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Anti-Theism, Pro-Theism, and Gratuitous Evil

Abstract: Ebrahim Azadegan recently argues that personal anti-theism, the view that it's rational for a particular individual to prefer that God not exist, is a form of gratuitous evil. This means it is an evil which doesn't need to occur in order for a greater good to obtain. He justifies this evil by arguing that the anti-theist is uniquely positioned to bargain, implore, and plea to God. Contrary to what many hold this type of pleading is a special good and hence adds value to the world. Thus, the existence of personal anti-theists are a gratuitous evil that turns out to add value to the world. All-else-being equal, then, the value of a theistic world is increased if it contains anti-theists. I argue that Azadegan faces a paradox. Once the anti-theist recognizes that God plus anti-theism makes the world better, she should convert to pro-theism. But then there can be no reflective anti-theists who could add value to the world. Ignorance is a requirement of the anti-theist who is able to offer these unique goods. It's also unclear whether the unreflective anti-theist could make the contributions Azadegan has in mind. The easiest way to avoid this paradox is to simply deny that anti-theism is a form of gratuitous evil. I conclude by (i) exploring whether a similar generalized version of the problem can be applied to anti-theism even if it is isn't a form of evil and; (ii) noting that in holding that anti-theism is a form of evil but subsequently failing to adequately address that evil from the theist's perspective, Azadegan has inadvertently opened the door for additional evidence for atheism. Namely, the existence of anti-theism counts as evil and hence as additional evidence against the existence of God.

I. Introduction

Philosophers of religion traditionally explore the existential question of whether God exists. The recent axiology of theism literature, however, focuses on the underexplored axiological question of what value impact, if any, God's existence does (or would) add to the world. Anti-theism is the view God's existence does (or would) decrease the value of the world.¹ This view can be subdivided to account for the impersonal or personal value impact of God's existence. Likewise, there could be a difference between God's value impact overall (wide scope), versus God's value impact in certain respects (narrow scope). Pro-theism is the view that God's existence does (or would) increase the value of the world, and it can be similarly subdivided.²

¹ For instance see Stephen Davis, "On Preferring that God Not Exist (or that God Exist): A Dialogue," *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014): 143-159; Travis Dumsday, (2016). "Anti-Theism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness." *Sophia* 55 (2016):179-195; Guy Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 no. 3 (2011): 674 – 696. Klaas J. Kraay, ed., *Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism*. Routledge, 2018; Kirk Lougheed, "[Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument](#)," *Dialogue* 56 (2017): 337-355; Kirk Lougheed, "The Axiological Solution to Divine Hiddenness," *Ratio* 31 (2018a): 331-341; Kirk Lougheed, "On the Axiology of a Hidden God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10 (2018b): 79-95; T. J. Mawson, "On Determining How Important it is whether or not there's a God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 no. 4 (2012): 95-105; Myron A. Penner, "Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument," *Faith and Philosophy* 32 no. 3 (2015): 325 – 337.

² Klaas J. Kraay and Chris Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43.2 (2013): 159. Klaas J. Kraay tells us that these hardly represent all of the attitudes one could take toward the axiological question, but these distinctions are all I need for my purposes here. See his excellent introductory chapter "Invitation to the Axiology of Theism" for more possible answers the axiological question (2018).

One underexplored sub-question pertaining to the axiological question is whether the existence of anti-theism itself constitutes a form of evil. And if it does, what are the implications of such an evil. In a recent article, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” Ebrahim Azadegan argues that personal anti-theism is a form of gratuitous evil.³ He suggests that the theist need not deny the existence of gratuitous evil, or appeal to solutions to the problem of evil such as sceptical theism. Rather, he argues that the anti-theist is uniquely positioned to bargain, implore, and plea to God. Contrary to what many hold this type of pleading or even the possibility of such is a special good and hence adds value to the world. Thus, the existence of personal anti-theists is a gratuitous evil, but it turns out that evil adds value to the world. All-else-being equal, the value of a theistic world is increased if it contains anti-theists.

