

***This is a pre-print copy of a paper in Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review. Please cite the published version only.***

## **Anti-Theism and the Objective Meaningful Life Argument**

KIRK LOUHEED    *McMaster University*

*ABSTRACT: Philosophers of religion have begun to explore the value question of whether God's existence would add to, detract from, or have no impact on the value of our world. The Meaningful Life Argument is one of the most promising arguments in support of the view that God's existence would make the world worse, at least for certain individuals. I offer an objectivized version of the Meaningful Life Argument and show why recent objections leveled against it by Myron A. Penner do not apply to this version.*

Keywords: axiology of theism, personal anti-theism, meaning of life, pro-theism, Myron A. Penner

### **I. Introduction**

Contemporary philosophers of religion primarily focus on the ontological question of whether God exists. For instance, there has been much discussion about the arguments for and against God's existence. Arguments in favour of God's existence include the cosmological, ontological, and the teleological arguments. Arguments against God's existence include those based on evil, the problem of no best world, and the apparent hiddenness of God. Other topics discussed include the (in)consistency of the divine attributes, the possibility of miracles, and significance of religious diversity. A survey of the last decade of any of the speciality journals in philosophy of religion will show that there is little agreement on these topics and no end in sight to the work being done on them.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, however, philosophers of religion have begun to explore the *value* question about the existence of God.<sup>2</sup> This is the question of whether God's existence would add to, detract from, or have no impact on the value of our world. The literature addressing this question is known as the *axiology of theism*.<sup>3</sup> As with much contemporary philosophy of religion, the concept of God at play in this debate is a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. A number of different stances in answer to this question have begun to take clearer shape in last few years. Pro-theism is the view that it is rational to prefer that God exists. Anti-theism is the view that it is rational to prefer that God does not exist. Pro-theism can be subdivided to account for the value impact

---

<sup>1</sup> Even Alvin Plantinga's (2001) widely accepted solution to the logical problem of evil has recently come under scrutiny. For example, see Pruss (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Guy Kahane (2011) is the paper that clearly started the recent debate, though the topic is first explicitly discussed in Rescher (1990).

<sup>3</sup> For more on axiology of theism debate, see Rescher (1990); Mawson (2012); Davis (2014); Penner and Lougheed (2015).

God's existence would have to a particular person (personal scope), or all persons (impersonal scope).<sup>4</sup> Anti-theism can be similarly subdivided.<sup>5</sup>

An initial objection to the axiology topic is that any conditional with God's existence as the antecedent is a counterpossible and hence trivially true. Since God is a necessary being, God exists in every possible world. Put differently, if God does not exist, then nothing exists.<sup>6</sup> But Guy Kahane's remarks are instructive on this point:

We are not asking theists to conceive of God's death—to imagine that God stopped existing. And given that theists believe that God created the universe, when we ask them to consider His inexistence we are not asking them to conceive an empty void. Except for a number of exceptions that I will make explicit, I will understand the comparison to involve the actual world and the closest possible world where [the opposite about the truth of God's existence is true].<sup>7</sup>

The axiology of theism literature presses on an interesting question that everyone seems to be able to comprehend. Likewise, if this is an objection for my project, it is an objection for everyone working on this topic.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I examine one of the most promising arguments for personal anti-theism, the Meaningful Life Argument, first offered by Kahane and subsequently developed and rejected by Myron A. Penner. The general idea behind this argument is that it could be rational for an individual to prefer that God not exist if her life would turn out to be meaningless if God exists.<sup>9</sup> The Meaningful Life Argument depends on accurately identifying and weighing goods that contribute to a meaningful life.<sup>10</sup> Penner's first objection is that the anti-theist is fallible with respect to identifying and weighing goods that contribute to a meaningful life, and therefore might be mistaken. While one might be tempted to respond to Penner by claiming that there is epistemic parity between pro-theists and anti-theists with respect to identifying and weighing goods that contribute to a meaningful life, Penner can accept that this parity exists and his objection still applies. This is because the anti-theist—as opposed to the pro-theist—is making positive claims about goods that contribute to a meaningful life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kraay and Dragos (2013), 159-160.

<sup>5</sup> Kraay and Dragos also note that pro-theism can be further subdivided to account that things would be better in some particular respect (narrow scope), or overall (wide scope). I refer to personal anti-theism throughout the paper because what I say is compatible with both narrow and wide scope anti-theism.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to discuss this worry.

<sup>7</sup> Kahane (2011), 676.

<sup>8</sup> This problem has recently been taken up by Joshua Mugg (2016). He offers a novel solution to the counterpossible problem but I will not explore that account here. Also, related to this objection is the claim that, since God exists necessarily and is an infinitely good being, every possible necessarily has the same (infinitely good) axiological value. I assume that this too is false. A world with one less genocide is better than a world that is otherwise identical to it, regardless of whether God exists. See also Penner and Loughheed (2015), 60; Kraay and Dragos (2013), 160-162.

