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On How (Not) to Argue for Preferring God's Non-Existence

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ABSTRACT: *Consider two epistemically possible worlds that are as similar as can be, except that atheism is true in one world and theism is true in the other world. Which world is it rational to prefer? I explore the strongest defence of the somewhat counterintuitive claim that it is rational to prefer the atheistic world. I also discuss the opposite conclusion, namely, that it's rational to prefer the theistic world. Surprisingly, my conclusion is that it's difficult to tell whether to prefer theism or atheism overall.*

RÉSUMÉ : *Considérons deux mondes épistémiquement possibles qui sont aussi similaires que possible, sauf que l'athéisme est vrai dans un monde et que le théisme est vrai dans l'autre monde. Quel monde est-il rationnel de préférer? J'examine la défense la plus forte de l'affirmation quelque peu contre-intuitive selon laquelle il est rationnel de préférer le monde athée. Je discute également de la conclusion opposée, à savoir qu'il est rationnel de préférer le monde théiste. Étonnamment, ma conclusion est qu'il est difficile de dire s'il faut préférer le théisme ou l'athéisme en général.*

Keywords: axiology of theism, anti-theism, pro-theism, atheistic goods

I. Introduction

In the philosophy of religion, the *existential* question is about whether God exists. Both past and present philosophers of religion have primarily been concerned with this question. Discussions of the arguments for the existence of God include the cosmological, teleological, ontological arguments, along with arguments from meaning or normativity. Arguments against the existence of God include the logical problem of evil, the evidential problem of evil, the problem of no best world, and the problem of divine hiddenness. Scholarship has also been conducted on the coherence of the divine attributes, the interaction between faith and reason, and religious epistemology. Recently, however, philosophers have asked the *axiological* question of what impact, if any, God's existence would (or does) have on the value of the world.¹ The literature addressing the axiological question has come to be known as the 'axiology of theism.'²

¹ Sometimes the value question is construed as one about rational preference. I will not worry about the distinction between rational preference and value in this paper. I will assume that they reduce to the same answers.

² While Rescher (1990) is the first place to explicitly discuss the axiology of theism, Kahane (2011) is clearly the paper that started the recent debate. A recent research project housed at Ryerson University in Canada, led by Klaas J. Kraay, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is also worth mentioning since it was the first time philosophers received funding specifically for research exclusively on the axiology of theism. The grant has spurred new research on this topic and will result in the first edited collection of papers on the axiology of theism. For more details, see: <http://www.ryerson.ca/~kraay/theism.html>.

It's worth noting that the axiology of theism literature to date has focused exclusively on theistic conceptions of God, and the atheistic claim that no such theistic God exists. More specifically, the conception of God that most of the authors have in view is the classical Christian conception (even if this is not explicitly stated). Likewise, while atheism is technically only the view that theism is false (and hence is compatible with supernaturalism), it's most often equated to naturalism. The focus of the axiological question, then, has been with respect to comparing Christianity to naturalism. My project will largely stay within this framework because I'm addressing ideas in the current literature. But the axiological question becomes more complicated if the relevant comparison class is expanded. Surely one of the next steps in the debate will be to examine the axiological implications of worldviews other than Christianity and naturalism, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Bahaism, other non-Western conceptions of divine, among many more options.

An initial objection to the axiological question is the worry that any conditional with God's existence as the antecedent is a counterpossible and hence trivially true.³ As a necessary being, God exists in every possible world. Thus, the question as to whether the world would be better or worse if God existed cannot get off the ground in the first place. However, I will assume that it is possible to discuss this question in a way that is non-trivial and meaningful. Guy Kahane's remarks about the relevant comparison are helpful:

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].⁴

Perhaps the best way to understand the relevant comparison that Kahane has in view here is not of one between metaphysically possible worlds, but as one between *epistemically* possible worlds. David J. Chalmers explains that something “is *epistemically possible* for a subject that p, when it might be that p for all the subject knows. A scenario is a maximally specific way things might be: a sort of epistemically possible world, in a loose and intuitive sense.”⁵ The axiological question focuses on comparing two epistemically possible worlds. The first is an epistemically possible world where God exists, and the second is an epistemically possible world where God does not exist. Of course, if the former is true, then the latter world is metaphysically impossible. Likewise, if the latter is true, then the former is metaphysically impossible. So the axiological question is best understood as a comparison between epistemically possible worlds rather than metaphysically possible worlds. In sum, “[w]e are not dealing here with counterfactual space: the space of way things might have been. Here, we are dealing with epistemic space: the space of ways things might be.”⁶ The axiology of theism literature addresses an interesting question that

³ This assumes a standard Lewis/Stalnaker interpretation of counterpossibles, which I acknowledge isn't uncontroversial. For instance, see Lewis (1973) and Stalnaker (1987).

⁴ Kahane (2011), 676.

⁵ Chalmers (2011), 60.