I suggest that an initial worry for Azadegan is that his definition of gratuitous is problematic. If an instance of evil leads to an otherwise unobtainable good, then it is not gratuitous *by definition*. I’m going to assume Azadegan can modify his account appropriately in order to avoid this worry. The main problem with his view is that he faces a paradox: Once the anti-theist recognizes that God plus anti-theism makes the world better she should convert to pro-theism. But then there would be no reflective anti-theists who could add such value to the world. Ignorance is a requirement of the anti-theist who is able to offer these unique goods. Likewise, it may well be that only reflective anti-theists are capable of the unique outputs Azadegan has in mind. The easiest way to avoid this paradox is to simply deny that anti-theism is a form of (gratuitous) evil. I conclude by examining whether this problem generalizes for anti-theism even if it’s not a form of evil. It might be argued that inasmuch as the creative output of the anti-theist is the result of her anti-theistic sentiments, she should be a pro-theist (at least upon reflection). Such creative outputs include (but aren’t limited to) music, literature, and philosophical works. However, it’s doubtful that such creative outputs are dependent on the existence of God. It remains rational to be a personal anti-theist. I conclude by pointing out that by holding that anti-theism is a form of evil but subsequently failing to adequately address that evil from the theist’s perspective, Azadegan has inadvertently opened the door for an additional evidence for atheism. Namely, the existence of anti-theism counts as evil and hence is another instance of evil the theist must show it compatible with God’.

II. Azadegan on Anti-Theism

In this section I outline Azadegan’s recent article on the axiology of theism.

1. Preliminaries

Azadegan believes that impersonal anti-theism is difficult, if not impossible to defend.⁴ This is because whatever the punitive downsides of theism amount to, they will always be outweighed by the various upshots of theism. While he never explicitly specifies whether he means broad or narrow impersonal, I will assume what he says is intended to cover both. Azadegan outlines Guy

³ Ebrahim Azadegan, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” *The Heythrop Journal* 60, iss.5 (2019): 671-677.

⁴ Kraay and Dragos have also made this observation (see “On Preferring God’s Non-Existence,” 166-168) This is also explored in Kirk Lougheed, “On How to (Not) to Argue for the Non-Existence of God,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* (2018c): 1-23.

Kahane's influential Meaningful Life Argument as interpreted (and improved upon, though ultimately rejected) by Myron A. Penner. He believes that this is the strongest argument for personal anti-theism on offer. The argument focuses on the idea that there are certain goods such as independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude that are deeply connected to certain individual's life plans and hence meaning. These goods don't obtain if God exists. Hence, for certain individuals their lives would lose meaning if God exists. Hence, it's rational for certain individuals to prefer that God not exist.⁵

Penner ultimately rejects the Meaningful Life Argument and one of his main criticisms of the Meaningful Life Argument is that when it comes to goods like independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude that they can still be experienced to a high degree on theism. This makes a theistic world preferable to atheistic world where no theistic goods obtain. However, Azadegan writes that "the proponent of antitheism can still insist on the claim that for some persons there are some values the full and ultimate obtaining of which is essential for those person's lives to be meaningful. So an antitheist can still maintain that there are life-meaning-bestowing subjective values whose obtaining is incompatible with God's existence."⁶

Here's it's worth pausing to note three initial worries with Azadegan's account. First, I have criticized Penner along the same lines as Azadegan and Penner has responded that such values don't obtain in a full or complete sense on atheism either.⁷ Still, Penner never considers that there is a difference in the *degree* to which a good like privacy obtains in a theistic world compared with an atheistic world. In other words, Azadegan doesn't need it to be the case that these values fully and ultimately obtain only on atheism as opposed to theism. They just have to obtain to a higher (and/or perhaps qualitatively different) degree on atheism. Second, such values don't have to be connected to meaning in order to support personal anti-theism. The obtaining of a certain value or good can be valued by a specific individual regardless of whether she connects the good in question to the meaning of her life. Third, Azadegan's use of 'subjective' is potentially (and unnecessarily) misleading.⁸ As I've mentioned elsewhere, it's not always clear whether the values Penner has in mind are subjective or objective.⁹ But this is not important so long as the anti-theist and pro-theist agree that the specific value in question is indeed a value. As long as they both agree that, at least *prima facie*, privacy, solitude, etc., are valuable, then we need not worry about the distinction between objective and subjective. These, however, are only minor worries, so I now turn to Azadegan's main thesis.

2. *The Problem with Anti-Theism*

Azadegan writes that "antitheism in its personal form reduces to a type of the evidential or inductive problem of evil. Consider a person whose life would become meaningless if he

⁵ Kahane, "Should We Want God to Exist?" 682-692; Penner, "Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument," 328.

⁶ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 675.

