

REVIEW OF *UNSONG*

You realize you're talking to the Augustine Distinguished Scholar in Theodicy? The girl who picketed in front of the World's Fair back in 2012, waving a sign saying "NO IT ISN'T"?

The main theme of this novel is... biblical puns. It's ridiculous and I love it. I laughed a lot.

One of many little tangents I enjoyed is this bit poking fun at the idea of [nonoverlapping magisteria](#):

The hardest hit were the atheists. They'd spent their whole lives smugly telling everyone else that God and the Devil were fairy tales and really wasn't it time to put away fairy tales and act like mature adults, and then suddenly anyone with a good pair of binoculars can see angels in the sky....

Stephen Jay Gould, a biologist working at Harvard University, tried to stabilize the burgeoning philosophical disaster with his theory of "nonoverlapping magisteria." He said that while religion might have access to certain *factual* truths, like that angels existed or that the souls of the damned spent eternity writhing in a land of fire thousands of miles beneath the earth, it was powerless to discuss human values and age-old questions like "What is the Good?" or "What is the purpose of my existence?" Atheistic science should be thought of not as a literal attempt to say things like "Space is infinite and full of stars" or "Humankind evolved from apes" that were now known to be untrue, but as an attempt to record, in the form of stories, our ancestors' answers to those great questions. When a scientist says "space is infinite and full of stars," she does not literally mean that the crystal sphere surrounding the earth doesn't exist. She is metaphorically referring to the infinitude of the human spirit, the limitless possibilities it offers, and the brightness and enlightenment waiting to be discovered....

In this book's universe, both God and hell are real, which means its central mystery is one of the most difficult—I would say impossible—questions in philosophy of religion. I like that the book doesn't punt on the question; we get an answer at the end.

Then God spoke to Ana out of the whirlwind, and He said:

THE REASON EVIL EXISTS IS TO MAXIMIZE THE WHOLE COSMOS' TOTAL SUM GOODNESS. SUPPOSE WE RANK POSSIBLE WORLDS FROM BEST TO WORST. EVEN AFTER CREATING THE BEST, ONE SHOULD CREATE THE SECOND-BEST, BECAUSE IT STILL CONTAINS SOME BEAUTY AND HAPPINESS. THEN CONTINUE THROUGH THE SERIES, CREATING EACH UNTIL REACHING THOSE WHERE WICKEDNESS AND SUFFERING OUTWEIGH GOOD. SOME WORLDS WILL INCLUDE MUCH INQUITY BUT STILL BE GOOD ON NET. THIS IS ONE SUCH.

This answer makes a lot more sense than the ones people most commonly put forward in the real world. Like any halfway-plausible theodicy, though, it does ultimately require watering down the traditional concept of hell (traditional at least in the Protestant Christian tradition I was raised in) so that people don't actually suffer forever.