

Beyond the reach of God

Eliezer Yudkowsky

abridged by Raymond Arnold and Nate Soares

I remember, from distant childhood, what it's like to live in the world where God exists. Really exists, the way that children and rationalists take their beliefs at face value.

In the world where God exists, he doesn't intervene to optimize everything. God won't make you a sandwich. Parents don't do everything their children ask. There are good arguments against always giving someone what they desire.

I don't want to become a simple wanting-thing, that never has to plan or act or think.

But clearly, there's some threshold of horror, awful enough that God will intervene. I remember that being true, when I believed after the fashion of a child. The God who never intervenes—that's an obvious attempt to avoid falsification, to protect a belief-in-belief. The beliefs of young children really shape their expectations—they honestly expect to see the dragon in their garage. They have no reason to imagine a loving God who never acts. No loving parents, desiring their child to grow up strong and self-reliant, would let their toddler be run over by a car.

But what if you built a simulated universe? Could you escape the reach of God? Simulate sentient minds, and torture them? If God's watching everywhere, then of course trying to build an unfair world results in God intervening—stepping in to modify the transistors. God is omnipresent. In the world where God exists, there's no refuge anywhere for true horror.

Life is fair.

But suppose you ask the question: Given such-and-such initial conditions, and given such-and-such rules, what would be the outcome, what would be the mathematical result? Not even God can change the answer to that question.

What does life look like, in this imaginary world, where each step follows only from the step before it? Where things only ever happen, or don't happen, because of mathematical rules? And where the rules don't describe a God in the system that watches over each step? What does it look like, that world of pure math, beyond the reach of God?

That world wouldn't be fair.

If the initial state contained the seeds of something that could self-replicate, natural selection might or might not take place. Complex life might or might not evolve. That life might or might not become sentient. That world might have the equivalent of conscious cows, that lacked hands or brains to improve their condition. Maybe they would be eaten by conscious wolves who never thought they were doing wrong, nor cared.

If something like humans evolved, then they would suffer from diseases—not to teach them any lessons, but only because viruses happened to evolve as well. If the people of that world are happy, or unhappy, it might have nothing to do with good or bad choices they made. Nothing to do with free will or lessons learned. In the what-if world, their Genghis Khan can murder a million people, and laugh, and be rich, and never be punished, and live a happy, happy life with never a shadow of regret. Who would prevent it?

And if their Genghis Khan tortures people to death, for his own amusement? Those people might call out for help, perhaps imagining a God. And if you really wrote the program, God himself *would* intervene, of course. But in the what-if question, there isn't any God in the system. The victims will be saved only if the right cells happen to be on or off. And it's not likely that anyone will defy their Genghis Khan; if they did, someone would strike them with a sword, and the sword would disrupt their internal organs, and they would die, and that would be the end of that.

So the victims of their Genghis Khan die, screaming, and no one helps them. That is the answer to the what-if question.

... is this world starting to sound familiar?

Could it really be that sentient beings have died, absolutely, for millions of years... with no soul and no afterlife... not as any grand plan of Nature, not to teach us about the meaning of life, not even to teach a profound lesson about what is impossible, but... just because?

Dead forever, in a world beyond the reach of God.

Once upon a time, I believed that the extinction of humanity was not allowed. I trusted that something would intervene, something would happen to prevent such horror. Others may yet have things they trust. Maybe "positive-sum games", or "democracy", or "capitalism", or "technology." Things that are sacred. Things that can't lead to anything really bad, not without a silver lining. The unfolding history of Earth can't ever turn from its positive-sum trend to a negative-sum trend. Democracies won't ever legalize torture. Technology has done so much good, there can't possibly be a black swan that does more harm than all the good up until this point.

It's not allowed.

Anyone listening, who still thinks that being happy counts for more than anything in life, well, maybe you shouldn't ponder the unprotectedness of your existence. Maybe think of it just long enough to sign up yourself and your family for cryonics, or to write a check to an existential-risk-mitigation agency every now and then. Or at least wear a seatbelt and get health insurance and do all those other dreary necessary things that can destroy your life if you miss one little step... but aside from that, if you want to be happy, meditating on the fragility of life isn't going to help.

But I'm speaking now to those who have something to protect.

Tell me; what can a twelfth-century peasant do to save themselves from annihilation? Nothing. Nature's challenges aren't always fair. When you run into a challenge that's too difficult, you suffer the loss; if the loss is lethal, you die. That's how it is for people, and it isn't any different for planets. Someone who wants to dance the deadly dance with Nature needs to understand what they're up against: Absolute, utter, exceptionless neutrality.

And knowing this will not save you. It wouldn't save a twelfth-century peasant, if they knew. If you think that a rationalist who fully understands the mess they're in can always find a way out—then for you, rationality is still sacred. If you believe that no matter what trials lie ahead, humanity will find a way...

We live in a universe beyond the reach of God.

It is a hard, uncaring universe where the challenges are not calibrated to your skills, and you can die from failing them.

If we want to build a softer universe, without disease or hunger, where no-one has to waste away and die against their will, then we have to start from the utterly neutral one, the one with no second chances and no safety nets.

This one.

*No rescuer hath the rescuer.
No Lord hath the champion,
no mother and no father,
only nothingness above.*