⁷ Kirk Lougheed, "[Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument](#)"; Myron A. Penner, "On the Objective Meaningful Life Argument: A Reply to Kirk Lougheed," *Dialogue* 57 (2018): 173-182.

⁸ See Azadegan's explication of Penner where he writes "an antitheist can still maintain that there are life-meaning-bestowing *subjective* values whose obtaining is incompatible with God's existence" (Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 675, emphasis mine).

⁹ Kirk Lougheed, "[Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument](#)"

tentatively thought that God exists. Accordingly, he prefers that God doesn't exist."¹⁰ God could prevent individuals from this thought process by emerging from hiding. It would then be difficult for a person to rationally pursue a life plan which is dependent on God's non-existence.¹¹ He continues:

God has many ways to prevent the existence of persons who can rationally hope for His non-existence. God could adopt general ways and purposes that are compatible with evil states that include the existence of such persons, but because the goodness of God's general ways and purposes outweighs the badness of the existence of such evils from an overall perspective, God's existence can be seen as compatible with the existence of such evils. However, in the case of the personal antitheist none of the general theodicies or defenses would work out, since the question now is what necessitates that the benevolent God does not prevent the existence of such evils. It seems that, if God exists, the existence of [a] personal antitheist is a *gratuitous evil*.¹²

This quote represents the problem that Azadegan is attempting to address in his article. He never standardizes his argument by providing us with explicit premises and conclusions. In order to be as clear as possible, in what follows I'm going to standardize what I take to be the strongest version of the problem before exploring Azadegan's response to it.

The Problem:

- (1) God has many ways of preventing personal anti-theism.
 - (2) God's existence is compatible with the existence of evil because God's goodness outweighs *general* badness (or God's goodness outweighs evil *overall* or *on balance*).
 - (3) (2) doesn't apply to personal anti-theism given the truth of (1).
- Thus,
- (4) Personal anti-theism is an instance of gratuitous evil.

Here it is worth noting that the problem Azadegan has set out in the above quote is clearly intended as a problem for the theist. And he clearly addresses it from the theist's perspective throughout the rest of his essay. Unfortunately, Azadegan's formulation of the problem isn't as clear as it could be; (4) doesn't follow deductively from (1)-(3). Likewise it isn't clear how (1)-(3) abductively support (4) either. For the sake of argument, however, let's assume he has offered good reason to think that personal anti-theism is a type of gratuitous evil. Azadegan begins his reply to this problem by rejecting sceptical theism as a plausible response. Furthermore, he doesn't think that denying the compatibility of gratuitous evil and theism is necessary. Here he isn't explicit in claiming that gratuitous evil is logically impossible on theism, as many theists hold, but this seems

¹⁰ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 675.

¹¹ Presumably absolute epistemic certainty isn't required here. We can't be sure there's an external world, but it's irrational to pursue life plans which rely on their not being an external world.

¹² Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 675- 676

to be the best way to understand him.¹³ In explaining his preferred solution Azadegan claims that “we can accept their possible existence and then find a way to show that *gratuitous evil itself is a good*. Accordingly, I shall show that the existence of personal antitheism is itself a good, and so that the existence of God will enhance the value of the world from an axiological point of view.”¹⁴

3. *Azadegan’s Proposed Solution*

Azadegan explains that:

Gratuitous evil is a kind of evil which on reflection we can see no good reason for God’s permission of it. It is a kind of evil which seems pointless and avoidable. Could it be good that we were in a state such that we do not know any good reasons on the basis of which to defend God? Is it good that there could be some person who think (truly or not) that if there is a God their life will lose its meaning?¹⁵

So what good does Azadegan uniquely identify with personal anti-theism? In a somewhat counterintuitive and surprising move he appeals to the Biblical stories of Abraham pleading to God to spare Sodom, and also the story of Job’s sufferings. In the first story, Abraham begs God not to destroy the evil city of Sodom if there are just 10 righteous people in it. This number is the result of a continual reduction in the number of people worth saving from the beginning of Abraham’s conversation with God. Azadegan claims that Abraham believes destroying a city with 10 righteous people in it amounts to gratuitous evil. He explains that, “[t]he process of bargaining is... only possible if we can be in a state such that we can think that gratuitous evil is possible. So God, by permitting us to be in a situation such that upon reflection we cannot find a way to know God’s reasons, actually makes it possible for us to bargain, implore and plea for His special mercy and attention.”¹⁶ Likewise for Azadegan the story of God allowing Satan to destroy Job’s life for inscrutable reasons does not confirm skeptical theism. Rather, the story shows “that it is good that in some situations we should complain, like Job, that we don’t know God’s ways. This unknowingness opens a new way to plea to God and even to complain to Him, by asking why He has permitted us to be in such an evil state.”¹⁷