<sup>9</sup> Kahane (2011); Penner (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

In reply to Penner's first objection, I offer an objectivized version of the Meaningful Life Argument that is not susceptible to his fallibility objection.<sup>11</sup> Penner's second objection is that the goods in question still obtain to a certain degree if theism is true, and there is no reason to think they must obtain completely in order for them to confer meaning. This objection also applies to the objectivized version of the argument. I reply to this objection by showing that some goods must obtain completely in order for them to confer meaning. Also, some of the goods in question simply do not come in degrees. Thus, while Penner's initial rejection of the Meaningful Life Argument is successful, it is unsuccessful against the objectivized version of it. In sum, I aim to (i) show why Penner's initial rejection of the Meaningful Life Argument succeeds; (ii) demonstrate that there is an objectivized version of the argument that avoids Penner's objections and; (iii) support (ii) with an extensive discussion of the relevant goods in question.

## II. The Meaningful Life Argument

Penner's sophisticated development of the Meaningful Life Argument<sup>12</sup> builds on the following comments from Kahane:

If a striving for independence, understanding, privacy and solitude is so inextricably woven into my identity that its curtailment by God's existence would not merely make my life worse but rob it of meaning, then perhaps I can reasonably prefer that God not exist—reasonably treat God's existence as undesirable without having to think of it as impersonally bad or as merely setting back too many of my interests. The thought is that in a world where complete privacy is impossible, where one is subordinate to a superior being, certain kinds of life plans, aspirations, and projects cannot make sense .... Theists sometime claim that if God does not exist, life has no meaning. I am now suggesting that if God does exist, the life of at least some would lose its meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Before proceeding with the Meaningful Life Argument, Penner explains that moral goods are "those goods that only moral agents are able to experience or pursue in virtue of their being moral agents."<sup>14</sup> He also assumes that, "for some agents, striving for, and perhaps obtaining a meaningful life, depends on obtaining or pursuing some moral goods."<sup>15</sup> Penner says it is now possible to identify the following set: "let ' $M_S$ ' name the set of moral goods such that, from some agent  $S$ 's perspective, obtaining or pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  is necessary for  $S$  to have a meaningful life."<sup>16</sup>

With these distinctions in mind, Penner offers the Meaningful Life Argument:

---

<sup>11</sup> The idea for this construal of the argument comes from an anonymous referee which he or she takes to be a more accurate interpretation of Kahane than the one offered by Penner. Regardless of whether this is the case, the distinction between subjective and objective will turn out to be very important.

<sup>12</sup> Penner (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Kahane (2011), 691.

<sup>14</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>15</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>16</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

1. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ , then God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life.
2. If God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining what she thinks is a meaningful life, then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.
3. So, if God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ , then it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.
4. God's existence would constrain or prevent *S* from obtaining some of the goods in  $M_S$ .
5. Thus, it's rational for *S* to prefer that God doesn't exist.<sup>17</sup>

Penner acknowledges that the goods mentioned by Kahane—such as independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude—are goods that plausibly contribute to meaning and that they are jeopardized in some important sense if God exists. Penner notes that:

There is a good prima facie case for independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude to be considered moral goods. Moreover, there is good reason to think that God's existence would constrain or prevent moral agents from experiencing those goods in any ultimate sense. Thus, if independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude are crucial for some agent's meaningful life-plan, then given the barrier God's existence would be for achieving that life-plan, it would be rational for that agent to prefer that God doesn't exist.<sup>18</sup>

### III. Penner's Fallibility Objection to the Meaningful Life Argument

Penner's fallibility objection attacks premises (1) and (2) of the Meaningful Life Argument. He reminds his readers that the premises include purely subjective criteria about what the agent thinks constitute a meaningful life. This will turn out to be a very important detail. Penner explains that:

Regardless of how *S* came to believe that  $M_S$  has the particular members it does, from *S*'s perspective, pursuing the goods in  $M_S$  constitute a meaningful life. But unless *S*'s perspective is an infallible indicator of these sorts of things, we'll need to acknowledge the potential gap that exists between *S*'s perspective on what constitutes a meaningful life for *S*, and what actually constitutes a meaningful life for *S*.<sup>19</sup>

Penner says to imagine that there's an objective set  $*M_S$  of moral goods that make up a meaningful life. An important question becomes: how closely does  $M_S$  reflect  $*M_S$ ? He suggests that humans are often mistaken about what goods constitute a meaningful life. For example, many people often used to think certain things were worthwhile pursuits but later change their minds. He then employs the following case to prime intuitions in favour of the idea that we're highly fallible with respect to what constitutes a meaningful life:

---

<sup>17</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>18</sup> Penner (2015), 333-334.

<sup>19</sup> Penner (2015), 334.

