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Completing the Complete Understanding Argument: A Rejoinder to Roberto Di Ceglie

Abstract: In *The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews* (2020), I defend the Complete Understanding Argument for anti-theism, which says that God's existence makes the world worse with respect to our ability to understand it. In a recent article, Roberto Di Ceglie offers three objections to my argument. I seek to rescue my argument by showing (1) that understanding can come in degrees; (2) that I'm not a consequentialist about the value of understanding; and (3) that my argument is consistent with God providing us with sufficient knowledge of important spiritual matters. Di Ceglie's objections point to future areas for fruitful exploration but do not defeat my argument.

Key words: axiology of theism; anti-theism; complete understanding; Di Ceglie; Lougheed

1. Introduction

In my book, *The Axiological Status of Theism and Other Worldviews*, I defend the Complete Understanding Argument for anti-theism (2020). Anti-theism is the view that God's existence has (or would have) a negative impact on the value of the world. Specifically, I use the argument to defend narrow personal anti-theism, the view that God's existence would make things worse for (certain) individuals and in certain respects. My basic claim is that if God exists, there is something in the universe fundamentally unknowable; namely, God. With respect to understanding, then, God's existence makes us worse off. Roberto Di Ceglie objects that the Complete Understanding Argument fails because (1) complete understanding is impossible; (2) complete understanding isn't beneficial; and (3) God would ensure that we have complete understanding of the most

important spiritual matters. I seek to rescue my argument by showing that, with respect to (1), while complete understanding may be impossible, my argument still succeeds if understanding comes in degrees; with respect to (2), that I am not a consequentialist about the benefits of understanding; and with respect to (3), that my argument is indeed consistent with God providing us with sufficient knowledge of important spiritual matters. Di Ceglie's objections point to future areas of fruitful exploration but do not defeat my argument.

2. Understanding Comes in Degrees

Di Ceglie's first objection to the Complete Understanding Argument is based on the worry that "Lougheed does not ask himself whether or not complete understanding is really possible, no matter whether or not such a God exists" (2021, 2). For common experience shows us that complete understanding is impossible. Even when considering epistemic progress from a diachronic and group point of view, such that humans as a group are together moving towards greater understanding, complete understanding remains impossible (2021, 2-3). Part of the reason for this is that historical knowledge is often forgotten along the way, such that it is lost from collective humanity entirely.

Di Ceglie may successfully show that humans as they are presently constituted can't know everything, individually or collectively. However, the stronger claim that complete understanding is therefore impossible doesn't follow from this fact.¹ But for the sake of argument, suppose that Di Ceglie is correct that such complete understanding is impossible. Notice that I can rally by revising his argument to say that *less* understanding is possible if God exists than if naturalism is

¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

true. With respect to historical knowledge, our epistemic position may well be the same on theism and naturalism, but my basic point that God cannot be fully understood remains intact. When reinterpreted as a claim about the degree of understanding possible, my argument is not damaged by this objection.

A different way to attack my argument, and not one made by Di Ceglie, is to show that more understanding is possible on theism than naturalism by virtue of there being at least one more entity to understand, i.e., God. So, it's possible that even if much of God is inscrutable, the small aspects of her that can be understood are enough for there to be more possible understanding on theism than on naturalism. Imagine that on naturalism there are 1000 units of understanding. Further suppose that God represents an additional 1000 units of understanding but is mostly mysterious such that 900 of them are inaccessible to humans. This still means that there are 1100 units of understanding available on theism and only 1000 units of understanding available on naturalism.²

I have two primary responses to this objection. First, it is overly optimistic in thinking that the existence of God does not impact the purely 'natural' understanding available on naturalism. The objection seems to assume that God as an object of understanding is merely *in addition* to the objects of understanding in the world available on naturalism. But as some of my discussion in the book implies, this really depends on just how much God interacts with the natural order. If God intervenes frequently in the causal order, then normal scientific knowledge becomes impossible (Lougheed 2020, 157-159). In other words, the 1000 units of understanding available on naturalism does not necessarily transfer seamlessly to the theistic world.

² Thanks to an anonymous referee raising this objection and pressing me to think through it.

Though I don't concede the basic point of this objection, suppose that it turns out to be the case that on the assumption that God can be partially understood, more understanding is available on theism than on naturalism. There is still an important sense in which less understanding is available on theism than on naturalism such that a restricted version of anti-theism is true. This critical type of understanding in question regards the *percentage* of what a person (or group of inquirers, if one prefers) can understand about the world. On the initial objection, 1000 of the 1000 units of understanding are available on naturalism. But only 1100 of the 2000 units of understanding are available on theism. Admittedly, some of what I say below about the intrinsic value of understanding would have to be reformulated to fit with this type of response. My point here is simply that this response is indeed available to me.