Azadegan wants to apply to same lesson from these stories to the personal anti-theist. He says that:

The personal antitheist thinks that her privacy, solitude, independence and moral autonomy have been constrained by the existence of God to the extent that she loses her life goals, and so desires God not exist. She complains about the existence of God. She rebels against God. These complaints and rebellions, I propose, shape her life and

¹³ Of course, sceptical theism is hardly the only response to the problem of evil. In some cases it might be perfectly clear that a particular evil brings about a particular greater good (or prevents some particular worse evil from occurring). In other cases, we might not know which particular goods are brought about, or which particular evils are prevented, but we know some general good (e.g. freewill) allows for at least some evil. Such defenses are not Azadegan’s focus.

¹⁴ Azadegan, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” 676.

¹⁵ Azadegan, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” 676.

¹⁶ Azadegan, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” 676.

¹⁷ Azadegan, “Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil,” 676.

give her life new meaning. Consider Jean-Paul Sartre or Nietzsche, who rebelled against God or responded with indignation to His perceived indiscretions. This rebellion gave a new meaning to their lives. The world containing Sartre and Nietzsche seems to be more valuable than the world without them. But what made them what they were, is the Lord's transcendence and hiddenness, which allowed them to be in a situation such that they dared to rebel against God.¹⁸

Thus, the existence of gratuitous evil in the form of personal anti-theism leads to what Azadegan refers to as a "special sort of goodness."¹⁹ He concludes that "theism has axiological value even for antitheists, because it gives them the possibility to find new meaning for their lives."²⁰ Such a rebellion is valuable (i.e. adds value to world) and so the existence of anti-theists turns out to be good.²¹

III. Problems for Azadegan

In this section I level a number of objections to Azadegan's proposed solution, concluding that his view leads to an unpalatable paradox.

1. Initial Problems

Before explaining a paradox which is fatal to Azadegan's project, there a number of lesser worries that are nevertheless worth briefly examining. Azadegan appears to say that there is a unique good that arises from the gratuitous evil of personal anti-theism. But if there is such a good that arises from an evil, such that it can justify that evil existing, then that evil is not gratuitous *by definition*. This would be a benign point if what Azadegan was attempting to show was simply that personal anti-theism is *not* a type of gratuitous evil. But at times he writes as if the fact that personal anti-theism is gratuitous is part of the very essence of what allows it to manifest the unique good of special pleading. This is a fundamental misunderstanding and misapplication of the definition of *gratuitous*. Consider the standard way that Kraay and Dragos understand gratuitous evil: "God cannot permit any gratuitous evil to occur: on theism, any evil that occurs is permitted either for the sake of obtaining a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unobtainable good, or for the sake of preventing a sufficiently significant, otherwise-unpreventable evil."²²

This problem would, I think, stop Azadegan's argument from even getting off the ground. However, it is perhaps easy enough for Azadegan to avoid this worry by simply discussing anti-theism as a form evil rather than gratuitous evil. He could still maintain that anti-theism is a type of evil that leads to certain unique goods. This would necessarily involve reframing some of his discussion, but it seems he could so without hurting his general thesis. He simply needs to removed the idea that it's the gratuitous nature of the evil that allows for the resulting good (rather than just

¹⁸ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 676.

¹⁹ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 671, 677

²⁰ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 677.

²¹ This is presumably the case in a sinful world where God can provide appropriate responses.

²² Kraay and Dragos 2013, 166.

the fact that it's an evil). Yet Azadegan should also remember that while the existence of evil itself might not be as problematic for theism as gratuitous evil it is still very much a problem.²³

It's also worth noting that personal anti-theists aren't necessarily committed to denying that there is *any* value associated with theism. Indeed, this is part of the reason for distinguishing between personal and impersonal forms of anti-theism. Azadegan does not distinguish between wide and narrow axiological judgments. But his target is clearly narrow personal anti-theism and when I when say 'anti-theism' in what follows I always mean 'personal anti-theism' unless I explicitly state otherwise. Values like privacy, independence, and solitude should *not* be properly understood as anti-theistic values.²⁴ Rather they are values that obtain to a higher degree in atheistic worlds than on theistic worlds (at least according to those who appeal to such goods in order to defend person anti-theism). In this sense, then, they are atheistic values, not anti-theistic values. The atheist need not necessarily be an anti-theist, even if she values the goods uniquely associated with atheism. Perhaps she thinks the value of God's existence is much greater than these goods. Thus, Azadegan needs to specify that his example is of a person who is *both* an atheist *and* an anti-theist.