I used to think that pursuing and achieving goods X, Y, and Z would constitute a meaningful life, but it turned out I was wrong. I achieved goods X, Y, and Z to a high degree and on a scale beyond what I'd dare to dream, and yet it didn't give me the kind of satisfying life I thought it would. In fact, getting the kind of life I thought I wanted actually seemed to make life less worth living, not more. When I look back and think about that time in my life, the best way to make sense of what was going on was that I was mistaken about what would yield a meaningful life. It's not as if X, Y, and Z were meaningful for a time and then ceased to be meaningful because the criteria for a meaningful life changed over time. Instead, it seems overwhelmingly the case that I was just mistaken about what would generate a meaningful existence.<sup>20</sup>

Penner concludes the fallibility objection by pointing out that:

The strength of any particular version of the Meaningful Life Argument Template will depend on the degree of support one has for thinking that one has accurately identified the goods necessary for obtaining a meaningful life. Given the fallibility of such judgments, more work needs to be done than simply articulating a purely subjective list.<sup>21</sup>

In this objection, Penner appears to endorse the following principle:

*Identifying Fallibility: Anti-theists are fallible and prone to error with respect to identifying goods that contribute to a meaningful life.*

#### **IV. An Initial Rejoinder to Penner's Fallibility Objection: Epistemic Parity**

One might be tempted to reply to Penner in the following way: Penner is certainly correct that people are highly fallible with respect to the goods that they think will constitute a meaningful life. His example is highly plausible and realistic: people often pursue and achieve certain ends they think will give their lives meaning, but are left feeling empty and hopeless even after they obtain them. We're at least sometimes mistaken about what goods constitute a meaningful life. But one might claim that Penner's worry about our ability to identify what goods constitute a meaningful life is a sword that cuts both ways. There is no reason to think that pro-theists are any more likely to accurately identify goods that contribute to a meaningful life.

Consider the vast and pervasive actual disagreement about religious metaphysics. There is widespread inter-religious disagreement. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and far too many other religions to mention disagree about the nature of God among other important religious questions.<sup>22</sup> There is also widespread intra-religious disagreement. For example, different Christian sects include Baptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, United, Catholic, Orthodox, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Penner (2015), 335.

<sup>21</sup> Penner (2015), 335.

<sup>22</sup> It might be objected that some religions on this list aren't properly theistic. True, but that only serves to bolster my point that disagreement shows we're unreliable on religious questions.

so on. All of these different sects have important disagreements about the nature of God and other religious questions.<sup>23</sup> Things get even more complex if we include past, future, and counterfactual disagreement, instead of just actual disagreements.<sup>24</sup> This widespread disagreement about religious questions demonstrates that people are *very* unreliable at forming accurate religious beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Given widespread disagreement, theists are getting most religious claims wrong, most of the time. And, of course, one's religious metaphysics will significantly influence what constitutes a meaningful life. Furthermore, consider that theists often change their minds about what constitutes a meaningful life *in the very same way* as described in Penner's example. Theists often change their answers to religious questions over their lifetimes and therefore change their views about what constitutes a meaningful life.

So, on the one hand, Penner is correct that a subjective list of goods might not map onto the actual facts about what constitutes a meaningful life. But, on the other hand, this problem isn't unique to the anti-theist. The pro-theist has no better access to the actual facts as to what constitutes a meaningful life. Widespread disagreement shows that theists have no direct infallible access to what goods are grounded in God. Everyone is in the same epistemic position when it comes to identifying the goods that constitute a meaningful life.

Thus, Penner's objection entails that he is committed to the following principle:

*\*Identifying Fallibility: Humans are fallible and prone to error with respect to identifying goods that contribute to a meaningful life.*

The problem with this objection to Penner's criticism is that, even if it is true, it does not apply to his rejection of the Meaningful Life Argument.<sup>26</sup> Penner makes no claim about the pro-theist's ability to identify goods connected to meaning. He is simply pointing out that we should be sceptical of the anti-theist's ability to do so. Penner could thus accept that there is epistemic parity between the pro-theist and anti-theist with respect to identifying goods connected to a meaningful life and his objection to the argument still succeeds. If his objection is not enough to outright defeat the argument in showing that (1) and (2) are false, he still successfully shows that we lack a reason to think that they are true. We thus have good reason not to endorse the Meaningful Life Argument, at least as Penner has construed it.

## V. The Objective Meaningful Life Argument

---

<sup>23</sup> For one important example of intra-religious disagreement, consider that many Christians disagree over God's foreknowledge. Molinists argue that God knows the truth value of every counterfactual. God knows what every essence would freely do in any possible world. Open theists deny that there are facts to know about counterfactuals of free creatures. This debate has implications for the Christian doctrine of atonement, and for how one thinks God causally interacts with creation.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this, see Ballantyne (2014).

<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed defence showing that widespread disagreement undermines the epistemic justification for religious claims, see Philip Kitcher (2014); Kornblith (2010); and King (forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helping me to see this point.