⁶ Chalmers (2011), 62.

everyone is able to comprehend. If this is an objection for my project, it is an objection for everyone working on this topic. This problem has recently been taken up by Joshua Mugg. He offers a novel solution to the counterpossible problem, but I will not explore that account here.⁷

In the axiology of theism, pro-theism is the view that it would be better if God exists than not. Anti-theism, by contrast, is the view that it would be worse if God exists than not.⁸ Pro-theism can be subdivided to account for the value impact of God's existence on a particular person (personal scope), or all persons more generally (impersonal scope). Further subdivisions are made to account for things that would be better in some particular respect (narrow scope), or overall (wide scope). Anti-theism can be subdivided in the same way.⁹ Klaas J. Kraay and Chris Dragos rightly observe that the categories of wide, narrow, personal, and impersonal "cut across each other, and generate four varieties of anti-theism."¹⁰ The four varieties are:

Wide Impersonal Anti-Theism:	It would be far worse overall if God exists than if God does not.
Wide Personal Anti-Theism:	It would be far worse overall for me if God exists than if God does not.
Narrow Impersonal Anti-Theism:	It would be far worse <i>in certain respects</i> if God exists than if God does not.
Narrow Personal Anti-Theism:	It would be far worse <i>in certain respects, for me</i> , if God exists than if God does not. ¹¹

To date, most defences of anti-theism have been personal and narrow in scope. For instance, Guy Kahane first gestured at justifying personal anti-theism on the basis of individual meaning:

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 sometimes 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.¹²

⁷ Mugg (2016). See also Penner and Lougheed (2015), 60; Lougheed (2017); Kraay and Dragos (2013), 160–162.

⁸ For more on different possible answers to the axiological question, see Kraay (2018).

⁹ Of course, two other possible stances are agnosticism and indifference with respect to preferring God exist or not exist. See Kraay and Dragos (2013), 159.

¹⁰ Kraay and Dragos (2013), 159.

¹¹ These distinctions follow Kraay and Dragos (2013), 159–160.

¹² Kahane (2011), 691–692. See also Kahane (2012).

Myron A. Penner develops Kahane's initial suggestion into the detailed Meaningful Life Argument.¹³ He suggests that this argument for anti-theism hinges on successfully identifying and weighing goods that contribute to a meaningful life. Both Kahane's statement and Penner's development of the argument seek only to defend personal anti-theism. In this paper, however, I explore goods associated with atheism in general, not necessarily ones that are connected to an individual's (personal) meaning in life.¹⁴

In what follows, I develop, defend, but ultimately reject what I take to be the best case for wide personal overall anti-theism, what I will call the 'Goods of Atheism Argument.' This argument defends wide personal anti-theism on the basis that certain goods obtain on atheism that either don't obtain at all, or don't obtain to the same degree on theism. Such goods include the ability to independently solve problems, and take immediate responsibility for one's actions, bravery, autonomy, and privacy. The argument defends wide impersonal anti-theism because the goods in question are objective; they are goods for individuals. But they are also goods that would be better for every individual if they were to obtain. This makes the Goods of Atheism Argument much more ambitious than the Meaningful Life Argument, since some have thought *wide* impersonal anti-theism is indefensible.¹⁵ I then reject this argument by showing that it is at best incomplete, and at worst too ambitious. At the very least, we should be agnostic about whether wide impersonal anti-theism is true.

To conclude, I explore the best argument for wide impersonal pro-theism. While it might be obvious that this position is easily defensible, I show that it is less easy to defend than might be expected. Reflections on controversy surrounding things like whether gratuitous evil is possible on theism, and the definitions and consequences of the divine attributes help show why this is the case. It turns out that defending wide impersonal pro-theism is quite ambitious too. Reflections on the goods associated with atheism and theism make it clear that both views make things better and worse in different respects, and for different individuals. But it's less clear whether theism or atheism is better overall, and for everyone. Defences of the Goods of Atheism Argument or of wide impersonal pro-theism are, at best, incomplete. Finally, it might not even be possible to compare and measure the different goods against one another. If this is right, there might not even be an answer to the question of whether theism or atheism is better overall. As it stands, we should be agnostic about whether theism or atheism is better overall and for everyone, even if we can answer questions about what's better in certain respects and for certain individuals.

II. The Goods of Atheism Argument

Before outlining the specific premises of the argument, it's worth making explicit a few important assumptions. I will assume (for now) that epistemically possible worlds have overall axiological

¹³ Penner (2015), 328. Both Kahane and Penner are expanding on brief comments made by Thomas Nagel. Nagel writes: "I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that" (Quoted in Kahane (2011), 679).

¹⁴ Penner is sceptical about the ability of humans to identify and weigh such goods and hence sceptical of the success of the Meaningful Life Argument.

¹⁵ See Kraay and Dragos (2013), 167–168. I will explore this position in more detail later.

values and that the value of worlds are impacted by the goods that exist in them.¹⁶ The argument must also assume that it is possible to compare sufficiently many possible worlds based on their axiological values.¹⁷

It's worth noting that many goods relevant to this debate are closely connected to specific monotheistic religious traditions. One example of this fact is beliefs about the afterlife. Theism on its own does not entail an afterlife, just as atheism on its own does not entail that there is no afterlife. Interestingly, the conclusion that the world is better overall if God does not exist is consistent with maintaining narrow personal pro-theism, the view that it would be far better *in certain respects, for me*, if God exists than if not. Thus, it is possible for an individual to rationally prefer that God exists, while acknowledging that the world is worse off overall if God exists. Part of the motivation behind the Goods of Atheism Argument is to imagine how the anti-theist might take up the challenge of showing how the *overall* axiological upsides of atheism could possibly outweigh the axiological upsides of theism. With these preliminaries in mind, it is now possible to offer the Goods of Atheism Argument, the best case for wide impersonal anti-theism:

The Goods of Atheism Argument

Assumptions:

Comparison World Assumption: The value of epistemically possible worlds can be compared.

Value of Goods Assumption: The existence of goods in a world adds value to that world.