It isn't always clear whether Azadegan believes that there is unique positive value associated with complaining to God, or whether what's valuable are the unique attitudes associated with personal anti-theism. For instance, regarding the story of Job, he writes:

Contrary to many contemporary readings of Job I don't think that the story confirms the truth of sceptical theism, but rather says more than this. It says that it is good that in some situations we should complain, like Job, that we don't know God's ways. This unknowingness opens a new way to plea to God and even to complain to Him, by asking why He has permitted us to be in such an evil state.²⁵

Let's consider each interpretation in turn. Azadegan admits that he has non-standard interpretations of the two Biblical stories of Sodom's destruction and Job's life. Unfortunately, his interpretations aren't just non-standard, they're implausible (and this is so even if the standard interpretations are wrong or incomplete). In the story of Job God is clearly angered that Job is complaining. His wife urges him to 'curse God and die' and she is hardly painted as a moral exemplar. If anything, this type of complaining counts *against* the claim that personal anti-theism adds value to the world. For within certain theistic traditions, such complaints are a sin and hence actually decrease the value of the world.²⁶ Consider the story of Abraham pleading for Sodom, in particular pleading for Lot and his family. It's doubtful that Abraham (or Job for that matter) is an anti-theist. Hence, I fail to see the connection between anti-theism and the special pleading that is alleged by Azadegan to be taking place in these stories. These stories don't support anti-theism even if there is something uniquely valuable about complaining and petitioning to God (though this in itself is doubtful). In order to make this interpretation more plausible Azadegan needs to argue that

²³ Indeed, much of the literature on the logical problem of evil focuses on whether God and evil are compatible (regardless of whether the evil in question is gratuitous).

²⁵ Azadegan, "Antitheism and Gratuitous Evil," 676.

²⁶ The traditions I have in mind are certain varieties of Christianity (both protestant and Catholic), and Islam. Additionally, one may wonder why it matters whether this is a sin on theism but remember that the problem of evil is a problem for the theist.

Abraham and Job are anti-theists and then show how their complaining adds unique value to the world.

The second interpretation of Azadegan is that there are unique attitudes associated with personal anti-theism that result in goods otherwise unobtainable. Perhaps when referencing thinkers like Nietzsche and Sartre, Azadegan is saying little more than that the philosophical, artistic, and literary output of thinkers who appear to hate the very idea of God is often wonderful. These people (and their work), as such, add value to world. Without the existence of personal anti-theism we wouldn't have these great works. But on this interpretation it's difficult to see what would make the existence of such people and their work a *gratuitous* evil. Here Azadegan's argument appears better suited as a possible solution to the problem of divine hiddenness: If God wasn't hidden then certain philosophical, artistic, and literary work would be impossible.²⁷ Also consider that Nietzsche and Sartre were atheists so it makes little sense to think as them of pleading with God. Their work might reflect their atheistic convictions (along with their very likely anti-theistic) convictions but I fail to see the connection between this fact and the two biblical stories who center on figures who are typically understood as devout theists. Thus, there are problems on either interpretation of Azadegan's position.

These worries should be enough to make us sceptical of Azadegan's proposed solution to the problem, if not also sceptical of the very problem itself. But even supposing these worries can be adequately addressed there remains an unpalatable paradox for Azadegan's thesis.

2. *The Paradox*

Azadegan argument leads to the following paradox:

- (1) Agent S is an anti-theist and because of this adds value to the world via special complaints and/or creative output which would otherwise be impossible.
- (2) Agent S reflects on the value mentioned in (1) and observes that if God exists the world is more valuable than if God does not exist.

Therefore,

- (3) Agent S is rationally required to be a pro-theist because of (1) and (2).