There is, however, a version of the Meaningful Life Argument that Penner does not consider.<sup>27</sup> An objectivized version of the argument could avoid the fallibility objection since it would not include purely subjective criteria about what contributes to a meaningful life. While such a formulation of the argument requires a more rigorous defence of the goods in question, it is stronger, and so it is somewhat of a curiosity that Penner never considers it. Recall that one of his assumptions is that, “for some agents, striving for, and perhaps obtaining a meaningful life, depends on obtaining or pursuing some moral goods.”<sup>28</sup> For the objectivized version of this argument, I assume that for *all* human agents striving for and (with at least the possibility of) obtaining a meaningful life depends on pursuing and (with at least the possibility of) obtaining some moral goods. With Penner, we can continue to understand moral goods as “those goods that only moral agents are able to experience or pursue in virtue of their being moral agents.”<sup>29</sup> Now we can identify a different set from the one previously identified from Penner: Call ‘ $O_s$ ’ the set of objective moral goods such that for every agent  $S$  pursuing or obtaining the goods in  $O_s$  is necessary for  $S$  to have a meaningful life.<sup>30</sup> With these assumptions in mind, here is what I will call the ‘Objective Meaningful Life Argument’:

6. If God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $O_s$ , then God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining a meaningful life.
7. If God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining a meaningful life, then it’s rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn’t exist.
8. So, if God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $O_s$ , then it’s rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn’t exist.
9. God’s existence would constrain or prevent  $S$  from obtaining some of the goods in  $O_s$ .
10. Thus, it’s rational for  $S$  to prefer that God doesn’t exist.<sup>31</sup>

(6) differs from (1) in that it does not contain a clause that the goods in question are based on the agent’s subjective assessment. The same is true when comparing (7) to (2). In order to reject (6), it would have to be shown that God’s existence doesn’t constrain or prevent *any* goods from obtaining, or that God’s existence doesn’t constrain or prevent goods from obtaining that are connected to a meaningful life. In order to reject (7), again, it would have to be shown that the goods in question are not necessary for  $S$  obtaining a meaningful life. Or one could reject the idea that it’s rational to prefer a meaningful life to the existence of God. But I’m doubtful that that stance could be rationally defended. Part of the difference between this version of the argument and Penner’s version is that below I offer positive reasons to accept the premises and hence they aren’t susceptible to the worry that, while they might not be false, there is no positive reason to accept them. Rather than the general worry that  $S$  might be mistaken about the goods, this argument

---

<sup>27</sup> It is irrelevant whether Kahane would endorse this argument, since we’re just looking for the best argument.

<sup>28</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>29</sup> Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>30</sup> This is modified from Penner (2015), 328.

<sup>31</sup> This is modified from Penner (2015), 328.

assumes straight away that the goods in question are goods connected to a meaningful life. Arguing against this will require a rejection of the analysis of goods I provide below.

In sum, the Objective Meaningful Life Argument avoids the fallibility objection that Penner raises to his construal of the argument, since the goods in question are not purported to rely on one's subjective preferences. The goods in question— $O_s$ —are objective, and they apply to *everyone*. In the following section, I consider an objection from Penner and a potential reply.

## VI. Penner's Degree of Goods Objection

Penner's second objection to the Meaningful Life Argument, however, is applicable to the Objective Meaningful Life Argument. He could object that premise (9) of the Objective Meaningful Life Argument is only true if the goods mentioned by Kahane—such as independence, understanding, privacy, and solitude—need to be experienced to a complete and total degree. The natural objection to (9), then, is that “there are good reasons to think that when it comes to these particular goods, it is better to experience them in proximate, restricted degrees as opposed to experiencing them in an ultimate, unrestricted way.”<sup>32</sup>

Penner considers the good of independence and argues that humans typically have more independence and autonomy as they come into adulthood. This regresses back to more dependence on others with old age. Penner says “[n]othing about God's existence would seem to preclude one from experiencing high degrees of independence and autonomy. God's existence *would* entail that one is dependent on another for one's coming into existence, but that would be true even if there is no God, for no contingent human being is a completely independent being.”<sup>33</sup> He notes that perhaps the worry is: if God exists, then everyone is necessarily subordinate to another. He responds by concluding that:

[I]f my perspective on the nature of human flourishing is fallible and limited, prone to all sorts of biases that stem from shortcomings—including moral shortcomings—it is an open question whether subordination to a maximally great being is less valuable than complete autonomy. At the very least, it is difficult to set the immediate advantage of complete independence from a maximally great God, if such a God indeed does exist.<sup>34</sup>

Penner's objection here can be summarized as suggesting that the goods in question can still obtain to a high degree if God exists, and this high degree coupled with the existence of a maximal being surely outweighs them obtaining completely. Call this the *Degree of Goods Objection*. This objection forces the discussion onto the goods in question, which is perhaps one of the most important, yet underdeveloped, topics in the axiology of theism. The answer to the question of whether it is rational to prefer that God exists as based on meaning depends on how and if certain goods connected to meaning are instantiated with or without God. The same good might obtain on both theism and

---

<sup>32</sup> Penner (2015), 336. Penner says this in objection to premise (4) of the original argument but it applies equally well here.

<sup>33</sup> Penner (2015), 336.

<sup>34</sup> Penner (2015), 336.



atheism, but it might not be instantiated in the same way or to the same degree. So the details very much matter when assessing Penner's objection.