1. God's existence constrains or prevents certain goods G from obtaining in any world W.¹⁸ (Premise)
2. If goods G make every world W better overall than any relevantly and sufficiently similar world without G, then a world W1 where goods G obtain is better overall than W2 where goods G do not obtain. (Premise)
3. Goods G make every world W better overall than any relevantly and sufficiently similar world without G. (Premise)

Therefore,

¹⁶ This is similar to how Kraay and Dragos (2013) construe the axiology of theism debate.

¹⁷ Another caveat: unlike many prior formulations of anti-theism, the goods in question need not be connected to the meaning of life (Penner (2015)). For instance, I could recognize that it is a good for a sick person to receive proper medical treatment, or that it would be a good if a Syrian refugee received appropriate help in relocating to a safe country (rather than being repatriated). But I need not understand such goods as being connected to the meaning of my life in order to recognize them as goods and that the obtaining of such makes the world better. Later, I will explain that this is a controversial assumption.

¹⁸ That is: if God exists, then no G in W.

4. A world W1 where goods G obtain is better overall than W2 where goods G do not obtain. (From 2 and 3).
5. If there is some world W1 where goods G obtain, then God does not exist at W1. (From 1)
6. A world W1 with goods G and where God does not exist, is better overall than W2 without goods G where God might exist.¹⁹

Some may not find premise (1) intuitively obvious so it will be defended in the following discussion. (2) is uncontroversial given my Comparison World Assumption and Value of Goods Assumption with the caveat that it assumes that having G in W1 doesn't preclude some greater good G* that outweighs G from obtaining in W.²⁰ (3) is the most controversial premise of the argument. In what follows, I offer what I take to be the anti-theist's best strategy for defending (3). (4) to (6) should follow from (1) to (3). To the best of my knowledge, an attempt to defend conclusion (6), that wide impersonal anti-theism is true, has thus far not been explicitly defended in the literature. The reason for this, as I will show, might be that giving a defence of this is extremely difficult.

III. The Goods of Atheism

In this section, I offer what I take to be the best defence the anti-theist can offer for premise (3) of the Goods of Atheism Argument. There are a variety of goods that are constrained or prevented from obtaining if God exists, and these goods contribute to the overall axiological value of the world.

1. *Solving Problems Without God*

Given that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, it is reasonable to assume that such a being will be inclined to help humans in certain scenarios (even without reference to specific theological traditions).²¹ Likewise, the Judeo-Christian God is explicitly one who intervenes in human activity to help humans (and ensure that his perfect plans for the universe come to fruition). While none of this commits the theist to the view that God *always* helps humans, it does mean that it is possible, if not likely, to occur at various times and places. Many theists believe that this consistently happens in the world despite disagreement over the degree of

¹⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me to clarify the premises of this argument. The argument could be continued to explicitly include personal anti-theism:

7. Every individual should prefer to be in W1 rather than W2.
Therefore,
8. Every individual should prefer that God not exist.
Therefore,
9. Wide impersonal anti-theism is true.

²⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

²¹ By 'bare theism,' I mean 'God' without any connection to a specific religious tradition.

frequency that it occurs. On atheism, however, it is impossible for an individual to receive help from God. If atheism is true, then an individual is forced to solve problems without any assistance from God.²² This could be beneficial for an individual's character development. An individual who faces problems can develop a strong work ethic, determination, patience, and creativity in ways that would be impossible if she could receive help from God. Consider, for example, that if atheism is true, supernatural intervention is impossible in the face of adversity.²³

Related to the claim that without God an individual is forced to solve problems on her own, is that she may be inclined to cooperate with others in ways she otherwise would not. Since God cannot be appealed to in order to help solve problems, only other humans can be appealed to in order to help. One might object that humans are inherently social beings, and this is the case whether or not there is a God. This is certainly true, but consider that any support networks in place to help people take actions and make decisions in life are more valuable on atheism than on theism. These human support networks are all one has to rely on if there is no God. Of course, it is mere psychological speculation to think that humans may be more willing to cooperate with one another in order to solve problems if God does not exist. The point is that social cooperation is more valuable on atheism, regardless of whether the quantity or quality that occurs is connected to God's existence. Thus, the value of problem solving and social cooperation is higher on atheism than on theism.²⁴

One important objection to this line of argument is that the existential status of God's existence doesn't impact the personal psychology of people whose epistemic stance about God doesn't happen to line up with the ontological facts. In other words, there could be theists in the atheistic world who appeal to God in order to solve their problems. In this world, theists are mistaken and hence can't actually receive help from God. But this doesn't prevent them from appealing to God and perhaps even having the (misleading) experience of divine help. In order for the above argument to be true, it must be the case that the value of such appeals are not worth as much if they're not in line with the actual ontological status of the world.²⁵ More work must be done to show that (i) social cooperation is more valuable on atheism than on theism; and (ii) experience of a good is significantly less valuable than the experience of the good along with it actually obtaining (i.e., lining up with ontological facts of the world).²⁶

²² This idea is gestured at in Davis (2014), 147.

²³ This is technically not true. Supernaturalism could be true even if theism is false. Atheism could be true even if naturalism is false. This is a distinction that could be important to the axiology of theism. But, for the purposes of my project here, I will assume that if theism is false, then supernaturalism is false and if atheism is true, then naturalism is true.