Before proceeding to the conclusion of the paradox a number details are in order. In order for (1) to follow from (2) it needs to be the case that the otherwise creative outputs in (1) *outweigh* the particular disadvantages Agent S associates with theism. Perhaps Agent S agrees there are valuable unique outputs on anti-theism but maintains that her life would still losing meaning if God exists. There's simply no obvious way to interpret Azadegan on this point. His emphasis on just how

²⁷ For more on the axiology of theism and divine hiddenness see Dumsday, "Anti-Theism and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness," 179-195; Kirk Lougheed, "The Axiological Solution to Divine Hiddenness," *Ratio* 31, 3 (2018): 331-341 and; Kirk Lougheed "On the Axiology of a Hidden God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, 4 (2018): 79-95

wonderful the anti-theist's creative outputs makes it seem as if he is committed to such goods swamping the disadvantages of theism so I'm going to proceed as if this is the case.²⁸

Therefore,

(4) If Agent S is a pro-theist then (1) and (2) don't obtain.

(5) If (1) and (2) don't obtain then (3) and (4) don't obtain either.

Premise (1) is intended to be consistent with either of the above-mentioned ways of interpreting Azadegan. (1) is true if there are unique positive values associated with complaining to God, and it's also true if what's valuable are the unique attitudes associated with personal anti-theism. Premise (2) reflects the idea that if an agent reflects on the truth of premise (1) she will observe that a theistic world is more valuable than an atheistic world. Why? Because in a theistic world one is able to get all of the obvious theistic goods, plus the less obvious theistic goods of special complaints and/or creative outputs. This is a rational reflection on the assumptions that (i) premise (1) is true (and for the sake of argument we are assuming it is true) and; (ii) without the less obvious goods in question that the atheistic world is (still) not better than the theistic world. The dilemma would, I suppose, not apply to unreflective or ignorant anti-theists who don't know about the unique goods their position brings about.²⁹ This is one way one to limit the number of anti-theists to which this paradox applies. However, I think this ultimately does not hurt the strength of the paradox very much since once the anti-theist is sufficiently reflective about her anti-theism it becomes unreasonable. In other words, once the anti-theist is reflective the creative output is impossible. So the class of anti-theists to which this paradox does not apply is one which they are unreflective about their anti-theism. That ignorance is a requirement for Azadegan's account is problematic in itself. Furthermore, the sort of person Azadegan has in mind (e.g. Nietzsche and Sartre) may only be capable of creative outputs *if* they are sufficiently reflective individuals.³⁰

This brings us to premise (3). Namely, that after reflecting on (1) and (2) that the agent in question is rationally required to become a pro-theist. Here's a sub-argument to support the move from (1) and (2) to (3):

The Sub-Argument from (1) and (2) to (3)

(2.1) Agents are rationally required to prefer more valuable worlds to less valuable worlds.

²⁸ Even if I am wrong about this notice that the dilemma could still be posed in different, broader terms. For the dilemma could still be posed with respect to *wide* personal anti-theism which is about *overall* value judgments and hence not about individual advantages or disadvantages. If this is right it might not be a dilemma for Azadegan specifically, but it would show wide versions of anti-theism are incoherent.

²⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this possibility to my attention.

³⁰ I won't spend time defending this claim here. It is ultimately one about the psychological make-up of different individuals and it would be mere speculation on my part to say more about it.

(2.2) If a world with God is more valuable than a world without God, then an agent is rationally required to prefer the world with God.

(2.3) A world with God is more valuable than world without God (via 1)

Therefore,

(3) Agent S is rationally required to be a pro-theist.

I'm going to assume that premise (2.1) is generally uncontroversial. However, it's worth noting that some argue that there can be cases where it's rational for an individual to prefer the worse (overall) to the best (overall). Perhaps this sort of case occurs with respect to narrow personal anti-theism. For maybe (2.1) is true with respect to wide axiological judgments but not narrow judgments. As mentioned earlier this is simply a place where Azadegan doesn't provide us with enough information to know what he would say about matter. I'm going to continue to write as if this applies to narrow personal anti-theism. But even if it doesn't, the paradox will apply to *wide* personal anti-theism and this is interesting result.

If (2.1) is true, then (2.2) is true. (2.3) is true if (1) and my subsequent explanation of it is correct. As long as one doesn't think that an atheistic world is more valuable than a theistic world, before evaluating the goods of special complaints and/or creative outputs then all of this follows. The reason for this is that if one thought an atheistic world is better than a theistic world, then perhaps with or without the addition of the goods of special complaints and/or creative outputs, she would still believe the atheistic world is better. But this isn't a *wide* position that has garnered little support in the literature (indeed, to the contrary).³¹ (4) and (5) represent the crux of the paradox and follow from (1) through (3).