## VII. Complete Goods are Essential for Meaning

In this section, I argue that Penner's Degree of Goods Objection fails. There are goods that need to be complete in order to contribute to the meaning of life and it is not clear that some of the goods in question even come in degrees.

### 1. Privacy

Consider the good of privacy.<sup>35</sup> This is a good that clearly comes in degrees. For instance, a newborn baby experiences almost no privacy. The baby will be in constant contact with her parents or caregivers. Even when the baby is asleep there will be often be audio and sometimes visual equipment (i.e., baby monitors) in place to alert caregivers as soon as she awakes. Indeed babies have little physical privacy, as they are often changed and dressed in front of people and in places that would be considered inappropriate for adults. As the child grows, however, she will begin to experience higher degrees of privacy. The baby monitors will be removed and she will have much more privacy from her caregivers.

If Penner is correct that there is a *prima facie* case to consider privacy a moral good, then there needs to be a countervailing reason in order to justifiably violate a person's privacy. For example, parents might violate the privacy of their teenage daughter by reading her diary because they have good reason to suspect that she is suicidal (Penner and Lougheed 2015, 61). But they cannot read her diary simply because she has been more distant and secretive lately (as teenagers are prone to be), or because they wish to control her life. So one's privacy cannot be violated without a good countervailing reason. There is also an important distinction to be made between *physical* privacy and the privacy of our *thoughts* or *consciousness* (from here on, 'mental privacy').<sup>36</sup> In my first example, the baby merely has her physical privacy constantly violated and for good reason; she would quickly die if she were left alone for very long. In my second example, the teenager has the privacy of her thoughts violated by her parents and for good reason; they are worried that she is suicidal.<sup>37</sup>

A crucial part of forming intimate relationships centres on the fact that humans have the ability to choose how much of themselves they share with others. This is true of both physical privacy and mental privacy. Rape is horrible not only because the victim's autonomy has been violated. There is an important sense in which the victim's bodily privacy has also been violated. The victim has been exposed in a way she did not choose

---

<sup>35</sup> I do not want to get caught up in the details of trying to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for privacy. What I say here is intended to be consistent with a variety of definitions found in the literature. Likewise, most ethical theories will recognize a *prima facie* importance of privacy. One such example is the idea that a good model of privacy "would stress the blockage of illegitimate attitudes and judgments on the part of others. What we seek, on this conception of privacy, is immunity from the judgment of others" (Johnson (1992), 274). Or consider that the "value of privacy based on the idea that there is a close connection between our ability to control who has access to us and to information about us, and our ability to create and maintain different sorts of social relationships with different people" (Rachels (1975), 326). See also Fried (1970); Johnson (1989); Lackey (1985).

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps 'mental states' is a more appropriate term but I want to avoid controversial debates in philosophy of mind. The point I am making should apply regardless of what stance one takes on the mind/body problem.

<sup>37</sup> Assume, for the sake of example, that the content of her journal is equivalent to the content of her thoughts.

to be exposed. Part of what makes a physically intimate relationship a moral good is that one is choosing to open oneself up and not be private. The same is true of mental privacy. One often reveals little of one's innermost thoughts to strangers, but a much greater amount to family and friends. Part of what makes an intimate relationship valuable is the fact that one *freely chooses* to disclose a lot of one's thoughts to another person.

If God exists, then neither physical nor mental privacy is logically possible. If God is all knowing, then God is always aware of where we are, what we are doing (physical privacy), and what we are thinking (mental privacy). It is logically impossible that God would not have this knowledge of us, since then God would fail to be omnipotent. The good of privacy is not lessened on theism; it does not exist if God exists. Admittedly, the analogy to rape breaks down in certain places with respect to God. It is not as if God having this knowledge of us is equivalent to rape. But notice that we cannot consent to this with respect to God, which is part of what makes intimate relationships so valuable. The violation of mental privacy is perhaps even more troubling since we have little to no access to the thoughts of other humans. God not only knows all of our thoughts, but God has the equivalent phenomenological experience or at least the knowledge it would provide.<sup>38</sup> These states cannot be willingly disclosed by a person to God; they are automatically disclosed in virtue of God existing.

But, if God does not exist, however, then (minimally) both physical and mental privacy are logically possible. If one only has relationships with other humans, then one is in complete control of how much of her thoughts she devolves to other people. Likewise, she has more control over the amount of physical privacy she experiences. As social beings, it is rare that humans are ever completely physically isolated, but one can be isolated, at least for some time, if one so chooses. Of course, it is still possible to imagine scenarios where there is no God, but both one's physical and mental privacy are severely violated. For instance, it is not too difficult to imagine a future totalitarian government violating one's mental privacy with the use of advanced cognitive science and other technology. The point is that we would be justifiably indignant if this occurred. And nothing about human existence mandates that this *must* occur like it must if God exists.