3. Value Beyond Beneficial Consequences

Di Ceglie begins his second objection by assuming for the sake of argument that complete understanding is indeed possible. However, this concession isn't necessary if my above rejoinder succeeds. In any case, Di Ceglie's objection here is that the Complete Understanding Argument assumes that understanding is *beneficial* (2021, 4). For "[o]therwise, claiming that God's existence is detrimental to us because it does not allow us to achieve complete understanding would make no sense" (2021, 4). However, as we'll see in a moment, whether this makes sense depends on what Di Ceglie means by 'beneficial'. But first consider what Di Ceglie says about one of the cases I offer to support his argument:

Scientist Bill is a theoretical physicist at a research university. He has dedicated his life to finding a unifying theory of the universe. Bill thinks he has made significant

progress in this regard. He has a team of colleagues and graduate students devoted to helping him work out his theory. Bill finds great value in his work, while Bill enjoys the research process itself, what he is really after is the understanding of the universe that results from it. It is this understanding that motivates Bill and is indeed the most central focus of his life.” (Lougheed 2020, 160 quoted in Di Ceglie 2021, 4)

Di Ceglie carefully observes that Bill is not in fact interested in understanding literally *everything*. Bill derives the meaning of his life from understanding physics, not every single subject. While it’s true that in some sense a physical theory of everything is about everything, in other senses it clearly isn’t. For example, Di Ceglie notes that such a theory would not tell us about other things such as the history of music, or what it was like in seventeenth century France (2021, 4). So Bill really isn’t concerned with understanding *everything*; he just wants to understand everything about what he considers important. This means that “[h]e would not benefit from understanding these things, because, as I point out, that which motivates him is the wish to know the universe *that results from the research process* that he conducts” (2021, 5).

The problem with this objection is that it is rather straightforward to adjust the example as needed in order to accommodate Di Ceglie’s worry. The example can just be changed to say that Bill is in fact concerned with understanding everything in the broadest sense. If we worry that one person alone cannot possibly do this, we can change the example to be about a group of human inquirers striving for collective understanding of everything in the universe. Likewise, this example need not commit me to the idea that complete understanding is possible. Bill and/or his team of inquirers could be concerned with understanding everything *inasmuch as possible, while acknowledging that complete understanding is illusory*. Making such adjustments to the example

allows it to retain its initial intuitive force. And again, if God exists, then there is a very important object in the world that humans are simply unable to ever fully comprehend (i.e., God).

Di Cegli rightly recognizes that not all understanding is beneficial. Consider military research with great destructive potential.³ He continues:

There is a significant difference between complete understanding of *human experience*, which I have considered so far, and complete understanding of *God*. Given that God is the omnipotent and perfectly loving creator of all things, to understand him should only be beneficial to us. In fact, it is plausible to think that only spiritual and moral growth can follow from the achievement of complete understanding of the good itself, which causes every good thing in the world. As a consequence, my argument that achieving complete understanding is not beneficial to humans fails, at least when the subject matter of our understanding is God (2021, 5)

Di Ceglie answers this worry by explaining that “[i]t is widely argued that, when it comes to God’s nature, lack of complete understanding is preferable to complete understanding” (2021, 5). This is because if God remains (partly) hidden from humans, then they are able to freely choose God. So, there is a good reason why we are unable to fully comprehend God.

The problem with this claim about the consensus regarding divine hiddenness and free choice is that it is false. The very fact that there is now a massive literature on divine hiddenness in contemporary philosophy of religion is partly because there is *widespread disagreement* about whether God could ever be justified in hiding (e.g., Howard-Snyder and Green 2017, forthcoming; Kraay 2013).⁴ Indeed, is hiddenness even a necessary condition for freely choosing God? It seems

³ Notice, however, that nothing in my original argument claims that *all* understanding is beneficial.

⁴ Likewise, the literature has continued to grow so much that Kraay is now in the process of updating his original entry.

doubtful. Consider that I can freely reject my human father even though I know who he is, that he loves me, wants the best for me, has resources to help me, etc. It is not at all obvious that my human father needs to remain (partly) hidden from me in order for me to freely accept him. While I don't wish to turn this into a debate about divine hiddenness, my point is just that Di Ceglie writes as if these issues are settled. They aren't. In trying to challenge my assumption about the benefits of understanding (which we'll see below are actually not assumptions that I make), he appeals to assumptions about divine hiddenness which are plausibly more controversial. Robustly defending these assumptions means Di Ceglie must wade into the details of the divine hiddenness debate. In doing so, Di Ceglie risks losing otherwise sympathetic readers who turn out to disagree with the position he takes on divine hiddenness.