In sum, Azadegan's position paradoxically implies that a narrow personal anti-theist, upon rational reflection, should convert to personal pro-theism.³² But if all (reflective) anti-theists are rationally compelled to be pro-theists then there are no (reflective) anti-theists to make the reflection and subsequent conversion in the first place. Hence, the value that Azadegan alleges is added by anti-theism via special complaints or creative outputs is impossible, at least for reflective anti-theists. An agent has to be ignorant and unreflective to produce these outputs. Yet we may well wonder whether the sort of artwork and creative outputs Azadegan has in mind could really be the products of unreflective agents. If a certain level of reflectivity is needed in order to produce such creative outputs, then it may turn out that the paradox applies to *all* of the anti-theists capable of such outputs and hence all of Azadegan has in mind. If Azadegan is correct that anti-theism is a form of (gratuitous)evil, then anti-theism doesn't exist (at least for individuals sufficiently reflectively).

Azadegan could respond that while the anti-theist adds value to the world, she doesn't add enough to make pro-theism rationally compelling, and hence (2) is false. However, this response makes

³¹ Klaas J. Kraay and Chris Dragos, "On Preferring God's Non-Existence"; Penner, "Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument" and; Myron A. Penner and Kirk Lougheed "Pro-Theism and the Added Value of Morally Good Agents," *Philosophia Christi* 17, 1 (2015): 53-69. I hope to defend a version of wide personal anti-theism in a future book-length project.

³² This applies to both narrow and wide versions of personal pro-theism.

it difficult to see how anti-theism could somehow be justified on theism in the first place if it really is a form of gratuitous evil. This is because it is typically assumed that God and gratuitous evil are incompatible.³³

Another way out is to reject (1) by denying the claim that anti-theists add unique value to the world. For as soon as the anti-theist adds special value to the world in some way, the dilemma can simply be restated. This response need not commit one to denying that the existence of certain atheistic goods might be valuable, it only commits one to denying that the anti-theist herself adds unique value to the world. This response, however, appears to require Azadegan to abandon his main thesis about the special value offered by anti-theists.

This paradox raises further questions about (i) whether anti-theism is a form of evil and; (ii) if yes, whether it is a form of *gratuitous* evil. With respect to (i) if anti-theism is a form of evil then it constitutes additional evidence against the existence of God (at least if we take instances of evil to count as against the existence of God). While anti-theism is a position that has likely existed for centuries, its existence hasn't typically been marshalled as evidence against God's existence.³⁴ Finally, with respect to (ii): if anti-theism is a form of gratuitous evil, then it logically entails that God does not exist (at least on the assumption God and gratuitous evil can't coexist). It would be a bitter pill to swallow if to avoid this the theist responds that personal anti-theists don't really exist. For it seems obvious that such people exist. I doubt that this is a route that Azadegan himself would want to take.

IV. Problems for Personal Anti-Theism

These reflections on Azadegan's piece lead to a more general problem for personal anti-theism. For the sake of argument let's assume that anti-theism is not a form of evil. The question remains whether Azadegan is correct that the existence of anti-theism increases the axiological value of the world. It is possible Azadegan is right about this even if the observation cannot be used to justify a particular evil. This question is, of course, separate from the axiological evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages associated with theism and atheism. Indeed one's assessment of those advantages and disadvantages will inform one whether she should be an anti-theist or pro-theist. So the particular question I'm interested in now is whether the existence of anti-theism adds value to the world. I believe that there is a strong *prima facie* case in support of the claim that the existence of anti-theists do indeed add value the world. Inasmuch as great works of philosophy, literature, and art have been inspired by anti-theistic sentiments then, anti-theism adds value to the world. Azadegan rightly points to Nietzsche and Sartre as two important examples. However, a more general problem to the one raised above in reply to Azadegan can be applied to this analysis of anti-theism.

The Generalized Paradox

³³ See Kraay and Dragos "On Preferring God's Non-Existence," 166.

³⁴ It seems that Nietzsche was an anti-theist (at least in some way). New atheists like Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins are clearly anti-theists. Within contemporary philosophy, Thomas Nagel and Guy Kahane have explicitly affirmed anti-theism (or closely related sentiments). I have also explicitly defended versions of narrow personal anti-theism.

- (1) Agent S is an anti-theist and because of this adds value to the world via creative output that is (at least in part) the result of her anti-theism.
- (2) Agent S reflects on the value in (1) and observes that if God exists the world is more valuable than if God does not exist.