A natural objection to this discussion might be to appeal to divine hiddenness. Theists often complain of the hiddenness of God. For about instance, it is well documented that Mother Teresa's journals are filled with a longing for the presence of God that she fails to feel. A theist could argue that *phenomenologically* she experiences a high degree of physical and mental privacy. But this changes the good in question from privacy itself to the *appearance* of privacy. If there is something intrinsically valuable privacy, then this objection fails. Consider that we would prefer the NSA (National Security Agency) not to spy on us, regardless of whether we ever become aware of it. This is also true regardless of whether the NSA only uses the information benevolently. Finally, divine hiddenness has turned into a very strong argument *against* the existence of the God. Perhaps, then, this argument merely commits the anti-theist to endorsing the soundness of hiddenness arguments against God since she thinks God's presence will not be hidden.<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Independence and Autonomy

---

<sup>38</sup> The details of this case will vary depending on whether one holds that qualia are physical or non-physical.

<sup>39</sup> For an explication of divine hiddenness, see Schellenberg (2006) and (2015).

Notice that the same line of reasoning as above can be used for goods such as independence and autonomy. Penner does suggest that a good like independence is experienced to varying degrees throughout the course of a human life, regardless of whether God exists. This is certainly true when one reflects on the typical differences in the degree of independence and autonomy that children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly experience. However, there is an important sense in which independence and autonomy *do not obtain at all if God exists*. If God exists, then humans have been created by a maximal being and hence there necessarily exists a being superior to them. It is true that everyone is dependent on humans in some way (e.g., we all have biological parents), but this is different from the existence of a maximal being who is literally responsible for the existence of everything in the universe. The constraints that the existence of such a being places on our autonomy and independence in virtue of logical necessity, such as the impossibility of complete knowledge, do not exist if God does not exist. Autonomy and independence are not, then, goods that come in degrees at least when considered this way.

Notice too that independence and autonomy will obtain if God does not exist. The question of the existence of the universe needs a different answer if this is the case (though historically some atheists have argued that the universe is eternal), but the answer will not necessarily be that it was caused by a maximal being. I suppose if a powerful being created the universe (though not a maximally powerful one), then all of the same questions about whether it is better for that being to exist could be asked in the same way we are asking them about God. Alternatively, if the answer to existence is not supernatural, then it is unclear those same questions need or can be asked. And then humans will have autonomy and independence in a way they otherwise would not.<sup>40</sup>

Relatedly, while I have been examining the consequences of bare theism apart from specific theological claims, suppose that God's existence entails that there is cosmic justice and this involves the afterlife. Thaddaeus Metz writes that "restricting a person's choice by making threats is a quintessential form of disrespect, and it appears that God would threaten us by making eternal damnation the consequence of not realizing His end."<sup>41</sup> This type of coercion not only limits the degree of independence and autonomy that humans have; this type of coercion eliminates it altogether. Metz explains:

Consider that a reward or offer of heaven to humans from God for fulfilling God's purposes seems exploitative (even if humans are libertarian free). Metz explains that "[i]t seems exploitive, and hence disrespectful, to offer a starving person food in exchange for doing what you like ... By analogy, a critic could maintain that it would be exploitative for God to offer finite creatures an eternity of bliss in exchange for doing His bidding."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> It's worth noting that for the sake of simplicity I have been construing the debate as one between theism and ontological naturalism, but there are obviously many more options to consider if this were a larger project.

<sup>41</sup> Metz (2013), 100. See also Metz (2013), 100-104; Baier (1957), 107; Kurtz (1974), 86; Murphy (1982), 14-15; Baggini (2004), 13-17.

<sup>42</sup> Metz (2013), 101.

Suppose that, if God exists, God creates humans to fulfil his purposes. Metz explains that if this is the case it would be condescending:

Baier's concern about God's assigning us a purpose is that it would *degrade* us, not that it would *harm* us. Baier objects that being assigned a purpose would treat one's capacity for rational choice as a mere tool to be used for the realization of a purpose one does not share. It is irrelevant that realizing the purpose would be good for oneself; that would merely add a paternalistic aspect to the degradation ... If God were to assign us a purpose, then God would clearly have to regard us as a means; i.e., as being useful for the realization of his end.<sup>43</sup>

If God created people for a specific purpose, this constitutes a violation of our dignity. Consider that parents are able to create children for the wrong reasons and that this applies by analogy to God. Kurt Baier worries that the purpose theorist merely "sees man as a creature, a divine artefact, something halfway between a robot (manufactured) and an animal (alive), a homunculus, or perhaps Frankenstein, made in God's laboratory, with a purpose or task assigned him by his Maker."<sup>44</sup> Metz nicely summarizes the intuitions driving this idea:

To illustrate the problem, suppose that a couple decides to have a child fundamentally because they would like a musician in the family. Merely acting on the maxim of creating a child in order to have a musician might constitute disrespect, so the argument goes. The same apparently goes for creating a child with the aim of having a worker on the farm. In contrast, I would not be disrespectful to make a baby for the sake of promoting a being who will set its own ends.<sup>45</sup>

Metz rightly observes that these ideas assume the following principle:

*Creation Principle:* "[i]t is disrespectful to create a person for any purpose other than to pursue its own purposes."<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Irving Singer observes that "[i]f humanity, or life in general, was created to serve a purpose beyond itself, our being would be analogous to that of a manufactured artifact."<sup>47</sup> I will not spend time defending the Creation Principle here, but again note that this is something that does not come in degrees. Either a person is created to fulfil her own purposes or she is not.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Metz (2013), 102. See also Hepburn (1966), 262-263; Joske (1974), 259; Singer (1996), 29.