²⁴ I do not wish to enter into the debate about the harms and benefits of religion. Historically, religion has produced great harms, but it has also produced great benefits. I make no claims about whether the existence of religion has been more harmful or beneficial throughout history. Likewise, the existence of religion need not coincide with the existence of God. That is, the harms produced by religion could exist without the major metaphysical claims of the religion being true, including the existence of God. Still, it is worth observing that if God does not exist, then *any* action that an individual takes to harm another individual based on a divine command is *necessarily* mistaken. Religious violence, then, is *necessarily* misguided if God does not exist. Such religious violence has been a persistent source of division, and it remains one of the most serious threats to fostering social cooperation.

²⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this objection to my attention.

²⁶ For more on the difference between the obtaining of a good versus the experience of good, see Lougheed (2018).

2. Complete Responsibility for One's Actions

If God does not exist, then the good of being completely responsible for one's actions obtains. At first glance, this claim may appear to be counterintuitive. Many believe that if God exists, then there is going to be ultimate justice in the universe since that is what an all-good being would demand. Perhaps victims will receive just compensation for their suffering. Those who perpetrated evil on earth will be punished accordingly. Justice might not prevail in the here and now, but ultimately God will ensure that it does prevail. Likewise, the theology of heaven and hell found in certain branches of the monotheistic traditions is another example of the theistic idea of cosmic justice.²⁷ However, the idea that God will set everything right in the universe is, in fact, the *very feature* that makes it *impossible* for an individual to be completely responsible for her actions.

If God does not exist, God cannot intervene to fix my mistakes. Consider the immense damage that human activity has done, and is currently doing, to the environment. If God does not exist, then humans must take complete responsibility for their actions regarding the health of the planet. God cannot intervene to save the planet and fix the environmental damage caused by humans. This type of complete responsibility for one's actions does not exist on theism. Likewise, without God, victims are not assured that they will receive compensation for their suffering. Evil doers will not be brought to justice without intervention from humans. If God does not exist, then one must face the complete consequences of one's actions without a guarantee they will ultimately be made right. The sort of character development that can take place in having to deal with one's own problems is impossible on theism.²⁸

Consider that the major monotheistic religions all have paths to 'salvation.' These paths are a way to *avoid* the complete consequences of one's actions. In the Christian tradition, for example, guilt is transferred from individuals to Jesus, who takes full and complete responsibility for the wrongs committed by those individuals. This is known as the Christian doctrine of 'atonement.'²⁹ There are interesting questions here as to whether it is even possible for someone to take the moral blame for another person (even if both parties desire the transfer).³⁰ The point is that all of these claims are ways for an individual to avoid taking complete responsibility for her actions. Therefore, this counts as a negative consequence of theism, rather than a positive one.

Relatedly, if theism is true, then it may lead to moral paralysis that would be avoided on atheism. If God exists, there is always the possibility that God will intervene to prevent an evil. There is also the possibility that God may compensate the victim of a moral wrong. This could

²⁷ An anonymous referee pointed out that Tibetan Buddhism and some versions of Hinduism have terrifying doctrines of hell (e.g., Yama, God of hell).

²⁸ Of course, one might ask what makes atheistic character development better than theistic character development. I intend to discuss this question in a future project.

²⁹ There are various ways to understand the doctrine of atonement, which might make what I say here either more or less plausible.

³⁰ Consider that no legal system in liberal democracies would allow this to happen, at least with respect to capital offences.

prompt an individual to refrain from preventing a moral wrong.³¹ This is because the victim may receive an outweighing good as compensation for the wrong if God exists. If God's existence entails ultimate justice, one may be unmotivated to seek out complete justice in light of such guarantees. While these worries about moral paralysis do not necessarily arise if God exists, it is unlikely for them to arise if there is no God.³² Again, this is connected to the ability to develop one's character in particular ways if God does not exist.

Finally, it might be objected that even if all of this is so it must be weighed against the idea that there are problems that only God can solve. For instance, God might be able to intervene and prevent earthquakes from occurring.³³ But God is the ultimate (or first) cause of any problem in view here. Thus, while there might be problems, God is uniquely able to solve, God is also uniquely the cause of such problems. And this might detract from the value God is able to contribute to the world via problem solving.³⁴

3. Privacy

If God exists, then the good of privacy cannot exist.³⁵ Since God is all-knowing, God knows the inner mental content of every human. Necessarily, then, an individual cannot have complete privacy if God exists.³⁶ The burden of proof is on the observer to possess permission (or an overriding reason) to violate an individual's privacy. That is, one does not have to justify her entitlement to privacy. For example, parents ought not to read their daughter's diary without her permission or an overriding justifying reason (e.g., they suspect she is suicidal).³⁷ If God exists, then humans are under God's constant surveillance. Note that the way in which the information is used does not in any way impact whether privacy can be violated.³⁸

4. Independence, Autonomy, and Dignity

Three additional goods associated with the non-existence of God are independence, autonomy, and dignity.³⁹ If God exists, then one is necessarily always subservient to God. One is also ultimately dependent on God for her existence. Subservience and dependence are an affront to

³¹ This is an objection to the sceptical theist and greater goods responses to the evidential problem of evil. An anonymous referee also pointed out that in a non-theistic world a person who is testing for God might also refrain from intervening to stop an evil, but let's put this type of case aside. Admittedly, if this were to occur, it would be a downside of an atheistic world.

³² Of course, this is only so if the people in question are reasonably confident that God does not exist.

³³ This type of objection assumes a very permissive account of modality. By this, I mean that it's unclear that this sort of intervention is possible if God cannot (or would not) violate the laws of nature. The devil really is in the details.

³⁴ As an anonymous referee observes, moral paralysis wouldn't occur if a deistic God existed, since such a God does not intervene.