Therefore,

- (3) Agent S is rationally required to be a pro-theist because of (1) and (2).

Therefore,

- (4) If Agent S is a pro-theist then (1) and (2) don't obtain.

- (5) If (1) and (2) don't obtain then (3) and (4) don't obtain either.

I won't spend time outlining a defense of these premises and conclusions. They can be defended in much the same way they are above in the more specific case. On this more general account the problem remains that if anti-theists are rationally compelled to be pro-theists, then there are no anti-theists in the first place. More specifically, there aren't any sufficiently reflective anti-theists. It's logically possible that the anti-theist who never reflects on her anti-theism in the first place may produce such outputs. But as I state earlier, I'm suspicious that unreflective persons could produce such great works. So there is a general ignorance requirement built into responding the dilemma in this way. The value the anti-theist is supposed to add via creative output is impossible for the informed anti-theist. This remains so even if anti-theism isn't a form of evil. One way out of this problem is to deny that anti-theists contribute unique and otherwise unobtainable value to the world. But inasmuch as great works from thinkers are (at least partly) the result of their anti-theistic convictions then this response is implausible. It seems equally implausible to deny that these great works do not add value to the world. This leaves us in a puzzling position: Anti-theists do indeed add value to the world, but it is irrational for any individual to be an anti-theist.

In an attempt to avoid this strange result, the anti-theist might respond that while anti-theism adds value to the world, it doesn't add enough value to make pro-theism rationally compelling. Again, perhaps wide personal/impersonal pro-theism is compelling, but not narrow personal anti-theism. Hence premise (2) of the more general dilemma is false. I rejected this response as a solution above, however, because the value in question there is supposed to outweigh the existence of evil. But this is not what's being claimed here, so it is *prima facie* more reasonable. The anti-theist needs to show that the goods of atheism outweigh the goods of theism *plus* the good of the creative output resulting from anti-theists. This is a tall order, but perhaps not impossible (and at the very least not *prima facie* implausible).

A promising way for the anti-theist to avoid this problem is to reject the idea that the existence of God is necessary for anti-theistic creative outputs. Indeed, the axiological question about God is distinct from the existential question. The narrow personal anti-theist doesn't want there to be a God. Some of her creative output is the result of this desire. This creative output is in no way

dependent on whether it turns out there actually is or is not a God. Therefore, (2) of the Generalized Paradox is false. Therefore, it remains rational to be a personal anti-theist.

There is one last wrinkle regarding this dilemma I need to mention. As I've already mentioned, many theists hold that the existence of evil is logically impossible if God exists. If the creative anti-theist also endorses the problem of evil with respect to the existential question, then she must actually be a pro-theist. For God were to exist, then she thinks there would be no gratuitous evil. Given that this is a very great good she should be committed to pro-theism even though she is an atheist because of evil.³⁵ Where does this leave us? The creative anti-theist can be an atheist, but not because of the problem of evil.³⁶ Again, such reflections may change the relevant class of anti-theists to which this dilemma applies.³⁷

V. Conclusion

In observing that anti-theism is a form of evil but subsequently failing to adequately address that evil from the theist's perspective, Azadegan has inadvertently opened the door for additional evidence against the existence of God. Namely, the existence of anti-theism counts as evil and hence as additional evidence against the existence of God. Of course, it remains an open question whether we should consider anti-theism a form of evil in the first place. This is especially so given it is (at least *prima facie*) compatible with any and every form of theistic belief. As it stands, Azadegan should probably accept this option given all of the problems that ensue once one considers narrow personal anti-theism to be a type of evil. I concluded by examining whether this problem generalizes for anti-theism even if it's not a form of evil. It might be argued that inasmuch as the creative output of the anti-theist is the result of her anti-theistic sentiments, she should be a pro-theist. But it's doubtful that such creative outputs are dependent on the existence of God. Rather they depend on the individual in question preferring that God not exist. It remains rational to be a personal anti-theist.

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³⁵ See Myron A. Penner and Benjamin H. Arbour "Arguments from Evil and Evidence for Pro-Theism" in Klaas J. Kraay, ed., *Does God Matter? Essays on the Axiological Consequences of Theism*. Routledge, 2018, 192-202.

³⁶ This strategy might be available regarding other arguments for atheism but I won't discuss that here.

³⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to think about how the argument from Penner and Arbour relate to my project.