<sup>44</sup> Baier (1957), 104 quoted in Metz (2013), 103.

<sup>45</sup> Metz (2013), 103.

<sup>46</sup> Metz (2013), 103.

<sup>47</sup> Singer (1996), 29 quoted in Metz (2013), 103.

<sup>48</sup> Another way to understand this principle is that violating it would constitute a dignity harm. It is an open question as to whether Kant's conception of dignity needs to be true in order for the Creation Principle to be true. Notice that on a Kantian framework not even God could violate the Creation Principle.

Consider that if God does not exist, then the Creation Principle might not be violated. As mentioned above, the answer to whether it has been violated may depend on what caused the universe. A powerful supernatural agent who created the universe (but isn't as powerful as God) may or may not have violated the Creation Principle. If there is a non-supernatural explanation to the existence of the universe, then it is extremely unlikely (if not impossible) that the Creation Principle is violated.

This discussion serves to demonstrate that Penner cannot respond to the Objective Meaningful Life Argument by claiming that the goods in question still obtain to a high degree on theism. I have shown that, for many of the goods in question, particularly goods like privacy, independence, and autonomy, there is an important sense in which they *do not obtain at all if theism is true*. Likewise, I have shown that they exist, or at least possibly exist, on atheism (or, more accurately, ontological naturalism).

### **VIII. Phenomenological Experience of Good versus Actual Good**

Penner never suggests that it is merely the phenomenological experience of goods such as independence, autonomy, and privacy that really matters for meaning, rather than the fact that they actually exist. Still, one could make this suggestion on Penner's behalf, and in doing so attempt to reject the Objective Meaningful Life Argument on the grounds that the goods in question need not literally obtain on theism, but the *experience* of them does and this is enough (perhaps when coupled with the goods associated with theism). This type of response, however, does nothing to hurt the Objective Meaningful Life Argument since the goods are purported to actually exist on the argument, not the mere appearance of them. For this objection to succeed, one would have to demonstrate that the experience of the goods in question is as valuable (or more valuable) as the existence of such goods.

While the burden of proof is on the objector to provide the argument for this claim, there are two initial responses in defence of the Objective Meaningful Life Argument on offer. First, it is not clear that the phenomenological experience of the goods would amount to the same phenomenological experience on theism and atheism. And there would have to be epistemic certainty on the question of God's existence in order to know the answer to this question. Second, if the experience of goods and the existence of goods is indeed the same, then one could object that this makes God a deceiver. This, then, again might reduce to what one thinks of the divine hiddenness arguments against theism, and related issues. So once again the ontological question rears its head in discussion of the value question.

### **IX. Incorrect Goods and Goods over Time**

Notice that Penner cannot reject the Objective Meaningful Life Argument on the ground that the goods in question are not goods, or at least not goods connected to meaning in life. This is because he has already admitted there a strong "prima facie" case for considering them goods. Since his fallibility objection does not apply to the objective version, the Degree of Goods Objection is the strongest response he has left in his arsenal to reject the Objective Meaningful Life Argument. But we have just seen that this response fails because many of the goods in question do not obtain at all if God exists.

Recall that Penner writes "[i]t's not as if X, Y, and Z were meaningful for a time and then ceased to be meaningful because the criteria for a meaningful life changed over time. Instead, it seems overwhelmingly the case that I was just mistaken about what

would generate a meaningful existence.”<sup>49</sup> Here, it’s worth pointing out that maybe Penner hasn’t really offered a subjectivist version of the Meaningful Life Argument since this quote seems to assert that the criteria for meaning is objective, and that people’s differing evaluation of meaning over time suggests they are mistaken about what constitutes the objective criteria. But suppose we take Penner at his word and continue to assume that his explication of the argument really is subjective. One might still wonder how an objective argument could succeed if with the passing of time we are continually mistaken about what (objective) values are connected to meaning. Might not with the passing of time we be mistaken about the value of privacy, independence and autonomy?

First, even if this is a worry, it is not one that Penner can employ without duplicity since he himself acknowledges that goods like privacy, independence, and autonomy are connected to meaning. Second, while Penner’s example of one changing one’s mind about what constitutes a meaningful life is plausible it’s unclear that people change their minds about values as much as he seems to think they do. I suppose this question is ultimately open to empirical scrutiny. An objector would have to do the relevant work in order to demonstrate that this claim is true. Finally, though it is well beyond the scope of this paper, a historical examination of a value like privacy would either serve to undermine or support the case for its objectivity over time, at least with respect to how this objection has been construed.<sup>50</sup>

## **X. Conclusion**

In answer to the value question of whether God’s existence would add to, detract from, or have no impact on the value of our world, some have argued that God’s existence would detract value because for certain individuals their lives would lose meaning if God exists. In objecting to this version of the Meaningful Life Argument, Penner relies on the idea that humans are fallible at identifying what goods contribute to a meaningful life. This response justifies rejecting premises (1) and (2) of the Meaningful Life Argument. One might be tempted to respond to Penner that pro-theists are just as fallible as anti-theists with respect to identifying goods associated with the meaning of life. But, even if this is the case, Penner’s objection still defeats the Meaningful Life Argument.

