics." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85(1): 27–55, doi:10.1111/j.1933-1592.2012.00589.x.
- LICON, Jimmy Alfonso. 2021. "Aspirational Theism and Gratuitous Suffering." *Religious Studies* 57(2): 287–300, doi:10.1017/S0034412519000210.
- LOUGHEED, Kirk. 2017. "Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument." *Dialogue. Revue canadienne de philosophie / Canadian Philosophical Review* 56(2): 337–355, doi:10.1017/S0012217317000373.
- MACKIE, John Leslie. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin Books.
- MARTIN, Adrienne M. 2014. *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, doi:10.23943/princeton/9780691151526.001.0001.
- MEIRAV, Ariel. 2009. "The Nature of Hope ." *Ratio* 22(2): 216–233, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9329.2009.00427.x.
- MICHAELIAN, Kourken. 2011. "The Epistemology of Forgetting." *Erkenntnis* 74(3): 399–424, doi:10.1007/s10670-010-9232-4.
- PENNER, Myron Arthur and LOUGHEED, Kirk. 2015. "Pro-Theism and the Added Value of Morally Good Agents ." *Philosophia Christi* 17(1): 53–69, doi:10.5840/pc20151714.
- PLANTINGA, Alvin. 1993. *Warrant and Proper Function*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, doi:10.1093/0195078640.001.0001.
- . 2004. "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa' ." in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, edited by Peter van INWAGEN, pp. 1–25. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- POJMAN, Louis P. 1986. "Faith Without Belief?" *Faith and Philosophy* 3(2): 157–176, doi:10.5840/faithphil19863213.
- SAUER, Hanno. 2019. "The Argument from Agreement: How Universal Values Undermine Moral Realism ." *Ratio* 32(4): 339–352, doi:10.1111/rati.12233.
- SMITH, Michael A. 1997. "A Theory of Freedom and Responsibility." in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, edited by Garrett CULLITY and Berys GAUT, pp. 293–320. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reprinted in Smith (2004, 84–113), doi:10.1093/os0/9780198236467.003.0011.

- . 2004. *Ethics and the A Priori. Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-Ethics*. Cambridge Studies in Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:[10.1017/CBO9780511606977](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511606977).