³⁵ Kahane (2011). These ideas are discussed further in a defence of pro-theism in Penner and Lougheed (2015).

³⁶ Lougheed 2017, 348–349.

³⁷ Penner and Lougheed (2015), 60–62. See also Lacky (1985).

³⁸ There is some controversy about the appropriate philosophical (or legal) definition of privacy. But on *any* of these proposed goods associated with privacy, God will in some way violate it. See Parent (1983a), (1983b), (1983c).

³⁹ Kahane (2011).

one's dignity.⁴⁰ In one of his objections to the Meaningful Life Argument, Penner suggests that "[w]hen looking at typical development over a human lifespan, one sees a progression from complete and total dependence on others to greater degrees of independence, and, relative to one's particular end of life circumstances, a regression to further dependence on others."⁴¹ But Penner downplays the very important sense in which the good of independence cannot be realized if God exists. The degree of dependence one necessarily has on other humans is different than one has on a maximal being such as God. Such dependence on humans is only ever contingent; the dependency could have been different or must not have occurred. If God exists, then one's existence is unavoidably dependent on God.

Closely related to independence is autonomy. Imagine living in a country with a king who spies on his citizens. He collects extensive metadata on everyone, including all internet activity, physical movement, and monetary transactions. Cameras are everywhere, including in private residences. The king uses this information to dole out justice as he sees fit. Indeed, when WikiLeaks released information that the National Security Agency (NSA) was conducting extensive spying (without following due process), many expressed outrage. One worry is that if the state spies on people, it can limit the ability of citizens to organize protests against the state. But would it matter if there was a guarantee that the NSA only ever acted benevolently? Would it matter if it turned out that the NSA used the information to foil numerous terrorist plots? No. Similarly, even a guarantee that the king is benevolent does not lessen the affront to dignity such spying causes. All else being equal, a society where such spying does not occur is to be preferred to one where it does occur. Finally, the thought that God is all-good does little to comfort individuals in the face of having their autonomy and privacy so severely violated.⁴²

The most pressing worry here is that the good of dignity does not obtain in an important sense if God exists. This is because if God exists, then everyone is necessarily subservient to God. Penner writes:

[P]erhaps the most troubling consequence of God's existence with respect to independence is the notion that one is, ultimately, subordinate to another. For if God exists, I would then be subordinate to a maximally great being and the facts about what constitutes a meaningful and flourishing life for me are determined neither by me nor by nature but by God. However, if 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 see the immediate advantage of complete independence from a maximally great God, if such a God indeed does exist.⁴³

Penner is probably correct to identify subordination as the most troubling consequence of theism. One way to understand this drawback is by reflecting on a recent related discussion

⁴⁰ This possibility assumes a Kantian conception of dignity, which ties it human rational and moral autonomy.

⁴¹ Penner (2015), 336.

⁴² Lougheed (2017), 349–351.

⁴³ Penner (2015), 336.

on theism and *dignity harms*.⁴⁴ If we humans are ultimately created to fulfil God’s purposes, then this constitutes a dignity harm. For instance, humans can create children for the wrong reasons.⁴⁵ It is wrong for a couple have to a child solely for the purpose of having that child become a world-renowned musician or professional athlete. Thaddeaus Metz writes:

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.⁴⁶

These ideas culminate in the following Creation Principle: “[I]t is disrespectful to create a person for any purpose other than to pursue its own purposes.”⁴⁷ Notice that this isn’t something that comes in degrees. The principle is either violated or it is not.

5. Bravery

If God does not exist, then individuals can exercise bravery in a way that would otherwise be impossible. The existence of God provides many with great psychological comfort. It can provide a person with the comfort that she is not alone in the universe. The universe is not random, chaotic, and ultimately indifferent to her. While this psychological comfort can exist if God does not exist (i.e., people could mistakenly believe that there is a God), there is a good that obtains without it. Namely, the good of bravery does not obtain in a certain way if God exists. Without God an individual is forced to accept that she is alone in the universe, and cannot rely on the idea of God for psychological comfort. But one could mistakenly believe that she is alone even if God does exist. Therefore, this good (or at least the experience of it) is possible on atheism. Again, it would have to be shown that the actual obtaining of it, as opposed to the merely (mistaken) experience of it is more valuable in order for the ideas about bravery presented here to defend anti-theism.

There is also uncertainty about an afterlife, which is not the case for the monotheistic religions. There is, perhaps, uncertainty about life’s deeper existential questions. Without God the answer to such questions is less than clear. Paradoxically, not having meaning fixed by God may be a great source of existential angst, thus allowing one to exhibit a kind of bravery that would otherwise be impossible. This turns the Meaningful Life Argument on its head. The problem is not that for some people their lives would lose meaning if it turns out that God exists. Rather, the problem is that the world might lose value if God exists and *is* the source of meaning. The bravery of facing life if there is no meaning does not obtain if God exists (and hence confers

⁴⁴ Metz (2013).

⁴⁵ Lougheed (2017), 350.

⁴⁶ Metz (2013), 103 quoted in Lougheed (2017), 350.

⁴⁷ Metz (2013), 103 quoted in Lougheed (2017), 350.

meaning on life). This claim runs contrary to Penner's Meaningful Life Argument because it claims that without God there cannot be objective meaning in life.⁴⁸

Perhaps there is a genuine distinction between objective and subjective meaning. If God does not exist, then there is no objective meaning and one can exemplify the good of bravery in light of this fact. But this does not preclude the possibility of one's life being subjectively meaningful. Penner's recent explication of the Meaningful Life Argument focuses only on subjective goods.⁴⁹ If this is the case, then the good of bravery can obtain in the way described here, while also preserving the version of the Meaningful Life Argument that relies on subjective goods. Finally, note that for bravery to be a good in the way I have described means taking a stand on whether God is connected to (objective) meaning, which is something I have tried to avoid throughout this paper.