I have offered a stronger version of the argument, the Objective Meaningful Life Argument, which does not depend on one’s subjective criteria for meaning. A relevant objection from Penner is that the goods in question still obtain to a high degree on theism. I countered that many of the goods in question actually do not obtain at all if theism is true. Admittedly, the plausibility of this claim may rest on how hidden one thinks God is (or would be), and hence is connected to the ontological question of whether there is a God. I also suggested that it is the existence of the actual goods, not the mere experience of them, that is important. Or at least the objector would have to demonstrate why this isn’t the case. Finally, it’s unlikely that Penner could reject the objective version of the argument by claiming that the goods in question are not really goods since he has admitted there is a *prima facie* case for their being goods. I have thus offered a different argument for personal anti-theism that appeals to objective goods. Much more discussion on the goods entailed by theism and atheism is surely warranted.

---

<sup>49</sup> Penner (2015), 335.

<sup>50</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue and pressing me to think about values over time.

**Acknowledgements:** An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Toronto Philosophy of Religion Work-in-Progress Group at Ryerson University. I am indebted to Myron A. Penner and Klaas J. Kraay for extensive comments and discussion on an earlier draft. Thanks also to the multiple anonymous referees at *Dialogue* for insightful feedback.

## References

Baggini, Julian

2004 *What's It All About?: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. London: Granta Books.

Baier, Kurt

1957 "The Meaning of Life." Reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, edited by E.D. Klemke. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ballantyne, Nathan

2014 "Counterfactual Philosophers." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXXVIII(2): 368-387.

Davis, Stephen T.

2014 "On Preferring that God Not Exist (or that God Exist): A Dialogue." *Faith and Philosophy* 31(2): 143-159.

Fried, Charles

1970 *An Anatomy of Values: Problems of Personal and Social Choice*. USA: Harvard University Press.

Hepburn, R.W.

1966 "Questions about the Meaning of Life." Reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, edited by E.D. Klemke. New York: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, Jeffery L.

1989 "Privacy and Judgment of Others." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 23(2): 157-168.

Johnson, Jeffery L.

1992 "A Theory of the Nature and Value of Privacy." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 6(3): 271-288.

Joske, W.D.

1974 "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life." Reprinted in *The Meaning of Life*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, edited by E.D. Klemke. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kahane, Guy

2011 "Should We Want God to Exist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82(3): 674-696.

King, Nathan L.

2012 "Disagreement: What's the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXXV(2): 249-272.

King, Nathan L.

(forthcoming) "Religious Skepticism and Higher-Order Evidence." *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford University Press.

Kitcher, Philip

2014 "Chapter One: Doubt Delineated." In *Life After Faith*. USA: Yale University Press.

Kornblith, Hilary

2010 "Belief in the Face of Controversy." In *Disagreement*. Edited by Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield, 29-52. Oxford University Press.

Kraay, Klaas, and Chris Dragos

2013 "On Preferring God's Non-Existence." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43(2): 157-178.

Kurtz, Paul

1974 *The fullness of Life*. New York: Horizon Press.

Lackey, Douglas P.

1985 "Divine Omniscience and Human Privacy." *Philosophy Research Archives* 10: 383-391.

Mawson, Tim

2012 "On Determining How Important it is Whether or Not there is a God." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4(4): 95-105.

Metz, Thaddaeus

2013 *Meaning in Life*. Oxford University Press.

Mugg, Joshua

2016 "The Quietest Challenge to the Axiology of God: A Cognitive Approach to Counterpossibles" *Faith and Philosophy* 33: 441-460.

Murphy, Jeffrie

1982 *Evolution, Morality, and the Meaning of Life*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.

Penner, Myron A.

2015 "Personal Anti-Theism and the Meaningful Life Argument." *Faith and Philosophy* 32(3): 325-337.

Penner, Myron A., and Kirk Lougheed

2015 "Pro-Theism and the Added Value of Morally Good Agents." *Philosophia Christi* 7(1): 53-69.



Plantinga, Alvin  
2001 *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Pruss, Alexander R.  
2012 "A Counter-Example to Plantinga's Free Will Defense." *Faith and Philosophy* 29(4): 400-415.

Rachels, James  
1975 "Why Privacy is Important." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 4(4): 323-333.

Rescher, Nicholas  
1990 "On Faith and Belief." In *Human Interests*, edited by Nicholas Rescher. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Schellenberg, John L.  
2006 *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Cornell University Press.

Schellenber, John L.  
2015 *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God*. Oxford University Press.

Singer, Irving  
1996 *Meaning of Life, Volume 1: The Creation of Value*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.