Di Ceglie concludes the section on his second objection by writing that God's "love implies, among other things, a desire for the best possible good of the beloved. If we combine this desire that God has for the best possible good of us with God's omnipotence, we can conclude that, if God exists, he grants us the best. Thus, if he does not grant us complete understanding of him, this means that lacking such an understanding is good for us" (2021, 6). Again, this assumes that divine hiddenness is justified which is precisely what's at stake in the debate about hiddenness. But more importantly, throughout this section Di Ceglie never defines what he has in mind by 'beneficial'. Indeed, though I write about the value of complete understanding, it is doubtful that I share the same ideas as Di Ceglie regarding its value. For I am *not* a consequentialist about value. I *never* say that the value of understanding is based on whether it is beneficial where benefit is understood as utility (or some related good).

To see this, think of the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value. Here's an example that may be dear to the professional philosopher. Modern-day universities are

sometimes run by administrators who value disciplines inasmuch as they directly lead to jobs. In light of this, philosophers are sometimes prone to observe that philosophical acumen is beneficial to a whole host of different jobs and hence actually does help graduating students to make money. But suppose that this was not the case and graduating philosophy students were the least employable major. Would studying philosophy be beneficial in such a scenario? I submit that it depends on what we mean by beneficial. Di Ceglie seems to be thinking in terms of utility (or positive consequence of some kind) and so would have to deny that philosophy is valuable in such a case. However, I believe that philosophy has *intrinsic* and *final* value. This means that the location of its value is found within it (as contrasted to extrinsic value) and is not based on its instrumental value.⁵ The same point can be made for understanding more generally. While I won't make the case for such a claim, this is the type of value I had in mind in the original argument.

4. Complete Understanding of What?

In his last criticism of my argument, Di Ceglie questions the nature of complete understanding. He writes that “[i]f God exists, there is no reason for him to grant us complete understanding, whereby ‘complete understanding’ we mean the understanding *of everything*. However, God may grant us a different sort of ‘complete’ understanding, the understanding *of what counts most*” (Di Ceglie 2021, 6-7). So, Di Ceglie suggests that while by ‘complete understanding’ I appear to mean ‘understanding of everything’, a different and more important type of understanding is ‘what counts most’ which he equates to that ‘which is of primary importance to us’ (2021, 7).

⁵ See Korsgaard 1983 for more on distinguishing between these types of value.

Here again, Di Ceglie appeals to the hiddenness literature by highlighting that when setting up his defense of the hiddenness argument, J.L. Schellenberg assumes that God is love and wants the best for us.⁶ In light of this, Di Ceglie believes that God's main aim is to make us better persons. While this means that we need an understanding of certain subjects, it hardly implies that we must understand everything (2021, 7). This is unsurprising when we cease from thinking of understanding purely in terms of scientific progress (which may well be good), and also recognize that "[t]hings are different when it comes to matters that touch life, matters among which God and his existence are typically numbered. Essential to these matters is the understanding of what counts most, and not the understanding of everything" (Di Ceglie 2021, 7).

Yet notice that this objection presupposes that scientific knowledge doesn't 'touch life'. This is false. Bridges, cars, planes, food safety, farming technology, vaccine technology, empirical studies of religion, etc., all 'touch life' in important ways. This need not commit me to an unpalatable scientism as I can simultaneously acknowledge that this doesn't imply that science can tell us about things like value and meaning. While a more charitable reading of Di Ceglie likely interprets him as referring to value, meaning, spirituality, etc., by 'touch of life', he still needs to tell us why other sorts of knowledge and understanding aren't valuable. For *if* there is intrinsic value to understanding *everything* inasmuch as possible, then God's existence still makes things worse with respect to this type of understanding.

Di Ceglie proceeds to offer a more concrete suggestion about the type of understanding that he believes 'counts most'. He writes that:

⁶ It is interesting that Di Ceglie appeals to Schellenberg since as the main proponent of the hiddenness argument, Schellenberg clearly thinks that God is *not* justified in hiding. For his first statement of the argument for atheism from hiddenness see Schellenberg 1993.

While reflecting on the truths of the Christian faith, [Aquinas] says that for a believer it is sufficient to believe only a few of them. S/he may not be aware of the remaining part of divine revelation and nonetheless s/he may be able to achieve communion with God and salvation, which is the greatest good for us given God's existence. According to Aquinas, 'the direct object of faith is that whereby man is made one of the Blessed', whereas 'the indirect and secondary object comprises all things delivered by God to us in Holy Writ, for instance that Abraham had two sons, that David was the son of Jesse, and so forth.' (Di Ceglie 2021, 7).