IV. Why We Can't Endorse the Goods of Atheism Argument

In this section, I explain why the Goods of Atheism Argument shouldn't be endorsed. Initially, one might reject the argument by claiming that there is an important difference between goods that are good for a particular individual (personal) and goods that are good for everyone (impersonal). The goods that obtain on atheism (e.g., bravery) are personal, while many of the goods that obtain on theism are impersonal (e.g., cosmic justice). One might object that the axiological value of a world is based on impersonal goods, not personal goods. But, to avoid this objection, the Goods of Atheism Argument only requires that personal goods impact the overall value of the world. If value y is a good, and y obtains in w , then the value of w is increased if y obtains in w . Without a principled reason to favour impersonal goods over personal goods, it does not matter whether y is a personal or impersonal good.

A more promising objection to the Goods of Atheism Argument is that the goods in question can be experienced on theism. If people can be wrong about whether God exists in a theistic world, then goods like social cooperation and bravery, etc. can be experienced in a theistic world even if they don't actually obtain (because the person in question is wrong about God's non-existence). Elsewhere, I argue that objections to hedonism show us what's wrong with this thought.⁵⁰ If the experience of a good life is the only feature that gives it value, then we should choose to enter an experience machine that would give us the perception of such a life. But many of us would not enter such a machine. Thus, there must be a difference in value between a good actually obtaining and the experience of it. The key question to settling this dispute is the degree to which the experience is worse than the actual obtaining. The answer to this question will tell us the strength of this objection the Goods of Atheism Argument.

The main reason for rejecting the Goods of Atheism Argument has to do with its scope. With respect to defending impersonal wide anti-theism, Kraay and Dragos write "the anti-theist must show that the axiological *upsides* of theism do not outweigh the downsides, and it is difficult to imagine that this can be done. ... it is extremely difficult to see how *wide* impersonal antitheism

⁴⁸ These ideas brush up against the existential tradition in important ways, but are far too complex to discuss here.

⁴⁹ Penner (2015), 334.

⁵⁰ Lougheed (2017).

could be established.”⁵¹ It is far from clear that the Goods of Atheism Argument meets this standard, yet this is exactly what it would have to do in order to succeed. Recall premises (2) and (3) of the argument:

- (2) If goods G make every world W better overall than any relevantly and sufficiently similar world without G, then a world W1 where goods G obtain is better overall than W2 where goods G do not obtain. (Premise)
- (3) Goods G make every world W better overall than any relevantly and sufficiently similar world without G. (Premise)

It is difficult to see how the antecedents of (2), or premise (3), are true at least in light of the defence offered above. This doesn’t mean denying that goods G are indeed goods, and that, when they exist in a world, they add value to it. Rather, the worry is that the goods outlined above don’t make a world that is relevantly and sufficiently similar *with* God better. This is because the defender of wide anti-theism must do the following: (i) enumerate the downsides to a theistic world; (ii) argue that (i) represents a complete or sufficiently representative list; (iii) enumerate the upsides to a theistic world; (iv) argue that (iii) represents a complete or sufficiently representative list; and (v) demonstrate that the combined downsides of a theistic universe are larger than the combined upsides of a theistic universe.⁵² The Goods of Atheism Argument successfully fulfills (i) to some extent, but none of the other criteria.

The next steps in arguing for wide anti-theism is to demonstrate that a discussion of goods like the one in this paper are sufficiently representative of all of the goods in question, since covering *all* of the goods is unrealistic even if this topic were treated in a book-length project. Of course, explicating the Goods of Atheism Argument has not been in vain. It does include a discussion of goods associated with atheism either not discussed in the literature, or it adds to previous discussion of the goods. This serves as a convincing case for narrow anti-theism. For it shows that the world is worse in certain respects if God exists. And it is certainly worse in certain respects for certain individuals if God exists. The Goods of Atheism Argument, then, constitutes a defence of narrow anti-theism. To defend broad anti-theism, however, a lot more work must be done. At best, then, the Goods of Atheism Argument remains incomplete.

V. Problems with Defending Wide Impersonal Pro-Theism

In light of this discussion, it might be thought that wide impersonal pro-theism is easier to defend than wide impersonal anti-theism. After all, surely the significant upsides of a maximal being are bound to outweigh any possible downsides associated with it. In this section, I argue that the case for impersonal wide pro-theism isn’t nearly as easy to defend as first glance might suggest. A successful argument for wide impersonal pro-theism will have to meet criteria (i) to (iv) mentioned above. The fifth criterion will be to: (v) demonstrate that the combined upsides of a theistic universe are larger than the combined downsides of a theistic universe. In this section I

⁵¹ Kraay and Dragos (2013), 167–168.

⁵² Thanks to Klaas J. Kraay for helping me to get clear on this criterion.

examine a number of potential upsides to theism including (a) many atheistic goods still obtain on theism; (b) the logical impossibility of gratuitous evil; and (c) the infinite value of a maximal being. I problematize each of these upsides in order to show that, while they are definitely upsides to theism, they aren't uncontroversially so. I conclude with a brief discussion of issues surrounding world incommensurability. It's true that we should be sceptical about the truth of wide impersonal anti-theism, but it turns out that the same may be true of wide impersonal pro-theism.

1. *Many of the Atheistic Goods Still Obtain on Theism*

Solving problems on one's own, cooperation, and immediate responsibility can all obtain frequently on theism. That is, a pro-theist could object that I have overstated how much God (assuming there is one) intervenes in the world. Consider that many theists believe that God only infrequently answers prayers. Or, they claim that it is at least not evident that God frequently answers prayers. Even if God exists, one still must often solve problems on one's own. Likewise, since God only infrequently intervenes, humans must still cooperate with one another in order to solve problems. Finally, if there is no God, then God cannot correct people's mistakes. But many theists believe that God rarely does this anyway.⁵³ Therefore, many of the aforementioned goods all exist on theism anyway. The anti-theist must make the stronger, and more controversial claim, that *asking* God for help detracts from goodness, not the mere possibility of receiving help (since such help is rarely received even if God exists).

Notice that the success of this claim depends on how much one thinks God intervenes in the world. The pro-theist raising this objection holds something like the following:

Infrequent Divine Intervention: If God exists, then God only infrequently evidently intervenes in human affairs.

If Infrequent Divine Intervention is true, then this objection succeeds. The goods in question will still obtain to a high degree even if theism is true. But the way in which I stated the initial argument assumes a different amount of divine intervention if God exists. Consider:

Frequent Divine Intervention: If God exists, then God frequently evidently intervenes in human affairs.

Admittedly, the precise boundaries of what constitutes 'infrequent' and 'frequent' divine intervention are inevitably vague. Even so, Infrequent Divine Intervention and Frequent Divine Intervention cannot both be true. The success of this objection, then, depends on adjudicating between these two claims. Doing so, however, highlights important connections between the axiology of theism and divine hiddenness. Discussing this further, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵⁴ But it is important not to lose sight of the general point I'm making: *it isn't obvious*

⁵³ This fact of non-intervention often serves as support for the problem of evil.

⁵⁴ It turns out that much of this discussion is connected to the debate over divine hiddenness. The pro-theist could respond that many of these objections assume that God cannot or would not hide. But she could point out that

that atheistic goods obtain on theism. This is something that the proponent of wide impersonal pro-theism must defend.

2. *The Impossibility of Gratuitous Evil*

One upside of theism that possibly swamps *all* of the goods I have mentioned in connection to atheism is the impossibility of gratuitous evil.⁵⁵ Kraay and Dragos explain:

Philosophers typically maintain that while it may be morally acceptable for God to permit some evil to occur, 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. ... This is no *ad hoc* expansion of [theism]; instead it is generally taken to be a logical consequence of the essential divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. ...

We might call this a philosophical ‘judo move’, for the following reason: just as judo moves turn the force of one’s opponent’s blows against him, [no gratuitous evil] takes the force of any axiological downside urged by the anti-theist, and turns it against anti-theism. So, if [no gratuitous evil with God] is true, as many philosophers maintain, wide impersonal anti-theism is false.⁵⁶

In sum, the good of the *impossibility* of gratuitous evil on theism will always outweigh any goods associated with atheism. Interestingly, this could include compensation for the loss of atheistic goods like privacy and independence. If this is right, then it would be impossible for the loss of atheistic goods to ever outweigh the overall balance of theistic goods.⁵⁷

It might be tempting to think that this resolves the question of whether a theistic world is better overall than an atheistic world. But again, the question of the possible coexistence of gratuitous evil and God has been problematized. I won’t outline the details here, but it’s worth noting that two prominent (theist) philosophers of religion—William Hasker and Peter van Inwagen—believe that the existence of God and gratuitous evil are compatible.⁵⁸ Indeed, if humans are libertarian free, then gratuitous evil might be an unavoidable consequence of that freedom. Even if humans are guaranteed compensation for suffering (freely) caused by other humans, it is still gratuitous

many theists believe that God is (at least partially) hidden and seldom intervenes in human affairs. There is nothing on theism (or theistic belief) that implies that God is not hidden or that God constantly intervenes in human affairs. Elsewhere, I compare three different possible worlds: (i) an atheistic world; (ii) a world where God is hidden; and (iii) a world where God is unhidden. I argue that (ii) probably has the highest value of the three worlds since it is the only one where one set of goods (theistic goods) obtain and the experience of another set obtains (atheistic goods). See Lougheed (2018).

⁵⁵ Penner and Lougheed (2015) argue that morally good agents add value to states of affairs, and that God is the penultimate example of such an agent.

⁵⁶ Kraay and Dragos (2013), 166–167.

⁵⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.

⁵⁸ See Hasker (1992); and van Inwagen (2006).

in the sense that it need not have occurred and indeed the world would have been better had it not occurred. Finally, theists like Michael Almeida who endorse modal realism seem to deny that there is a problem of evil at all since God necessarily exists in every possible universe and every possible universe is actual.⁵⁹ But, then, if this ontological picture is correct, it's difficult to see what value God would add to each universe. Again, I take no stand on any of these issues here. My point is that it's easy to problematize the idea that God and gratuitous evil cannot coexist, but it's not an undisputed claim.

3. *The Infinite Value of a Maximal Being*

The last upside of theism that might be appealed to in defence of wide impersonal pro-theism that I will problematize is based on the infinite value of God. The idea is that since God is an infinitely good being, then any world in which God exists is infinitely valuable. Since God exists necessarily and is an infinitely good being, then every possible world necessarily has the same (infinitely good) axiological value. This upside of theism is similar to that of the impossibility of gratuitous evil in that it makes it difficult to see how any combination of the upsides of atheism could ever outweigh it.