However, observe the word 'sufficient'. I never claim that God wouldn't grant us the understanding that is *sufficient* for salvation (or related spiritual good). My point is that understanding has intrinsic and final value (though admittedly I should have been clearer about this), such that it is worse if God exists because we would have less understanding (even if complete understanding is impossible on naturalism too). This is perfectly consistent with it being the case that if God exists, then God would grant us understanding (or at least the opportunity to understand) very important spiritual matters.

Di Ceglie concludes that:

If my argument is correct, not only does a form of complete understanding exist. It is also beneficial to us. Beliefs regarding our final destiny as well as the meaning of our life can substantially benefit us. Once understood them, every aspect of our experience can change for the better, starting with the decrease of our moral weakness and the promotion of our flourishing. In conclusion, revisiting the complete understanding argument advocated by Lougheed makes us see that God allows us to have complete understanding. As a consequence, God's existence turns out to be beneficial to us, and

not detrimental [...] My argument is that my revisitation of the complete understanding argument shows that God's existence is beneficial and not detrimental to us (2021, 8)

One observation to make about these final remarks from Di Ceglie is that there is slippage from bare theism to Christianity. The former just says there is an omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent being who creates and sustains the universe while the latter is a much more detailed position. I am only referring to bare theism. In discussing what is needed for salvation, including offering examples of what beliefs are essential for Christian salvation that I haven't quoted, Di Ceglie slips from discussing the value of monotheism to the value of Christian monotheism (2021, 9). There could be important axiological differences between these views, including when exploring whether God would grant us understanding of what matters most, in addition to the very content of what matters the most. At the very least, it cannot be assumed that the axiological status of these two views is identical, including in the context of the Complete Understanding Argument.

More importantly, Di Ceglie has clearly changed the definition of 'complete understanding'. If I mean 'understanding of everything', then in order to show that his argument fails, Di Ceglie needs to demonstrate that people don't have less understanding if God exists or alternatively that understanding isn't valuable. I've argued that he's accomplished neither. He has, in effect, changed my definition of complete understanding to 'understanding of important spiritual matters'. If important definitions in an argument are changed, it is unsurprising when that argument is found to be unsound. Di Ceglie would be more charitable to keep my conception of understanding intact throughout his reply.

Di Ceglie's conclusion that God's existence is 'beneficial and not detrimental to us' is not something that I ever deny depending on the *scope* of the claim in question. Throughout my book, I am careful to delineate the different scope of the various axiological judgements I defend. *Narrow*

judgments are about the way that something is worse or better *in certain respects*. *Wide* judgments are about the way that something is worse or better *overall*. *Personal* judgments have to do with the axiological impact on persons (which can be further divided into the impacts on certain persons or all persons). Finally, *impersonal* judgments are about the value impact of something without reference to persons. I reject the version of the Complete Understanding Argument that would establish personal wide anti-theism, such that God's existence would be worse overall for everyone (Lougheed 2020, 161). Instead, I defend the more modest position that God's existence would be worse with respect to understanding for particular individuals. This establishes narrow personal anti-theism. I further claim that for certain individuals who connect understanding to meaning, theism is so detrimental to meaning in their lives that a theistic world is worse overall. But this still only establishes wide personal anti-theism for *some* persons. So I never claim that the Complete Understanding Argument demonstrates that God's existence is worse overall and for everyone. Di Ceglie's critique here would be more nuanced if it paid attention to the distinction in scope between various axiological judgments. Such distinctions feature prominently throughout the book.

5. Conclusion

Di Ceglie is right to press me about the fact that complete understanding is impossible in naturalistic worlds too. However, it's a straightforward amendment to the argument for me to maintain that *less* understanding of the world is possible if God exists. In claiming that not all understanding is beneficial, and that God would only give us understanding of what matters most, Di Ceglie seems to assume consequentialism. But I'm not a consequentialist and can reasonably

respond that understanding is of intrinsic and final value. Still, Di Ceglie has shown that my argument would be improved by more carefully stating the value of understanding upfront. So, he has shown that I should more intentionally connect his argument to the literature regarding the purported value of knowledge, understanding, true belief, or related epistemic goods. Di Ceglie's claim that God would provide us with understanding of important spiritual matters (i.e., the things that really matter) is not something that I ever deny. Instead, it draws attention back to the question of whether understanding on its own is indeed intrinsically and finally valuable. We also saw that God's existence could make the world worse with respect to understanding, even if it doesn't mean that the world is therefore worse overall (and/or worse for everyone). There is no tension here. Perhaps the most interesting part of Di Ceglie's discussion of my argument are the connections he draws throughout it to the debate about divine hiddenness. Doing so raises important questions about what type of understanding God is (or would be) justified in withholding from us. This is an important question in itself and one that also deserves more consideration in the context of the axiology of theism. As it stands, however, Di Ceglie fails to offer convincing reasons to reject my Complete Understanding Argument for Anti-Theism.

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