But there are at least two problems with appealing to this upside of theism. First, it appears to be highly counterintuitive to say that every epistemically possible world has the same value even if theism is true. Imagine a world with one fewer genocides occurring than in the actual world. Even if theism is true, it appears that the latter world has a greater value than the former actual world. Some might argue that God would only actualize a world that meets a certain minimum threshold.⁶⁰ Perhaps it is only these 'good enough' worlds that all have the same value. But this response doesn't avoid the intuition behind the initial worry. Likewise, it also wreaks havoc on our most basic common sense modal intuitions that things could have been otherwise, including a lot worse than they are in the actual world.⁶¹

Second, another worry with this upside of theism is that it isn't clear what it precisely means to say that God is 'infinite.' There are, after all, competing interpretations of the concept of infinity.⁶² In particular, does God represent the existence of an actual infinity? How is a numerical value representative of God's power, knowledge, and goodness? Or is the appeal to infinity supposed to be metaphorical? I don't raise these worries as decisive objections to ascribing the concept of infinity to God. I'm simply pointing out that it is not an uncontroversial upside of theism.

4. *World Commensurability*

I close this section by discussing world incommensurability. One assumption I have relied on throughout this paper is that the axiological value of epistemically possible worlds can be

⁵⁹ Almeida (2012).

⁶⁰ Lougheed (2014); Kraay (2011a).

⁶¹ Indeed, there is an entire literature that centres on the question of what type of world God could (or would have to) create. For more, see Kraay (2010), (2011a); Kraay, MacLeod, and Lougheed (2014); Leibniz (1710); Lougheed (2014); and Rowe (2004).

⁶² Barrow (2005).

compared with one another. Implicit in this assumption is that the value of the goods associated with atheism and theism can be weighed against one another. On the surface, this might be understood as the idea that the goods contribute to a numerical value of the world in which they obtain. We can then compare the numerical value of the worlds to one another. But perhaps this is rather naïve. It could be that there is no sensible way to compare different goods with one another. Goods might be fundamentally incommensurate with one another. In this case it wouldn't matter whether one world had more goods than another since we don't know the relative worth of the individual goods in each world, at least in comparison to one another. There is, after all, debate in the literature about whether possible worlds are fundamentally incommensurate with one another.⁶³

This discussion need not imply that we ought to be sceptics about what is a good, or sceptics about the claim that the instantiation of a good adds value to a world. Likewise, individuals need not refrain from making value judgements about what are particular goods for them. An individual might have her own reasons for highly valuing privacy. However, when it comes to the larger issue of how much privacy makes the world better overall, and whether privacy is more valuable than a good associated with theism, we simply might be asking a question for which there is no answer. Likewise, even if goods aren't fundamentally incommensurable with one another, the vast disagreement about them indicates that we don't currently have the tools to make such comparisons. To reiterate one last time: this doesn't show that wide impersonal pro-theism can't be defended; it points to yet another issue that must be addressed in such a defence.

Despite these worries, one might argue that wide impersonal pro-theism is still easier to defend than wide impersonal anti-theism. In attempting to problematize different upsides associated with theism, I have really just clarified a number of issues that the pro-theist must take a specific stance on in order to defend her position coherently. For instance, in order to defend wide impersonal pro-theism, certain positions on divine hiddenness, gratuitous evil, infinity, and world commensurability must be held. I don't deny that this is the case, but then this must be explicitly stated in defences of wide impersonal pro-theism. Likewise, it means that certain upsides of theism aren't available to certain people who may want to defend pro-theism. For example, Hasker and van Inwagen can't consistently appeal to the impossibility of gratuitous evil as an upside of theism. Defending wide impersonal pro-theism may indeed be easier than defending wide impersonal anti-theism. But the devil is in the details. And the details aren't going to be the same for every devil.⁶⁴

VI. Conclusion

We considered two epistemically possible worlds that are as similar as can be, except that atheism is true in one world and theism is true in the other world. We asked which world it is rational to prefer. Defending wide impersonal anti-theism as the right answer to this question is

⁶³ Kraay (2011b); Penner (2014).

⁶⁴ Indeed, the very fact of widespread disagreement on these topics might be cause for concern in and of itself. In the epistemology of disagreement, literature conciliationists (revisionists, equal-weighters, conformists) argue that the existence of epistemic peer disagreement over proposition P is in itself a (partial) defeater for P. See Ballantyne (2014); Christensen (2007); Elga (2007); Feldman (2006); Matheson (2015).

difficult. In order for the Goods of Atheism Argument to succeed, it must: (i) enumerate the downsides to a theistic world; (ii) argue that (i) represents a complete or sufficiently representative list; (iii) enumerate the upsides to a theistic world; (iv) argue that (iii) represents a complete or sufficiently representative list; and (v) demonstrate that the combined downsides of a theistic universe are larger than the combined upsides of a theistic universe. Since the argument only satisfies (i), it is, at best, incomplete. I then showed that, despite initial appearances to the contrary, it is also difficult to defend impersonal wide pro-theism. Many of the upsides typically associated with theism can be problematized. While this doesn't show that it's impossible to defend wide impersonal pro-theism, it does take a lot more work to defend than one might suppose. While it might be easier to defend wide impersonal pro-theism than wide impersonal anti-theism, this hasn't really been demonstrated in the literature. As it stands, we should withhold judgement about the answer to the question of whether theism or atheism is better *overall* and for *everyone*.

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